

The Crisis of Integration: Watching “Porgy and Bess” in the Time of Black Lives Matter

Last January I decided to go the opera for the first time in my life, and the evening did not go well.

There was a much-feted new production of the Gershwins’ “Porgy and Bess” at the Metropolitan Opera House that I had been reading about in The New York Times:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/24/arts/music/porgy-bess-met-opera-review.html>

The paper also published an article on the very complex Racial history of “Porgy” that served to supplement the rave review:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/19/arts/music/porgy-bess-gershwin-metropolitan-opera.html>

Indeed, there was an additional article about Black Opera that further complicated the issue:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/19/arts/music/black-operas-composers.html>

It was something that was widely discussed:

<https://theundefeated.com/features/a-new-porgy-and-bess-metropolitan-opera-raises-old-questions-about-race-and-opera/>

The Met website provided explanatory matter in its program guide:

<https://www.metopera.org/season/in-cinemas/2019-20-season/porgy-and-bess-live-in-hd/>

A complete recording of the opera is available on CD, and is well worth purchasing:

<https://www.metoperashop.org/shop/porgy-and-bess-3-cd-23288>

The February 1st performance was filmed and has been broadcast on PBS:

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/gperf/gp-at-the-met-porgy-and-bess-about-the-opera/11582/>

It can be seen through their paid streaming platform:

<https://www.metopera.org/season/in-cinemas/2019-20-season/porgy-and-bess-live-in-hd/>

In addition to the above articles, I have collected other relevant “Porgy” material in the following file:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1v1TRhJoVVQwlm52ibbEYyf6W7p_8Nh-UVYG0QfI8hB8/edit

On the evening that I was to attend the performance, my train got stuck for over half an hour, and it was clear that I was going to be late. Unbeknownst to me, the Met's policy is to lock the doors just prior to curtain time, and unlike other venues, does not allow latecomers in until the intermission.

Needless to say, it was a fairly tense-filled and miserable evening for me, as my first experience at the opera felt like being imprisoned in a plush mansion, where I could feel the stench of rich people and quickly became alienated from the oppressive environment.

Oddly enough, this forced my hand and did not allow me to write an essay about "Porgy and Bess" at the time; something I was very keen on doing, given all the work I have been doing on African-American culture and the ongoing degradation of our society under the banner of Poptrash Idiocracy and Corporate Hip-Hop.

Indeed, as we now know, it was a very interesting – and consequential – time lag.

Though I know absolutely nothing about opera, I do know a good deal about George Gershwin (1898-1937) and his elevated place in American culture.

For those not familiar with his oeuvre, the best place to start is this excellent two-disk compilation of his songs in their best-known versions from the Living Era label:

<https://www.amazon.com/S-Wonderful-Songs-George-Gershwin/dp/B00006GOFC>

It is worth noting that Brian Wilson recorded a very good album of Gershwin covers in 2010:

<https://www.amazon.com/Brian-Wilson-Reimagines-Gershwin/dp/B002RWKSII>

In addition to his chart-topping songs, many that could be heard in popular Hollywood movies of the day, Gershwin composed a number of extended pieces.

There was "Rhapsody in Blue" in 1924:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhapsody_in_Blue

"An American in Paris" in 1928:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An_American_in_Paris

It was made into a classic MGM musical by Vincente Minnelli in 1951, starring Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron with excellent support from the legendary Oscar Levant:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An_American_in_Paris_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An_American_in_Paris_(film))

The movie soundtrack provides an excellent overview of the Gershwin style and its wide range of influences:

<https://www.amazon.com/American-Paris-1951-Film-Soundtrack/dp/B0000033JE>

But more than anything else, it was “Porgy and Bess,” a Black “Folk Opera” composed with DuBose Heyward and his brother Ira, that fully confirmed his prodigious artistic genius:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Porgy_and_Bess

And that is where the complications begin.

The work was premiered on Broadway in 1935, two years before the composer’s untimely death:

<https://untappedcities.com/2016/10/13/throw-back-thursday-1935-gershwins-porgy-and-bess-premieres-in-nyc/>

Much of what is currently written about the opera tends to ignore the context in which it was written.

We must remember that not only was Hollywood essentially segregated, but that Black artists did not have the opportunity to represent themselves freely in this country.

MGM produced two all-Black musicals helmed by White men: King Vidor’s “Hallelujah” (1929) and Minnelli’s “Cabin in the Sky” (1943):

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hallelujah_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hallelujah_(film))

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cabin_in_the_Sky_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cabin_in_the_Sky_(film))

As can be seen from their respective descriptions, both films contain racist stereotypes – oversexed brutes, degenerate gamblers, loose women, hypocritical ministers – contextualized in a supercilious religious framework that was less spiritually-sensitive, and more mindless superstition.

And yet they remained outliers in a racist movie industry that pathetically continued to genuflect to Southern sensibilities. There were no other movies like them until the industry loosened up many years later.

It is important to mention here the three surviving silent movies by the independent African-American pioneer Oscar Micheaux, which serve to further complicate matters.

There was 1920's "Within Our Gates":

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Within_Our_Gates

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtwrCto9az0>

"The Symbol of the Unconquered" from the same year:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Symbol_of_the_Unconquered

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0l-uoKiaOA>

And finally, "Body and Soul," starring the great Paul Robeson, from 1925:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Body_and_Soul_\(1925_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Body_and_Soul_(1925_film))

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-A9aUp1pa8>

Micheaux carefully sketched out African-American life in the Jim Crow South, featuring rare on-screen portrayals of the KKK terrorists and lynchings.

But his movies also presented the internal problem of skin-tone and its deleterious role in Black life, and the ongoing scourge of "passing" in a world where Uncle Tom-ism could serve to make life difficult for those who were on the receiving end of racism; as is most famously the case in the harrowing climax of "Within Our Gates," which shows a cocky Black "informer" who seeks to harm an innocent man, but in the end ironically finds that he too cannot escape the White racist violence.

Micheaux's characters run the gamut from do-gooder saints to vicious predators, presenting a complex view of an African-American community under violent siege.

This was the context of DuBose Heyward's 1925 novel *Porgy*, which was the basis for the Gershwin opera:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2000/03/05/arts/the-man-who-breathed-life-into-porgy-and-bess.html>

As we read in David Schiff's 2000 article:

After developing enough of a reputation as a poet to be invited to the MacDowell Colony, Heyward began work on a novel inspired by a notice in The Charleston News and Courier about Samuel Smalls, a crippled beggar who had tried to shoot his lover. Smalls was a well-known figure on Charleston's streets, remembered mainly for the goat that pulled his cart through town. Heyward's surprising reaction to the news hints at the complex way he viewed the characters in "Porgy and Bess": "Just think of that old wreck having enough manhood to do a thing like that."

Heyward turned Smalls into Porgy and surrounded him with other characters he had observed in Charleston: Crown, the muscular stevedore; Bess, Crown's abused lover; Sportin' Life, the mulatto purveyor of "happy dust"; and the inhabitants of the slum known as Catfish Row. Here were all the ingredients for a best-selling novel and then a hit play: sex, violence, religion, love both requited and betrayed, an exotic setting.

Its racial theme resonated with other novels and plays of the era, like Carl Van Vechten's "Nigger Heaven," Eugene O'Neill's "Emperor Jones" and Paul Green's "In Abraham's Bosom." The black author Zora Neale Hurston called these white authors Negrotarians, not entirely a term of abuse. The historian David Levering Lewis writes that soon after its Broadway opening (in a segregated theater), "Porgy" became "Harlem's play" and "Harlemites knew the lines of the play almost as well as the understudies did."

Critics -- mostly, but not all, white -- hailed Heyward's novel for its realism, probably the last word that would spring to mind for readers today, for whom the book will seem condescending in its romantic idealization of Charleston's poorest blacks. But Heyward's characters are more complex and mysterious than they first appear. Porgy is a sage, a saint, a trickster, an inveterate gambler, eventually a murderer. He is an idealized "good" man who, like the stereotypical Good Negro, is good only at the cost of his manhood. In the novel he is of an indeterminate age, but he briefly regains his youth when Bess moves into his room, only to shrivel back into old age when she abandons him.

It is important to note the inclusion of the brilliant writer-scholar Zora Neale Hurston in the discussion, as she too worked to present an African-American anthropology in the context of folklore in her many books and studies:

<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0160.xml>

In spite of her literary and academic genius, Hurston died penniless and unknown, buried in an unmarked grave:

https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Zora_Neale_Hurston#Death

It took many years until the novelist Alice Walker rediscovered her and began to publish her seminal work:

<https://www.nytimes.com/1979/12/30/archives/looking-for-zora-zora.html>

Race relations were indeed very complicated at this time, and it is this context that must be understood when we speak of "Porgy and Bess."

In 1959 James Baldwin wrote a critical review of Otto Preminger's movie adaptation:

<https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/richardwinterthinkbiganalyticscom/on-the-horizon-on-catfish-row/>

While he had very dismissive words for the movie, his view of the opera was not as harsh:

I like *Porgy and Bess* but I do not think it is a great American opera. We do not have one yet. It is—or it was, until Mr. Preminger got his hands on it—an extraordinarily vivid, good-natured, and sometimes moving show. It is the story of a Negro beggar-cripple and his prostitute-addict sweetheart and it takes place in a Charleston ghetto; and it owes its vitality to the fact that DuBose Heyward loved the people he was writing about. (By which I do not mean to imply that he loved all Negroes; he was a far better man than that.)

Critically, Baldwin makes note of the racial disparity in representational terms:

Just the same, it is a white man's vision of Negro life. This means that when it should be most concrete and searching it veers off into the melodramatic and the exotic. It seems to me that the author knew more about Bess than he understood and more about Porgy than he could face—than any of us, so far, can face. The idea of a Negro beggar-cripple who yet has enough force in his hands to kill a man and enough force in his body—to say nothing of his spirit—to possess a woman is surely an arresting one; as is the notion that this woman is, herself, because of her own uncontrollable drives, at the mercy of two whore masters, one of whom is a murderer and both of whom are dope addicts. And Heyward was not inventing all this but describing things that he had seen.

Baldwin appears to present this racial complexity in a way that is antithetical to the recent dismissal of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Errin Haines:

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/Davidshasha/xZvHTvdY1t8>

There is keen insight in the Baldwin review that seeks to carefully process “Porgy and Bess” in its wider context, understanding – and criticizing – the role of the “melodramatic and exotic” in its denouement; while still acknowledging its realistic depth and the difficult issues being raised, whether spoken or unspoken.

Indeed, the criticism of “melodrama” can easily be made for many if not all European operas, which specialize in exaggerated emotionalism:

<https://operavision.eu/en/library/stories/opera-art-emotions>

Gershwin takes the European tradition, and incorporates “folk” elements from the African-American experience in a way that allows him to blend disparate musical styles

from Country to Blues to Jazz to Gospel; all framed in the orchestral modalities of the operatic heritage.

Indeed, one of the constant themes that runs through “Porgy and Bess” criticism is the way in which it functions as an American representative of what is a primarily European art-form.

The following article on American Opera will show that “Porgy” is perhaps the only actual representative in the standard repertory that is performed consistently along with the usual European classics:

<http://usopera.com/recs/>

The Gershwin work is thus not just an outsize representation of African-American life by a White composer, but has become a canonical American work of opera in a larger sea of European dominance.

Soraya McDonald writes about this in her excellent article in *The Undefeated*:

So much of the angst surrounding *Porgy and Bess* and its imperfect characters would dissipate if black opera singers were provided the release valve of variety. There are few canonical operas outside of *Aida* and *Otello* with characters that are explicitly written as black, and fewer still that require all-black or majority-black companies. If black opera singers didn't have to worry so much about being confined to Catfish Row for the rest of their careers, if the whole of the operatic canon was available to them in the way that the actor wishes the whole of Shakespeare were available to him, none of this would be quite so fraught. Of course, there are always exceptions: Denyce Graves sings Maria in this production of *Porgy and Bess*, but the mezzo-soprano became a world-renowned star thanks to her take on *Carmen*. If her circumstances were more rule than exception, *Porgy and Bess* could simply exist as an opera about black people instead of the opera about black people.

And for me this goes back to the alienating experience I had when attending the Met.

Opera is a very specific form of Art, and attracts a certain type of person who understands the form in a very certain way. Representation and misrepresentation can be seen in terms of artistic interventions and cultural loyalties.

Gershwin was threading a very difficult needle by entering the sacrosanct Opera World. He had things to say as an American, things to say as a Jew, and things he very much wanted to say about African-Americans, even though he was not Black. He relied on the Heyward novel, as he filled in the soundscapes of an imagined African-American community with a plethora of musical styles.

Indeed, in addition to the American styles he deployed, we can hear traces of the Eastern European Jewish musical tradition, as snatches of the melody of “Heveinu Shalom Aleichem” waft through portions of the performance.

“Porgy and Bess” is thus a form of cultural *métissage* which sets a White-informed version of African-American life in the framework of European operatic modalities, that present dialogue as song, and drama as character.

The story of the opera is multi-layered:

We see a Black community in South Carolina that is populated by poor people trying to live their lives in trying times. A mother with a new baby, a group of men playing dice in their leisure time after work, their women keeping the hearth, and the various tensions that arise when a killer and a drug dealer ply their malfeasance on the community.

There is murder, and there is possible redemption. Crown, a criminal, keeps Bess, a drug addict, and is seen killing one of the dice players, which sets the town into frightful convulsions. The community is continually forced to put out fires and find a way to stay safe and united, as their material existence remains precarious.

Porgy, a crippled beggar, falls in love with Bess and a struggle ensues with Crown who is now on the run from the police. And those police, White racists all, present an occupation force in the community, keeping the Black people “in their place.” They are terrorized, and in deep pain over the dysfunction presented by criminality and social division.

A drug dealer named Sportin’ Life creates yet more havoc by liberally doling out “Happy Dust” as Bess struggles to find a way to Porgy and a new life.

As McDonald sums it up:

***Porgy and Bess* is a story about isolation, compassion, abuse and connection set against a backdrop of poverty and prejudice in Charleston, South Carolina. The city’s poorest black residents live in a fictional tenement called Catfish Row. Bess is a drug addict whom the God-fearing women of Catfish Row deride as a “hussy.” Her boyfriend, Crown, is an abusive, murderous drunk. Porgy, the man with whom Bess takes up after Crown skips town to avoid a murder charge, is lonesome, disabled and in want of love. As much as Porgy’s presence improves her life, Bess, like many abuse survivors, has a hard time letting go of her twin addictions: Crown and “happy dust,” provided by the drug dealer Sportin’ Life. When Porgy goes to jail after freeing Bess from the lurking menace that is Crown, she’s still not quite his woman. The opera ends with Bess following Sportin’ Life and his happy dust to New York and Porgy, free from jail, chasing after his beloved Bess.**

The opera, like many others in the classic tradition, is a tragedy. We **hope** for a happy ending, but after many heartening moments, all we are left with is a broken community and a perplexed Porgy whose future with Bess is uncertain at best.

It is a work filled with pathos and compassion for the downtrodden.

We can see it in Porgy's emotional song "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'":

**Oh, I got plenty o' nuttin'
And nuttin's plenty for me
I got no car, got no mule
I got no misery
De folks wid plenty o' plenty
Got a lock on de door
'Fraid somebody's a-goin' to rob 'em
While dey's out a-makin' more
What for?
I got no lock on de door
Dat's no way to be
Dey kin steal de rug from de floor
Dat's okeh wid me
'Cause de things dat I prize
Like de stars in de skies
All are free**

**Oh, I got plenty o' nuttin'
And nuttin's plenty for me
I got a gal, got my song
Got Hebben the whole day long
No use complaining
Got my gal, got my Lawd
Got my song**

**Oh, I got plenty o' nuttin'
And nuttin's plenty for me
I got the sun, got the moon
Got the deep blue sea
De foks wid plenty o' plenty
Got to pray all de day
Seems wid plenty you sure got to worry
How to keep the debbel away
Away
I ain't frettin 'bout hell
'Till de time arrive
Never worry long as I'm well
Never one to strive**

**To be good, to be bad
What the hell
I is glad I's alive**

**Oh, I got plenty o' nuttin'
And nuttin's plenty for me
I got a gal, got my song
Got Hebben the whole day long
No use complaining
Got my gal, got my Lawd
Got my song**

On the one hand, the song provides ample evidence of the clichéd “Happy Negro” who is uninterested in battling oppression, but on the other it provides a deeply emotive and resonant portrait of a man who is engaging his own deepest emotions and trying to live life as best he can under extremely adverse circumstances.

We can also see the liberal use of Black vernacular, which is front and center in Sportin’ Life’s anti-religious screed “It Ain’t Necessarily So”:

**It ain't necessarily so.
De t'ings dat yo li'ble
To read in de Bible -
It ain't necessarily so.**

**Lil' David was small, but oh my!
He fought Big Goliath
Who lay down and dieth -
Lil' David was small, but oh my!
Wadoo!**

**Zim bam boddle-oo!
Hoodle ah da waah da!**

**Scatty way!
Scatty wah!**

**Oh Jonah, he lived in de whale
Fo' he made his home in
Dat fish's abdomen -
Oh Jonah, he lived in de whale.**

**Lil' Moses was found in a stream
He floated on water
'Til Ole' Pharaoh's daughter
She fished him, she says from dat stream.**

**Dey tell all you chillun
De Debbles a villun
But 'tain't necessarily so.
To get into Hebbben**

**Don't snap fo' a sebben -
Live clean! Don' have no fault!
Oh, I takes dat gospel
Whenever it's pos'ple -
But wid a grain of salt!
Methus'lah lived nine hundred years,**

**But who calls dat livin'
When no gal'll give in
To no man what's nine hundred years?
I'm preachin' dis sermon to show
It ain't nessa, ain't nessa,
Ain't nessa, ain't nessa -**

It ain't necessarily so!

Gershwin marks the different voices and moral values of the characters, as he moves through the various plot lines and musical styles. The aim is to provide a cultural-ethical multiplicity that, at the time in which the work was written, could serve to promote pluralism and mutual understanding among the races.

The thematic is framed by the magnificent opening song "Summertime," which is tenderly sung by a mother to her baby:

**Summertime,
And the livin' is easy
Fish are jumpin'
And the cotton is high**

**Your daddy's rich
And your mamma's good lookin'
So hush little baby
Don't you cry**

**One of these mornings
You're going to rise up singing
Then you'll spread your wings
And you'll take to the sky**

**But till that morning
There's a'nothing can harm you
With daddy and mamma standing by**

The cruel irony of course is that nothing is ever certain, and life is often lived on a knife's edge. Danger lurks at every corner.

Gershwin is imagining what his Black characters think and feel, as he is also expressing his own moral and emotional concerns about what it means to be a human being.

This process of introspective sociology is being conducted by three White men who unite to bring word, image, and sound together.

It is a form of democracy that is presented by Michael Cooper in his New York Times article "The Complex History and Uneasy Present of 'Porgy and Bess'" as a set of tough questions:

Is it a triumph of melting-pot American art, teaming up George and Ira Gershwin (the sons of Russian Jewish immigrants) with DuBose Heyward (the scion of a prominent white South Carolina family) and his Ohio-born wife, Dorothy, to tell a uniquely African-American story? Or is it cultural appropriation? The fact that the most-performed opera about the African-American experience is the work of an all-white team has not been lost on black composers who have struggled to get their music heard.

And has the Gershwins' insistence that "Porgy" be performed only by black artists — originally aimed at keeping it from being done in blackface — helped generations of black singers by giving them the opportunity to perform on some of the world's great stages? Or has it pigeonholed some of them, limiting the roles they are offered?

James Baldwin answered these questions in a critical counterpoint to the open multi-cultural process:

What has always been missing from George Gershwin's opera is what the situation of *Porgy and Bess* says about the white world. It is because of this omission that Americans are so proud of the opera. It assuages their guilt about Negroes and it attacks none of their fantasies. Since Catfish Row is clearly such a charming place to live, there is no need for them to trouble their consciences about the fact that the people who live there are still not allowed to move anywhere else. Neither need they probe within their own lives to discover what the Negroes of Catfish Row really mean to them. But I am certainly not the first person to suggest that these Negroes seem to speak to them of a better life—better in the sense of being more honest, more open, and more free: in a word, more sexual. This is the cruelest fantasy of all, hard to forgive. It means that Negroes are penalized, and hideously, for what the general guilty imagination makes of them. This fantasy is at the bottom of almost all

violence against Negroes; it is the reason they are not to be mixed in buses, houses, schools, jobs; they are to remain instead in Catfish Row, to have fish fries and make love. It is a fantasy which is tearing the nation to pieces and it is surely time we snapped out of it. For nobody in Catfish Row is having fish fries these days, and love is as rare and as difficult there as it has always been everywhere else. They struggle to pay the rent, the life insurance, the note due on the bedroom suite, the TV set, the refrigerator, the car. They worry about their children. They begin to hate each other, they turn to mysticism or to dope, they die there.

In the end, “Porgy and Bess” is both of these things: It is the White man trying to understand the struggle of the Black man, and the struggle of the Black man with how the White man tries to understand his struggle. The dialectic is a cruel one that we continue to deal with so many years later.

It is also the way in which Black singers and dancers have been given the opportunity to embody this complex arrangement, and flesh out these classic characters in concert halls and theaters all over the world, as “Porgy and Bess” remains a central part of the classic Opera repertory.

In that context, I was struck by an article **against** the opera by Cornell music professor David Yearsley, who is White, in Counterpunch:

<https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/07/24/porgy-and-bess-in-the-time-of-blm/>

Here is what he says there:

Dubose’s inhabitants of Catfish Row are superstitious and gullible, often unable to control their animal urges. They are utterly servile to the police and are easily tricked and brow-beaten by them; a predatory black lawyer easily dupes the hapless cripple, Porgy. Crown, Porgy’s competition for Bess’s affections, is a hulking beast who, in a fit of cocaine rage, kills an innocent man. Still, when Crown surprises Bess, momentarily left alone after a picnic on Kittiwah island, she cannot resist his “hot hands” and, although she loathes him, she yields willingly. The Catfish Row pusher, Sportin’ Life, finds a captive market for his cocaine and at the end of the opera uses the “happy dust” to lure Bess off to New York, leaving behind her adopted baby and Porgy, himself more of a sap than a tragic hero. Heyward wrote the libretto (Gershwin’s brother Ira contributed some of the song lyrics) in pidgin, and in contrast to Mark Twain’s brilliant use of dialect, the language of Porgy and Bess sounds crude and inauthentic. In the L.A. production the lyrics were projected above the stage, forcing the audience—it is virtually impossible to ignore supertitles—to read phrases like “I ain’t care who you takes up with while I’s away.” One cannot help but sense Heyward looking down with amusement at the quaint foolishness of his characters.

And he has little admiration for Gershwin’s music either:

Gershwin's music suffers from similar delusions of omnipotence, an overweening confidence that in *Porgy and Bess* he had expressed "the humor, superstition, religious fervor, the dancing, and the irrepressible high spirits of the race ... qualities that are inherent in the Negroes, as a race." Gershwin's orchestration, in particular, constantly undermines the humanity of his characters, as a stale catalog of flute glissandos, percussion effects (marimba, xylophone, clavés, and snare drum), and string tremolos provides condescendingly ironic comment on the misbegotten actions of the simple folks on stage. Gil Evans—it is perhaps necessary to say that he was white—redeemed those songs he arranged for the Miles' recording by integrating the soloist and orchestra in a way Gershwin could not.

I was intrigued to read an article of his on another American cultural phenomenon, Lin-Manuel Miranda's "Hamilton":

<https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/07/17/hamilton-comes-home/>

He is not as critical of Miranda's cultural confusion:

I hugely admire its creator Miranda's talents, and thought that his first great success, *In the Heights*, made for a captivating night at the theatre, even if its vibrant fondness for the old neighborhood at the upper end of Manhattan tipped towards the maudlin at its close. The composer is a gifted melodist and lyricist: words flow and sing from him with fluency and fervor. Miranda is master of the sub-genres of the musical: the burner, the tender love song to person and place, the show-stopper. The movie of *In the Heights* had been scheduled for release in cinemas last month, but has been postponed to 2021. The Disney+ *Hamilton* was called on to fill the breach.

Hamilton is an even more impressive display of Miranda's talents than *In the Heights*. For *Hamilton*, Miranda wrote the book, the lyrics, and the music, and played the title role. I can't think of a precedent for such wide-ranging creative accomplishment. Then there's Miranda's incredible industry, which is a match for Hamilton's own indefatigable labors as advocate for the Constitution and as the first Secretary of the Treasury.

Though by the end of the article he is somewhat more equivocal:

What are we to make of *Hamilton* in the aftermath of Georg Floyd's murder and calls for statues of another George to be toppled? Miranda and his players would have us think that the imperfect experiment of American democracy is the birthright of the descendants of slaves and immigrants. But I couldn't help but find it dispiriting to see the energy and genius of the creator and cast poured into a patriotic pageant.

What Miranda writes and does makes for compelling theatre. His entrepreneurial spirit takes its energy from his tremendous musico-poetic skill. *Hamilton* would have

approved: there are few duets more seductive than that between money and music. In his high-minded hymning of the United States' origins, Miranda puts the "I" in front of deal. That the once-subversive art form of rap can be drafted into service of the state shows just how welcoming America really is to those who sing the praises of status quo.

Counterpunch has been hammering away at the commercial juggernaut, as we can see in this unhinged article by Ishmael Reed:

<https://www.counterpunch.org/2015/08/21/hamilton-the-musical-black-actors-dress-up-like-slave-tradersand-its-not-halloween/>

Unlike Yearsley, Reed does not equivocate:

And why would President Obama lend his prestige to this thing? First he welcomes black pathology pimp, David Simon, to the White House, where he endorsed "The Wire," a show in which black children are singled out as degenerate drug peddlers, when all of the heroin seems to be stashed in Vermont and other states with few blacks among their population. He honors this hustler even after Prof. Karl Alexander, who did an actual study of Simon's black Baltimore neighborhoods, found Simon's presentation to be "one sided" as he put it, politely.

Is this the president's view of traditional African Americans? Criminals. People who sang and danced their way through slavery under the watchful eye of merciful slave masters? He went to Harvard. Didn't he take courses from Martin Kilson? Doesn't the president know that Thomas Jefferson's proposal for the Native American problem was extermination?

It is hard to know exactly what Reed would say about "Porgy and Bess," but we can anxiously hazard a guess!

Corporatism is in some ways in the eye of the beholder.

Pointedly, Reed refers angrily to "The Wire," which is a reflection of the Corporate Hip-Hop pathology that presents an interesting counterpoint to Gershwin's opera. More interestingly, the new pathology is part of a synergy between Black performers and a largely White Corporate establishment.

It would thus be instructive to compare and contrast Gershwin with someone like Kanye West:

[https://groups.google.com/forum/#!searchin/Davidshasha/i\\$20love\\$20it/davidshasha/VV6i0BPjYbs/1zBy3GBWBQAJ](https://groups.google.com/forum/#!searchin/Davidshasha/i$20love$20it/davidshasha/VV6i0BPjYbs/1zBy3GBWBQAJ)

It is possible to look at similarly debased lyrics from Jay-Z and the Wu-Tang Clan, but given the ubiquity of YEEZUS, and his close ties to the Trump family, I prefer to cite his recent song "I Love It," as I have done a number of times:

'Cause you know in the old days they couldn't say the shit they wanted to say
They had to fake orgasms and shit
We can tell niggas today, "Hey, I wanna cum, mothafucka"
You're such a fuckin' ho, I love it (I love it)
You're such a fuckin' ho, I love it (I love it)
You're such a fuckin' ho, I love it
(Love it, love it) (I'ma fuck a bitch, tell her cousin)
Your boyfriend is a dork, McLovin (dork, McLovin, ooh, ooh, ooh)
I just pulled up in a Ghost (Ghost)
Fucked that bitch up out in London (up out in)
Then I fucked up on her cousin
Or her sister, I don't know nothin' (uh-uh, woo)
And my niggas gettin' ignorant
Like a lighter, bitch, we ignorant (ignorant, yeah)
All this water on my neck
Look like I fell when I went fishin' (fell)
So much diamonds on my bust down
Ooh, fuck, what's the time? (where we at?)
Me and Smokepurpp sippin' drank (aye!)
Ooh, fuck, she take lines (lines)
You're such a fuckin' ho, I love it (scoop!) (I love it)
You're such a fuckin' ho, I love it (I love it)
You're such a fuckin' ho
When the first time they ask you if you want sparklin' or still?
Why you try to act like you was drinkin' sparklin' water 'fore you came out here?
You're such a fuckin' h—
I'm a sick fuck, I like a quick fuck (whoop!)
I'm a sick fuck, I like a quick fuck (whoop!)
I'm a sick fuck, I like a quick fuck (whoop!)
I'm a sick fuck, I like a quick fuck (whoop!)
I'm a sick fuck, I like a quick fuck
I like my dick sucked, I'll buy you a sick truck
I'll buy you some new tits, I'll get you that nip-tuck
How you start a family? The condom slipped up
I'm a sick fuck, I'm inappropriate
I like hearin' stories, I like that ho shit
I wanna hear mo' shit, I like the ho shit
Send me some mo' shit, you triflin' ho bitch (bitch, bitch, bitch)
You're such a fuckin' ho, I love it (I love it)
You're such a fuckin' ho, I love it (I love it)

**'Cause you know in the old days they couldn't say the shit they wanted to say
They had to fake orgasms and shit
We can tell niggas today, "Hey, I wanna cum, mothafucka"**

It is quite difficult to make the comparison with a song like “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” largely because the idea of literacy and decency has been shredded to bits in the current iteration of Corporate Hip-Hop.

What is Black degradation, and how are we to address cultural appropriation when Whites are rewarding Blacks to undermine their own moral standing?

Where Gershwin was a stylist of rare skill, YEEZUS is an opportunistic appropriator whose self-understanding remains deeply warped and pathologically problematic.

It is worthwhile to recall that “Porgy and Bess” was a relative commercial failure for Gershwin when it premiered on Broadway:

<https://parkersymphony.org/porgy-and-bess-facts>

What we can now see are the many difficult challenges presented by cultural integration and pluralism. The Jewish Gershwin sought to bring African-American society into the American mainstream; while now we have White Corporate interests, aided and abetted by African-American performers, that are intent on re-establishing boundaries and ghettos.

For all its cultural difficulties, “Porgy and Bess” seeks to present a vision of African-American life to White audiences that would occasion sympathy and concern for the ubiquitous oppression and racism. Gershwin’s music is a mélange of different styles and genres which in the end exudes the brilliance of the Black tradition of Spirituals, set in a formal European operatic context.

Again, it is important to remember that Gershwin insisted that the opera be performed only by Black people, trying to make sure that Whites in Blackface would not have the chance to undermine the work’s authenticity:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2002/03/20/arts/critic-s-notebook-all-black-casts-for-porgy-that-ain-t-necessarily-so.html>

As Anthony Tommasini said back in 2002:

Though now an American classic, "Porgy and Bess" is not often produced, due largely, I think, to the Gershwin estate's stipulation that the opera be performed by an all-black cast. This was the will of its creators, who wanted their depiction of an African-American community in crisis to have authenticity. It cannot be easy for most opera companies to assemble a strong black cast, though City Opera, to its credit, has assembled three rosters of singers who rotate in the solo roles.

Watching the performance from my seat at the Met last January it was impossible not to be swept away by the powerfully epic nature of the opera with all its grandeur and beauty. It was a way to reach for the heavens, as the lush score was suffusing the hall with tension as well as joyful exuberance.

Many months later, as we suffer the depredations of Trumpdeath and witness the spontaneous outpouring of marches and demonstrations to protest police brutality, a primary element in “Porgy,” I sat watching it in the comfort of my living room, and could see in even more exquisite detail and comprehensiveness the brilliance of the many performers who brought the classic work to life.

I am in no position to comment intelligently about lead actors Eric Owens and Angel Blue, and how they might rate against the Met luminaries of the past, but watching “Porgy and Bess” was for me a truly exhilarating experience that brought together the flawed traditions of an earlier time in American culture, with the robust iteration of tenderness and human feeling brought to life in the truly brilliant performances of these great African-American artists.

And while “Porgy and Bess” should continue to be debated in the public square, we must be thankful that it is a central part of the operatic canon, and that it will continue to be performed and re-interpreted for audiences in the future.

David Shasha