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Language, Race, and Culture in *Porgy and Bess*
By: Madeline Baker

I resented the role at first...I felt I had worked too hard, that we had come too far to have to regress to 1935. My way of dealing with it was to see that it was really a piece of Americana, of American history. Whether we like it or not, whether I sang it or not, it was still going to be there. –Grace Bumbry, 1985

In my epigraph, I quote Soprano Grace Bumbry, who shares her initial impressions when asked to sing the role of Bess in a 1985 production of *Porgy and Bess* at the Metropolitan Opera. Bumbry expresses doubts about the role she was asked to play: a black woman addicted to drugs and attached to a man who gambles and murders, who falls in love with Porgy, a paralyzed man who panhandles for a living in a poor fishing community. Given that many music and theatre critics simultaneously named *Porgy and Bess* the first American opera and the first black opera, Bumbry rightly questions the opera's representations of Black characters, knowing that audiences might understand the characters categorically as a representation of African Americans in general. Furthermore, Bumbry points out that performing in the opera would be a regression to 1935 (the year the opera premiered), reversing the progress to which she refers when she says, "we had come too far." However, even though Bumbry speaks of progress, she also observes the ubiquitous nature of *Porgy and Bess*, saying, "whether I sang it or not, it was still going to be there." Indeed, she speaks the truth, because *Porgy and Bess* holds a unique and enduring place in American musical culture. The opera has been reproduced in many productions, including a 1952 international tour, wherein it was the first American opera to be performed at the La Scala Opera House in Milan, Italy. American jazz artists Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and Miles Davis recorded entire albums of music from *Porgy and Bess*, and jazz and pop artists have performed countless covers of popular tunes from the opera such as "Summertime," "I Loves You Porgy," and "It Ain't Necessarily So."

I base my research of the opera and the cultural manifestations that preceded and succeeded it on Bumbry's "way of dealing with it," which is to see it as a "piece of Americana, of American history." I argue that the evolution of the story of *Porgy and Bess*, beginning with the 1925 novel *Porgy* by DuBose Heyward, creates a narrative of the representation of African American characters and their language in twentieth century American culture, albeit one replete with tensions between stereotypes of Black primitivism and celebration of the music and vibrancy of Black culture.

DuBose Heyward and George Gershwin, the pair who collaborated to create the opera version of *Porgy and Bess*, expressed various definitions of Americanness with the story. Heyward, an upper class white writer from Charleston, South Carolina, based the characters on the African American fisherman and stevedores of a Charleston neighborhood called Cabbage Row, who were speakers of the Gullah creole language. He wished to emphasize the Americanness of the Gullah culture, pointing out that they formed much of their language and music through contact situations that arose from forced migration and separation as a result of American slavery. This culture, constructed upon their arrival in the United States, exemplifies Americanness for Heyward, and he contrasts such culture with that of European immigrants who maintained languages and music from their home countries (Heyward "The Negro in the Low-Country 37). In contrast, Gershwin, a first generation American citizen born to Russian Jewish immigrants, embodied a narrative of immigrant integration into American culture. Indeed, in 1931, biographer Isaac Goldberg presented Gershwin as, "'Made in America' and, likewise 'Made by America' ...Ours, in scene, in theme, in progress, in goal" (4). Gershwin brought these ideas of cultural integration into his work, and stated that his intention with *Porgy and Bess* was to write "an opera of the melting pot" (qtd. in Greenberg 166).

Heyward's and Gershwin's varying definitions of Americanness and their representations of African American language and culture warrant critical investigation because their subject positions as white, upper class males differ so drastically from those of the lower class, Gullah peoples they represent. Such relationships, divided by race and class differences, exist among characters within the texts as well, and Heyward and Gershwin denote such differences through linguistic and musical variations. This distancing within the texts, along with the distances and tensions among the author, composer, performers, audience, and subjects elucidate both racist and celebratory depictions of African American language and culture in the various manifestations of *Porgy and Bess*.

In order to understand these depictions, I investigate the linguistic and musical distancing within the works, the distance and relationship between Heyward and the Gullah speakers he represents, and distances and relationships among the audience and performers and the subjects presented in the works.

Brief Synopsis and Historical Overview

DuBose Heyward first presented the story of *Porgy* as a novel in 1925. The six-part book depicts a fictional community called Catfish Row at the turn of the twentieth century, and narrates the change of seasons and circumstances within the community. Though Heyward features subplots related to other characters, he focuses mainly on Porgy, a man paralyzed from the waist down, who makes his living by panhandling during “the Golden Age of many things, and not the least among them was that of beggary” (11). Heyward depicts Porgy's reaction to and participation in the events of the community, including incidents with the law, a celebratory picnic on Kittiwah Island, and a catastrophic hurricane in which many fishermen are lost. Along

with these events, the story focuses on the romance between Porgy and Bess, a woman who is initially attached to Crown, the powerful stevedore who goes into hiding after killing a man over a craps game. Porgy takes Bess in when the rest of Catfish Row shuns her and acts as a positive influence in her life. She says to him, “Ef yuh is willin’ tuh keep me, den lemme stay. Ef he jus’ don’t put dem hot han’ on me, I kin be good, I kin ‘member, I kin be happy” (166). Though Porgy and Bess commit themselves to each other in this pivotal scene, an unfortunate combination of events separates them. Porgy kills Crown in revenge and serves time in jail for failing to appear as a witness, and Bess is seduced and kidnapped by Sportin’ Life, a notorious character from New York known for dealing drugs. Porgy is left alone at the end of the novel with, “a face that sagged wearily, and the eyes of age lit only by a faint reminiscent glow from suns and moons that had looked into them, and had already dropped down the west” (196).

After Heyward published the novel to some critical and financial success, he and his wife Dorothy worked to adapt the novel into a play, also entitled *Porgy*, which premiered on October 10, 1927 in a production by an all black cast in the Theatre Guild in New York City (Alpert 65). During this time, composer George Gershwin read a copy of *Porgy* and proposed to set it to music in what he intended to be the first American folk opera. Over the next eight years, Gershwin worked with his brother, lyricist Ira Gershwin, and with DuBose Heyward to adapt the novel into the opera, *Porgy and Bess*, which premiered on October 10, 1935 in the Alvin Theatre in New York City (Alpert 3).

Linguistic and Musical Distance within the Works

Heyward writes the dialogue of the Catfish Row residents in a variety of English influenced by the Gullah creole language he observed among the African American speakers in Charleston. The novel contains a range of linguistic varieties as the narrator speaks in an unmarked version of English, while the Catfish Row residents speak in dialogue marked with grammatical variations and phonetic features that Heyward represents through nonstandard spellings. Furthermore, Heyward depicts race and class related power differentials among the characters through linguistic variation. However, when Gershwin composed the opera version of the story, he began encoding racial divisions through music as well. I argue that the method of linguistically encoding race creates a hierarchy of standard and non-standard language, while the musical strategy refrains from placing such value on different types of expression.

An example from *Porgy*, in which both the narrator and Bess describe the hurricane that terrorizes Catfish Row, illustrates the contrast between the unmarked language of the narrator and the marked language of Bess, who speaks in the Gullah-influenced dialect. The narrator describes the hurricane in the following manner: “Suddenly an enormous breaker loomed over the backs of its shattered and retreating fellows... Yellow, smooth, and with a perpendicular, slightly concave front, it flashed across the street, and smote the solid wall of the Row” (149). In contrast, Bess’s description of the hurricane reads: “It been dis way in de las’ great storm. De win’ hol’ de watuh in de jetty mout’ so he can’t go out. Den he pile up annoder tide on him” (149). While Heyward presents the narrator’s speech with standard spellings and long, flowery sequences of adjectives, Bess’s speech is marked with spelling changes to denote phonetic variations in her speech such as the stopping of fricatives in which a /th/ sound is represented as a /d/. The presence of orthographic markings of pronunciation variants in the dialogue of the

Gullah speakers, and the absence of said markings in the words of the narrator creates a strong visual contrast, which establishes the narrator's speech as normative, and the marked dialogue of the characters as a deviation from that norm. In a book chapter titled "White Writers, Creole Languages," linguist Gavin Jones connects this visual contrast to race when he argues, "At its most extreme, this literature [that which uses Black dialect] attempted to encode an essential blackness in the written representation of speech, making the lines of writing into color lines designed to segregate upon the printed page" (107). Such strong visual contrasts between the language of the presumably white narrator and the dialogue of the black characters creates a racial division in the way Jones points out, and such divisions exist among characters as well in that Heyward includes linguistic variations that denote power differentials among characters of different races and social statuses.

For instance, in a scene in which Porgy panhandles outside the office of Alan Archdale, a white lawyer, linguistic variations denote the racial and class divisions among Porgy, Archdale, and a third character: Simon Frasier. Outside the office, Porgy meets Simon Frasier, a black man who is not a licensed lawyer, but who is allowed to "represent his own people in the police and magistrates' courts and to turn his hand to other small legal matters into which it was thought inadvisable [for white, licensed lawyers] to enquire too deeply" (70). Frasier, seeing himself as part of a higher class than Porgy because of the difference in their occupations, says to Porgy, "Yuh bes' git along out of Mr. Alan' do'way wid dat goat befo' he fin' yuh" (70). Porgy answers, "I ain't goin' tuh hab yuh stan' dey an' tell me dat Mistuh Archdale gots dem po'w'itetrash ways...he gots er haht in he breas' fuh de po' cripple nigger" (71). Frasier's sentence contains an imperative toward Porgy when he says "Yuh bes' git along," and contains

less marked features than Porgy's speech, with its combination of words like "po'w'itetrash" and invocation of the word "nigger."

However, once he begins his meeting with Archdale, the white lawyer, Frasier speaks in a manner similar to Porgy as he asks Archdale to pardon him for selling illegal divorces to Catfish Row residents. Frasier pleads to Archdale regarding divorces, "I hyuh tell dere ain't no such t'ing fuh de w'ite folks; but de nigger need um so bad, I ain't see no reason why I can't mek up one wut sati'fy de nigger?" (74). Frazier's speech resembles Porgy's here in that it contains questions, spelling changes of almost every word to denote pronunciation differences, and two uses of the word "nigger." Archdale calls a judge to pardon Frasier for selling illegal divorces, and then instructs Frasier in a patronizing manner to stop selling them immediately or, "snap! to jail we both go" (75). Interesting race and class dynamics coalesce as Frasier believes he can speak in a commanding manner to a member of his own race whom he sees as belonging to a lower class, but then must avoid these airs when speaking to a white, upper class lawyer.

Heyward himself displays this awareness of the ability of language to segregate people by race and class when Frasier leaves Archdale's office and passes Porgy once more. Having heard Archdale reprimand and patronize Frasier, and seeing Frasier's station lowered, Porgy speaks to Frasier in what Heyward describes as, "an exact imitation of Frasier's professional manner" (75). Porgy, says to Frasier, "mobe on, please; mobe on. I gots a berry perlite goat hyuh wut objec' tuh de smell ob de jail-bird" (75). Here, having seen Frasier humiliated, Porgy speaks in a commanding manner to Frasier, illustrating how language functions to differentiate the power of the characters related to racial and class differences

. As he developed the story of *Porgy* into an opera, George Gershwin began to illustrate racial difference among characters not only by linguistic means, but also through music. In

drafting his opera, George Gershwin had to choose whether to present the dialogue as spoken or as recitative (sung dialogue common in traditional opera). His visits to Gullah communities on James Island helped him decide. In Heyward's 1935 essay titled "Porgy and Bess Return on Wings of Song," he reflects on Gershwin's introduction to the music of the Gullah peoples:

James Island with its large population of primitive Gullah Negroes...furnished us with...an inexhaustible source of folk material. But the most interesting discovery to me, as we sat listening to their spirituals, was that to George it was more like a homecoming than an exploration. The quality in him which had produced the *Rhapsody in Blue* in the most sophisticated city in America, found its counterpart in the impulse behind the music and bodily rhythms of the simple Negro peasant of the South. (49)

Having had this exposure to the songs of the Gullah peoples, Gershwin decided unequivocally on recitative, sung dialogue for the opera production, with the assumption that setting the lives and the dialogue of the Gullah characters to music would properly express their energy and vibrancy.

However, Gershwin's biographer, Rodney Greenberg, reports that Gershwin eventually "hit on the idea of giving spoken dialogue only to the story's white characters; their distance from and threat to the black community are thereby brought into sharper focus" (172). With Gershwin's decision, the production transitions from denoting race by opposing linguistic norms and variations, to capturing the musical and rhythmic quality that the Gullah peoples appeared to have and the white Charlestonians seemed to lack.

DuBose Heyward, Distance, and Dialect

Upon the release of *Porgy* in 1925, critic Frances Newman wrote a favorable review in the *New York Herald Tribune*, commending its "scenic episodes and the dialect" as its "finest achievements" (qtd. in Alpert 39). In mentioning the "dialect" of *Porgy*, Newman commends Heyward's depiction of the Gullah creole language, common among people of African descent in the South Atlantic sea islands. Linguistic inquiry that post-dates Heyward's life, such as

Lorenzo Turner's 1949 text *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*, proves that Gullah contains grammatical components and, in Turner's words, the "characteristic intonation and rhythm" of West African languages (qtd. in Jones 102). However, before such recognition of the African roots of Gullah, some writers had a tendency to portray it as a substandard version of English full of "corruption and error" (Jones 103). This conflict between views of Gullah as a rule-governed, African creole language, versus those that see it as a substandard version of English, necessitates an investigation of how Heyward gained access to this language, how accurate was his representation, and what possible racial attitudes are communicated by his presentation of Gullah in the novel.

Frank Durham's 1954 biography of Heyward titled *The Man Who Wrote Porgy* describes how Heyward's childhood in Charleston granted him access to the Gullah creole. Heyward was born into an upper class Charleston family in name, whose fortune had dissipated. His father died in a mill accident when he was two, so he was raised by his mother, maternal grandmother, and a Black house servant whom he called "Mauma" (3-5). Durham writes of Heyward's early exposure to the African American peoples of Charleston: "from his birth DuBose Heyward knew the household Negro servants of Charleston, loved them for their love and loyalty, smiled at their superstitions and their folk humor, and respected them as individuals" (6). Durham's account of the influence of the house servants in Heyward's life, albeit patronizing and problematic in its invocation of "superstition and folk humor," explains in part Heyward's exposure to the Gullah creole. Durham writes that Heyward "spoke it [Gullah] fluently," and reports that Heyward's mother was known as a "dialect recitalist" who "reproduc[ed] the language of the house servants" and had published books of poetry in "the negro dialect" (59).

Charleston writer John Bennet, a friend and mentor to Heyward, documents such language contact among white Southerners and their black house servants in a 1908 text titled “Gullah: A Negro Patois.” He writes, “it is true that up to the age of four, approximately, the children of the best families, even in town, are apt to speak an almost unmodified *Gullah*, caught from brown playmates and country-bred nurses” (qtd. in Jones 103-04). Bennett’s use of the word “caught” casts the language contact among blacks and whites in the South in a model of disease or infection, as if Gullah is a substandard form that endangers the prestige dialect of white society. In light of Bennett’s language attitudes and of the knowledge that he and Heyward were contemporaries, Heyward’s relationship to Gullah speakers, his representation of their speech, and the attitudes communicated by this representation must be given a more critical examination.

The issue of intelligibility influenced the accuracy of Heyward’s representation of Gullah. Indeed, Durham points out that Heyward did not provide an accurate phonetic transcription of Gullah, but rather “a Negro dialect with the suggestion of Gullah to differentiate it from the standard but with sufficient watering-down of the Gullah to make it intelligible” (60). Many writers who sought to represent Gullah in literature faced this problem of intelligibility because, as Gavin Jones points out, Gullah is not actually a dialect, but rather a creole language “formed from the contact between speakers of wholly different tongues – with [its] own grammatical structures and rhetorical modes” (99). Therefore, according to Durham, Heyward intended to write in some version of English influenced by Gullah so readers with no exposure to Gullah peoples or language could comprehend the text (60).

Heyward’s concern for intelligibility provides evidence for an argument that his simplification of Gullah was not a result of negative or patronizing attitudes toward Gullah

speakers. Some accounts, which contextualize Heyward in a tradition of Southern writing about black characters, argue that he captured the complex humanity of the characters, even with the simplification of the dialect. Durham, always sympathetic to Heyward, writes, “Unlike most Southerners of his class, he had seen the Negro on the waterfront, the Negro in relation not only to the white man, but to other Negroes. And he wrote with veracity and drama of the vibrant life in Catfish Row and on the wharves when the white man was far away” (74). Durham claims that Heyward had access to the language of the Gullahs “when the white man was far away,” but fails to contend with the fact that Heyward, a white upper class man, was always in the picture as an observer who could affect the language of those he observed. Even so, Walter M. Brasch corroborates Durham’s argument in a more critical account of the use of Black English in the media. Brasch reflects on Heyward’s contribution to dialect literature in *Porgy*: “He portrayed the Black as others had portrayed the White – as a human being. Many other authors had taken the Negro and romanticized or propagandized him, and in the process had cast an entire race of people as heroes, villains, or fools” (181). While Durham and Brasch compliment the complexity of Heyward’s representation of black characters, Heyward’s essays and passages from the novel reveal problematic racial attitudes.

Heyward’s 1928 essay entitled “The American Negro in Art,” which served as an introduction to the play version of *Porgy*, demonstrates such attitudes. He shares his impressions of the African Americans he observed in Charleston, describes the powerful stevedores and the singers of spirituals, and explains his intentions for writing about them:

Slowly, as I watched and listened, there grew within me the conviction that this life which was going on within our own, yet was apart from it, possessed a certain definite, but indefinable quality that remained with my own people only in a more or less vestigial state, and at times seemed to have departed altogether like our gills and tails...my feeling grew to one of envy; and so...my approach to the subject was never one of pity for...an

unfortunate race. I saw the primitive Negro as the inheritor of a source of delight that I would have given much to possess. Why, then, should I weep over him? (27-8)

Though Heyward identifies the African Americans he observes as “inheritor[s] of a source of delight,” his statement that, for white people, this delight seems “to have departed altogether like our gills and tails,” creates a problematic dichotomy of a less evolved black race and a more evolved white race. Heyward’s use of the term “primitive Negro” in the passage communicates a similar message.

These same attitudes appear in the novel itself in Heyward’s description of the parade in which all the residents of Catfish Row participate. Heyward writes of the bright colors and music of the parade:

Out of its fetters of civilization this people had risen, suddenly, amazingly. Exotic as the Congo, and still able to abandon themselves utterly to the wild joy of fantastic play, they had taken the reticent, old Anglo-Saxon town and stamped their mood swiftly and indelibly into its heart. Then they passed, leaving behind them a wistful envy among those who had watched them go. (115)

Here, and throughout the novel, Heyward repeats such relations to the Congo and the contrast of the “exotic” nature of the Catfish Row residents with that of the “Anglo-Saxon” residents.

Though his descriptions often appear to celebrate the colors, music, and unity of the characters, they also contain problematic notions of black primitivism.

Thus, while Heyward uses language to portray the culture of the Gullah characters and to celebrate their vibrancy, he also writes in a segregationist manner, which emphasizes primitivism in Gullah culture. Lawrence Levine observes a trend in 19th century literature about Gullahs that arguably applies to Heyward’s work as well: that it is, “a *mélange* of accuracy and fantasy, of sensitivity and stereotype, of empathy and racism” (Jones 114). The particular combination of the terms “empathy and racism” best describes Heyward’s relationship with the Gullah peoples, whose language and lives he represents, because, while critics have complimented the

complexity of his characterization, his writing contains unmistakable impressions that the black characters are more primitive or less evolved than the white characters.

Porgy Takes the Stage: Audience and Performer Responses

While the novel version of *Porgy* received generally positive feedback, the story garnered more negative criticism as it evolved into play and opera productions. The shifting of the genres of the story's presentation caused concurrent shifts in the size and location of the consuming public, creating ever larger distances between the performers and audience, and the community depicted in the story. While Heyward's work arguably fits into a local color tradition of Southern writing, he often hovers in dangerous territory between emphasizing the particularities of the Gullah peoples and making general (often problematic) statements about African Americans as an entire race. This tendency to conflate impressions of localized Gullah culture with those of African Americans in general increased through the evolution of the various productions because the play version of *Porgy* was well known as one of several early professional theatre productions with all Black casts, and the opera was widely known as the first Black opera. Therefore, as productions of the play and opera were performed in New York City and beyond, actors, audience members, and critics expressed greater degrees of ambivalence regarding the racial messages encoded in the language and subject matter of the story.

In his essays and in the text of the novel itself, Heyward vacillates between trying to archive the language and way of life of a localized group of people, and problematically invoking what Durham calls a collective "race personality" of the characters (50). In a 1932 essay entitled "The Negro in the Low-Country," Heyward discusses his anxieties about the great

migration of African Americans to the urban North and the modernizing and industrializing influences present in the South at the turn of the twentieth century. He writes that for many African Americans, “the call of the city has already been heeded...the forces of advancement are at work and will prove irresistible...they will be taken from our fields, fired with ambition, and fed to the machines of our glittering new civilization” (45). However, Heyward states that he sees the “South Carolinian Low-Country Negro” as the last vestige of a rural, localized culture (45). He argues that in South Carolina, “we can still hear the Negro singing the songs of his own creation. We can see him hale, vigorous, and glad under the sun by day and...his faith in his simple destiny” (45). Heyward clearly romanticizes the lives of black people in the rural South, and his desire to celebrate their language and music appears in the novel in the cataloguing of the singing of hymns at a funeral, a musical parade, and the reciting of prayers during the hurricane.

Along with documenting unique elements of rural Gullah culture, Heyward’s novel contains ambivalence toward urban life, especially New York City. The character of Sportin’ Life, who hails from New York, deals drugs, and spreads religious skepticism among the inhabitants of Catfish Row, symbolizes many of Heyward’s fears about urban influences in the South. Heyward expresses these anxieties through the words of Maria, the owner of a cookshop in Catfish Row, who says to Sportin’ Life:

Don’t yuh try any Noo Yo’kin’ aroun’ dis town. Ef I had my way, I’d go down tuh dat Noo Yo’k boat, an’ take ebbery Gawd’s nigger what come up de gang plank wid er Joseph coat on he back an’ a glass headlight on he buzzom and drap um tuh de catfish befo’ he foot hit decent groun’. (56)

Maria’s tirade against Sportin’ Life, and other scenes in which characters from the city are feared or shunned by the residents of Catfish Row establishes *Porgy* as a novel of both resistance to urban influence and idealization of a rural version of Southern life.

When Heyward and his wife Dorothy began to adapt *Porgy* into a play that would be produced in New York City, tensions arose over the distance between the actors and the characters they played and the audience and the Gullah culture Heyward portrays. The Heywards, along with director Rouben Mamoulian, recruited actors for the production of *Porgy: A Play in Four Acts* from “black theatre groups, vaudeville houses, and cabarets” in Harlem (Alpert 56). Durham writes that these urban Black actors “had no intention of suggesting to the paying public that they had anything in common with the half-savage, childlike Negroes of a Southern slum” (110). Their ambivalence about the divide between their subject positions as New York-based professional actors and those of relatively rural Charleston Gullahs extended to the language of the play as well. Alpert reflects in his history of the play that “Gullah was a foreign language to them,” and that the Heywards became concerned about the commercial success of the play given that Gullah would also be a foreign language to Northern theatre patrons (58). As a result, Dorothy Heyward reflects, “the Gullah was blurred into the atmosphere... Should it ever fall on the astonished ears of Porgy’s prototype, he would never know what it was all about” (qtd. in Alpert 58). Dorothy Heyward’s quote illustrates the fact that creating an intelligible version of the language and particularities of a culture for the benefit of a distant group of consumers not only makes the depiction less specific, but also renders said language unintelligible to those being represented.

Several years later, when Heyward and the Gershwin brothers collaborated to transform *Porgy* into an opera, the linguistic specificity was neutralized further because, to fit the story into the conventions of opera, Gershwin asked Heyward to “cut the original play forty per cent and rewrite the dialogue to meet the needs of recitative” (qtd. in Durham 127). By this third incarnation of *Porgy*, the story had lost whatever degree of specificity of language and culture

Heyward had achieved with the novel in order to meet the needs of the genres of play and opera and to be comprehensible to new audiences. This blurring of specificity coincided with wider publicity as critics called the opera both the first American opera and the first Black opera. These conditions created an atmosphere in which the works began to be judged by how they represented Black Americans in general, as opposed to how well they portrayed a very particular group of people from turn of the century Charleston.

As a result, many people express concerns about the problematic subject matter of the opera. Gershwin biographer Rodney Greenberg characterizes such criticism as the question of whether the characters are “the same old black stereotypes with their naïve superstitions, their whoring and their gambling?” (196). Such criticism of the subject matter and racial representations of *Porgy and Bess* continued almost two decades after the premier of the opera. In 1953, journalist James Hicks wrote that the opera was “the most insulting, the most libelous, the most degrading act that could possibly be perpetrated against coloured Americans of modern times” (qtd. in Greenberg 196). On the other hand, Maya Angelou expresses a contrasting opinion from roughly same time period as Hicks’ review in her autobiography: *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry like Christmas*, in which she reflects on the experience of performing in *Porgy and Bess* in the international tour of the opera in 1952.

Angelou danced in the premier performance of *Porgy and Bess* in the La Scala Opera House in Milan, Italy, noting that it was the first American opera ever to be performed at La Scala, and the first all black cast ever to perform there as well (601). She writes about how the cast depicted rough, Southern life to the Italian audience, and how they connected with the story:

Who could deny this story? How many Black men had been crippled by American oppression and had lost the women they loved and who loved them, because they hadn’t the strength to fight? How often had the women submitted to loveless arrangements for the sake of bare survival? (602)

Angelou focuses more on the opera's universal themes of oppression and frustrated love, and glosses over its negative elements of gambling, drug use, and childish superstition. However, one must ask if, similar to Bumbry's statement in the epigraph, Angelou's focus on larger themes is her way of "dealing with" the complex fact that the opera contains problematic racial representations, yet holds an enduring place in culture, which allows it to advance the careers of the black opera singers with whom she worked by welcoming them into places like the LaScala Opera, which had excluded black artists since its establishment.

Many factors in the evolution of the work support arguments that *Porgy and Bess* does a disservice to African Americans in its representations and subject matter. The first is the tension in Heyward's novel, noted herein, between celebrating the uniqueness of Gullah language and culture, and expressing categorical notions of black primitivism. The second is the loss of specificity in language and characterization as Heyward and Gershwin developed the story into the genres of play and opera for wider audiences, making it much easier to see the characters as stereotypes. However, Maya Angelou's account of performing in *Porgy and Bess* identifies celebratory or empowering elements that remain in the opera version.

Perhaps Grace Bumbry best expresses the reconciliation of criticisms and celebrations of the opera in the quote from the epigraph, when she suggests that we see *Porgy and Bess* as "a piece of Americana, of American history" (qtd. in Greenberg 197). Given the multiplicity of productions and media in which this story has appeared, and the multiple views of Americanness expressed not only by Heyward and Gershwin, but by the musicians, actors, directors, and producers who have retold the story, this view of *Porgy* and all of its manifestations as "a piece of Americana" cannot help but be complex in its admission of both racist and celebratory elements in the works.

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