

Review Articles

Black Opera, Operatic Racism and an ‘Engaged Opera Studies’

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Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*. Urbana, Chicago and Springfield, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2018. 282 pp. ISBN 9780252041921 (hard cover); 9780252083570 (paperback); 9780252050619 (ebook).

Naomi André’s *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* is a call for recognition and inclusion. Over the course of nearly 300 pages, André covers a range of subjects, from long-forgotten concert performances, to opera, Broadway and opera film, to contemporary operatic composition and practice. As she does, she moves between the United States and South Africa – a striking way of approaching her material and a feature of the book that ought to prove highly influential. Some of the arguments she makes are new, some combine pre-existing thought and research in new ways. The most important moments, though, are when she pauses to describe her experiences or those of another black opera lover or group of black opera lovers.

In Chapter 1, for example, André turns to the renowned African American soprano Leontyne Price and her rendering of Aida’s outpouring in Act 3 of Verdi’s *Aida*, ‘O patria! ... quanto mi costi!’ (‘O my country, how much you cost me!’). This is a moment in the opera that is usually explained in terms of Verdi’s preoccupation with father–daughter relationships (it comes at the end of Aida’s duet with Amonasro). However, for André, schooled by Price, it has become the expression of something much more urgent: the struggles and only occasional triumphs of living as an African American in America. In Chapter 2, she reminisces about a lecture on early Verdi she gave at a leading conservatoire in South Africa, the South African College of Music at the University of Cape Town. She describes being astonished to discover that a section of her audience – primarily those who were disadvantaged and black – already knew this repertory, having sung it in choirs in their townships. In Chapter 4, André notes how, in spite of its content, Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* continues to attract African American audiences. This, she suggests, is because the opera offers an opportunity to spend an evening in an opera house when almost all onstage (and many in the audience) are black. These are only brief episodes in *Black Opera*, but they are individually and cumulatively powerful, identifying as they do a black operatic ‘we’, or what André describes as ‘those of us [black listeners and audience members] who have fallen in love with opera’ (p. 20).

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I am grateful to James Davies, David Gutkin, George Lewis, Diana Maron, Roger Parker, Matthew Timmermans and Emily Wilbourne for taking time to comment on this review article. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Bongani Ndodana-Breen, who shared video footage of *Winnie* with me.

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This 'we' has not often been heard from in musicology. And yet, as André makes clear, African American audiences have been enjoying opera since at least the middle of the nineteenth century. And South Africa currently has a very vibrant operatic scene, one that involves many black singers, composers and directors. Taking these two large but little-known facts as a backdrop, André not only acknowledges the black opera lover, but also identifies and asserts a larger, almost two-centuries-long 'shadow culture' of black operatic creation, performance and appreciation (p. 9). André explains that by 'shadow' she does not mean a culture that is 'second-tier', but rather one that emerged during periods of violently enforced racism and racial segregation (the nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States under slavery and Jim Crow; nineteenth- and twentieth-century South Africa under British colonial rule and apartheid) and that necessarily developed separately and in obscurity. Although separate and obscure, André argues, this culture should be better known. She argues further that the operatic 'mainstream' (p. 10) has much to learn from it.

André's book and her arguments are, of course, more than timely. Indeed, with references to Barack Obama and the Black Lives Matter movement within the first five pages, *Black Opera* is an attempt to engage with the present, in which (though does anyone really need to be reminded?) the US has moved in the space of a few years from being headed towards a supposedly 'post-racial' future to being afflicted by a resurgence of white supremacy and racist violence.¹ André refers repeatedly to contemporary events, including a parallel deterioration in South Africa, where after the achievements and optimism of the later 1990s there has also been a rise in racist violence,² and she uses the phrases 'political activism' and 'social justice'. Her hopes for opera right now are astonishingly high. In contrast to the centuries-old tradition of wondering whether opera is irrelevant or in fact already dead, André is convinced that it has a long future, one in which it can be a force for good and attract an audience that is 'vast' and 'diverse' (p. 193). As she writes in her conclusion, which is titled 'Engaged Musicology, Political Action, and Social Justice':

The list of hurdles to opera's accessibility continues. One of my goals is to show in print what I have experienced in real life many times: opera can be relevant, provocative, and empowering. Opera is an art form that has potential for being a site for critical inquiry, political activism, and social change [...] The audiences I envision in this book are vast. They encompass a diversity of publics and include the people I sit next to in opera houses across the world; my friends who are opera lovers; my friends who do not know much about opera but are willing to learn more; and the many students I teach in my classes [...] These audiences also include people who attend pre-concert lectures, academic conference sessions, and other adult-learning venues; they go to university alumni camps and enrichment opportunities, they listen to [radio] interviews, and some have been incarcerated at the local women's prison where I volunteered and team-taught women's studies and opera classes for four years (pp. 193–4).

¹ For a critique of the 'post-racial' idea, see Ta-Nehisi Coates, 'There Is No Post-Racial America', *The Atlantic*, July–August 2015, <www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/07/post-racial-society-distant-dream/395255> (accessed 4 November 2020).

² From around 2008, South Africa has suffered from waves of 'xenophobic attacks', attacks on immigrants from other parts of Africa that have resulted in dozens dead, hundreds displaced and many businesses and homes destroyed. A rather different development has been the emergence of the Rhodes Must Fall movement, which began at the University of Cape Town in 2015 and has now become global.

As the last part of this quotation may make clear, *Black Opera* also engages with a local present: the upheaval and self-questioning concerning race that has in the last few years occupied American musicology. This is turning out to be one of the most important periods of transformation since debates about the ‘new musicology’ in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although the origins of the upheaval are complex, they can superficially be dated to a post on the website of the American Musicological Society by an opera scholar about teaching a course on opera in the prison system.³ Some of the language and ideas in the post as well as its public defence by leading figures in the society caused an outcry because of what they suggested about the society’s true values (and biases). These values, it seemed, remained rooted in the idea of the superiority of Western art music over other musical traditions and practices; close attention to scores over other kinds of learning and interaction; and the ideas and experiences of white listeners and scholars over those of listeners and scholars from African American and other minority backgrounds. Unlike the upheaval of the 1990s, the controversy initially unfolded online, even generating its own Twitter hashtag, #amssowhite. However, it also led to rapid – and ongoing – change within the society, change that is already having an impact on the larger discipline.⁴ Although she does not mention it, André is engaging with the upheaval – for example, in comments such as those above, which are followed by a discussion of attending an opera with colleagues she had got to know from her own work teaching opera in prisons. Her argument here and throughout the book is that opera scholars and musicologists as a whole need to be better informed, more nuanced and braver in their work. In particular, their outreach or ‘public musicology’ needs to be a two-way process, one in which they *learn from* rather than try simply to educate readers and audiences. As she writes:

An engaged musicology [...] incorporates the vantage points of the current diverse publics interpreting a work [...] Engaged musicology emphasizes how a specific musical work has meaning today [...] An engaged musicology finds a way to incorporate some of the experiences of the public into a [scholarly] interpretation [...] What is needed is [...] a reparative mission that helps heal and strengthen along the way [and a] re-envisioning of [the way that musicological practice] brings ‘experts, audiences, and publics together’ (pp. 198–9).

I will be returning to André’s conviction that opera has a long future as well as to how opera scholars specifically might develop an ‘engaged opera studies’. I will also return to the ways in which André’s arguments are relevant for Britain, for since *Black Opera* is about two former parts of the British empire, it is a book with implications for Britain and for how scholars interested in, based in or hailing from Britain can begin more bravely addressing the country’s own long history of racism and ‘shadow cultures’. For now, I would like to return to the two-centuries-long history that is at the heart of André’s book. It is explored through a series of case studies (a typical way of proceeding in opera studies), beginning with the contemporary white American composer William Bolcom’s *From the Diary of Sally Hemings* (2001), moving

³ Pierpaolo Polzonetti, ‘Don Giovanni Goes to Prison: Teaching Opera Behind Bars’, entry on Musicology Now, the blog of the American Musicological Society, 16 February 2016, <www.musicologynow.org/2016/02/don-giovanni-goes-to-prison-teaching_16.html> (accessed 4 November 2020).

⁴ Many of the changes are related to the work of the society’s Committee on Race and Ethnicity, established in 2017: see <www.amsmusicology.org/page/cre> (accessed 4 November 2020). For more on the original controversy, see William Cheng, *Loving Music till It Hurts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 99–104.

through two classics of the repertory – Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* and Bizet’s *Carmen* – and concluding with the black South African composer Bongani Ndodana-Breen’s *Winnie: The Opera* (2011). These choices reflect André’s determination to grapple with the difficult aspects of her subject while remaining fundamentally positive – plunging the reader into the transatlantic slave trade with the Bolcom but eventually taking them to opera on the African continent.

Some will nonetheless find the decision to begin with *From the Diary of Sally Hemings* frustrating. In one of two chapters that precede this first case study, chapters that give the book a slow start, André notes the many operas that have been produced by African American composers and related figures. These works range from the ‘operatic kaleidoscopes’ of the Black Patti Troubadours, a company founded by the soprano Sissieretta Jones in the 1890s, to Anthony Davis’s trio of operas on African American themes – the most recent of which, *The Central Park Five*, includes probably the first original operatic portrayal of Donald Trump. André herself has uncovered some of this richness, in a volume she co-edited with Karen Bryan and Eric Saylor, *Blackness in Opera*, a work that is strong on the flourishing of opera by African American composers during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s.⁵ To prefer Bolcom over this wealth of operatic activity is surprising, particularly when *From the Diary of Sally Hemings* is not an opera but a song cycle for mezzo-soprano and piano. However, the choice reflects another of André’s priorities, which is to approach her subject intersectionally, paying attention to issues of gender and class as well as race, and especially the complex pressures faced by black women.

Hemings has in the last few years become a symbol of the complexities of black womanhood. As it was recently put by the soprano Alyson Cambridge, she was both the slave and the ‘presumed mistress’ of the founding father and third American president Thomas Jefferson, with whom she had six children.⁶ That Jefferson had a nearly 40-year relationship with one of the many individuals he enslaved was a fact that had long informally circulated but was denied until the late 1990s, when the work of the historian Annette Gordon-Reed and DNA evidence led to recognition by the Jefferson Estate and others. There are many lessons to be drawn from the case, but most important for André is the extent to which societies based on even the most oppressive forms of racial segregation involve a more complex reality of interracial exchanges. Some of these exchanges are coercive and violent, but others produce what she describes as ‘love and longevity’ (p. 82). By beginning with *From the Diary of Sally Hemings*, André begins with that love: with the past fact as well as the future possibility of our interracial connectedness. It is a typically hopeful move – for others, the issues raised by the case are more negative.⁷

⁵ *Blackness in Opera*, ed. Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan and Eric Saylor (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012): see Ann Sears, ‘Political Currents and Black Culture in Scott Joplin’s *Treemonisha*’, 101–15; Karen M. Bryan, ‘Clarence Cameron White’s *Ouanga!* in the World of the Harlem Renaissance’, 116–40; and Gayle Murchison, ‘New Paradigms in William Grant Still’s *Blue Steel*’, 142–63.

⁶ Quoted from Alyson Cambridge, ‘I Was Live with *The New York Times*’, 15 November 2017, <www.facebook.com/nytimes/videos/10151382721404999/?comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22O%22%7D> (accessed 4 November 2020), at 7’ 36”. For a recent performance of the cycle by Cambridge (at the Glimmerglass Festival, New York, in 2020), see <www.youtube.com/watch?v=bipRlc2haY0>.

⁷ For a negative view, see Caroline Randall Williams, ‘You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body Is a Confederate Monument’, *New York Times*, 26 June 2020, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/opinion/confederate-monuments-racism.html>> (accessed 4 November 2020).

Bolcom's song cycle was composed as the relationship was finally being acknowledged, and André presents it as a case of collaborative 'interracial[ity]' (p. 66), for it was commissioned from Bolcom by the African American mezzo-soprano Florence Quivar and the libretto was written by the African American playwright Sandra Seaton. For the text, Seaton created excerpts from a fictitious diary by Hemings, spanning the entirety of her life. André describes the 18 songs as a quasi-operatic monodrama in the style of Schoenberg's *Erwartung* or Poulenc's *La voix humaine*, though one could equally compare it to *Winterreise* or *Frauenliebe und -leben*. For the music, Bolcom produced one of his more austere and even modernist-sounding scores: he is a composer who regularly engages with American (including African American) popular musical traditions, but he himself has spoken of the songs as having a 'French atmosphere' (quoted in André, p. 69). The approach draws attention to the role that Europe played in the Hemings–Jefferson relationship, for it began when the Jefferson household was in Paris, during which time Hemings negotiated special privileges for the children they would have together. Resulting in music that is at times other-worldly and at times biting and acerbic, it also allows Bolcom to communicate a sense of a woman who must have had a certain 'fearless[ness]' (the composer again, p. 69) and cannot be placed into easy categories.

As will be becoming clear, André's shadow culture is not simply separate and obscure but also fragmentary and highly individual, if it can be thought of as a single culture at all – particularly when compared with the operatic mainstream. That mainstream is at times magnificently, at times stultifyingly, centred on the idea that it is a living, resounding continuation of a 'great tradition', and in particular a small group of works originally created from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth (from, say, *Le nozze di Figaro* to *Turandot*). What *Black Opera* uncovers is also – to repeat some of the adjectives André uses across the study – partly lost, unnotated or unrecorded, rendered invisible or inaudible, and prevented from being able to coalesce into something continuous by hostility and violence. Perhaps most importantly, if it is nonetheless a single entity, it is so because it has been made into one by generations of performers and audiences.

Singers play a central role in *Black Opera*, from the South African coloratura Nolutuyiso Mpofu, who appears thought-provokingly in white makeup on the book's cover, to the 1950s African American siren Dorothy Dandridge (who features in the *Porgy* and *Carmen* chapters), to the crossover opera and pop soprano Tsakane Maswanganyi, creator of the title role of Ndodana-Breen's *Winnie*. In André's account, black opera has been sustained by these and other figures to a degree that (to return to the questions I mentioned earlier) suggests that one of the first priorities of an 'engaged opera studies' would be to keep singers and performance central. This would run counter to trends in recent years, where there has been a move away from performance towards sound, technology, human–machine relationships and even the post-human in opera.⁸ However, André's work combines with writing by Nina Sun Eidsheim, Kira Thurman and others to suggest that there is more to be said on this subject. It also suggests that scholars have much to learn from African American studies and critical race theory, where issues of the voice, body, performance and personal and political expression have long been

⁸ See, for example, Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); *Technology and the Diva: Sopranos, Opera, and Media from Romanticism to the Digital Age*, ed. Karen Henson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Emily Wilbourne, *Seventeenth-Century Opera and the Sound of the Commedia dell'arte* (Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016); and Gundula Kreuzer, *Curtain, Gong, Steam: Wagnerian Technologies of Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2018).

treated with sophistication.⁹ André's account also indicates that the operatic future in which she believes will depend on singers. To put it in terms of Britain: what if, in thinking about the future, scholars paid as much attention to the activities of singers and groups of singers as they do the latest new work or production? What if they gave thought to singer-led organizations like the Black British Classical Foundation or the Brixton-based Pegasus Opera Company, which have been at the forefront of attempts to make the future more reflective of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) Britain?¹⁰

Black Opera's central chapters, on *Porgy and Bess* and *Carmen*, focus on operas that have been claimed for the shadow culture. *Porgy* is the one opera in the repertory that tells an African American story presented by an all-black cast; and yet it was created by an all-white, South Carolinian and eastern European Jewish team in an act of appropriation. André dwells on the opera's multiple identities, which include 'folk opera' (Gershwin's designation for the work); musical theatre (some of the first performances were on Broadway); and 'Great American Opera', for some even the starting point of the American tradition. André adds to these the idea that *Porgy* is about whiteness, and specifically the anxious circumstance of 'being Jewish – and not quite white' (p. 105) in the US in the early twentieth century. Among the evidence she cites is Sportin' Life's 'It ain't necessarily so'. This is one of the biggest numbers in the opera, and scholars have noted that it refers pointedly to stories in the Torah as well as to an opening common to many Jewish prayers (in the number's initial leaps up to the fifth, fourth and minor third degrees).¹¹ André herself emphasizes the importance in the opera of 'motion and relocation' (p. 101), which she relates to the eastern European Jewish immigrant as well as to African American experience. As she explains, the opera's première (in 1935) took place in the middle of the Great Migration, when large numbers of African Americans relocated from the Jim Crow South to northern and Midwestern cities. However, it also came at the end of a large wave of immigration to the US – a wave that included George and Ira Gershwin's parents, who made the now iconic journey across the Atlantic and into New York harbour.

As they arrived in New York, Washington DC and elsewhere, African Americans and Jewish immigrants built lives alongside each other, and Sportin' Life's vaguely Jewish-sounding melody, or his invitation to Bess to take a boat with him to New York, reflect that shared experience. But there was another way of being an immigrant, one that involved gaining acceptance by distinguishing oneself from one's neighbours. And André argues that this is also reflected in *Porgy*, in

⁹ Nina Sun Eidsheim, 'Marian Anderson and "Sonic Blackness" in American Opera', *American Quarterly*, 63 (2011), 641–71, repr. in *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 61–90; Kira Thurman, 'Black Venus, White Bayreuth: Race, Sexuality, and the Depoliticization of Wagner in Postwar West Germany', *German Studies Review*, 35 (2012), 607–26; and Thurman, 'When Marian Anderson Defied the Nazis', *New Yorker*, 15 July 2020, <www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/when-marian-anderson-defied-the-nazis> (accessed 4 November 2020). Three of the many important texts on performance in African American studies and critical race theory are Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); and Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ For the Black British Classical Foundation, which includes among its leadership the mezzo-soprano Grace Bumbry, see <bbcfc.org.uk>; and for the Pegasus Opera Company, which is led by the soprano Alison Buchanan, see <www.pegasusoperacompany.org>.

¹¹ I am grateful to Steven Rosenberg for the demonstrations.

Gershwin and his team's indebtedness to that most perplexing tradition of anti-blackness, the minstrel show. André explains the connections between *Porgy's* protagonists and the stock characters of minstrelsy, with Porgy resembling the dim but good-natured 'Sambo', Sportin' Life the wily 'Trickster' and Bess the sexy 'Jezebel'. She argues that the characterization of Porgy is driven by what she calls 'the minstrel imperative' – above all, at the end of the opera, where although he has only recently committed murder and Bess has just left him, he has to 'put on a happy face' and get the audience to 'clap and smile' as he sings 'Oh Lawd, I'm on my way' (p. 108).

But the connections between *Porgy* and minstrelsy are only part of a larger history. I had assumed that minstrelsy's song-and-dance routines – the genre notoriously featured all-white, primarily all-male troupes of performers ridiculing African American men and women in exaggerated costumes and black and white makeup – occupied a very different space from that occupied by opera. However, André draws on a growing body of scholarship to show that in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century US and in South Africa, where minstrelsy was popular from the 1840s, the lines between minstrelsy and opera were blurred. As a genre that burlesqued the 'higher' arts, minstrel shows often featured opera-themed sketches, operatic music (especially choruses) and opera-inspired stock characters. Black opera singers and other classically trained musicians, meanwhile, were referred to or promoted as minstrels, when they were neither white men in blackface nor performing popular music. Minstrelsy and opera therefore have a 'complicated, interconnected history' and minstrelsy is the 'giant specter' with which any consideration of black opera has to contend (p. 31).

André could have been bolder here, for although black singers and opera lovers were the immediate victims of this history, the mainstream must have been affected – and in ways that have a legacy today. This mainstream, after all, continues to be attached to what in other public and cultural domains has long been rejected as a painful reminder of minstrelsy: the presentation of black characters by white performers in black makeup. André opens *Black Opera* by describing how it felt to attend a Metropolitan Opera 'Live-in-HD' broadcast of Verdi's *Otello* in 2012, during which she quickly discovered, to her discomfort (all the more so because she was there with a colleague from South Africa), that the title role was to be played by the white South African tenor Johan Botha in black makeup. Although the Met has now discontinued the practice, 'blacking up' continues in other American and international houses and is defended as one of opera's traditions. In terms of defences, one can quote one of the most high-profile operatic sopranos today, Anna Netrebko, who recently commented on an Instagram post of herself in the role of Aida: 'Black Face and Black Body ... YES!'¹²

To return again to my questions, a second priority of an 'engaged opera studies' would be not only to argue forcefully against blacking up, but also to have exchanges about the culture of the opera house generally. These exchanges could be research-orientated, bringing scholars together to explore musical and historical issues (including opera's privileging not only of tradition but also of certain ideas about voice and vocal expression).¹³ But they could also be

¹² The comment was in response to a question about Netrebko's original post; the question was: 'But is the blackface really necessary?' See <www.instagram.com/p/BydFhzEHR11>. I should note that if blackface and blacking up have long been unacceptable beyond opera, examples of the practice regularly emerge and cause controversy.

¹³ Such exchanges would also engage with recent work on the legacy of minstrelsy in American popular music and music pedagogy: see Matthew Morrison, 'Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 72 (2019), 781–823, and Philip A. Ewell, 'Music Theory and the White Racial Frame', *Music Theory Online*, 26 (2020), <mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.2/mto.20.26.2.ewell.html>.

activist and involve scholars making practical, activist arguments. The most important of these would be that opera houses have *long* needed to transform, and need now to do so urgently, so that they are populated by a range of individuals working in a range of roles: not only as singers, but also as administrative staff, conductors, stage hands, orchestral musicians and so on. The point has been made in a different way by Russell Thomas, who recently became one of few black tenors to appear in a leading international opera house as Otello. In a Los Angeles Opera Zoom Conversation on the occasion of the summer 2020 wave of Black Lives Matter protests, Thomas urged: ‘This is serious [...] Let’s not talk about [whether or not singers should wear] blackface [...] Want to do something serious? Any [opera] company whose leadership or staff does not look like the community that their building sits in, refuse [to engage with it].’¹⁴ And these exchanges, of course, have a place in Britain, which has its own history with minstrelsy, blacking up and exclusionary institutions. A version of minstrelsy was broadcast by the BBC until nearly 1980; blacking up was the norm at the Royal Opera House until 2005; and a recent report on the present-day opera scene quoted insiders warning that it remains ‘shockingly mono-cultural’ in terms of the ethnic, socio-economic and gender profile of the talent on which it draws.¹⁵

If *Porgy* uses an African American setting and singers to tell a story about whiteness, Bizet’s *Carmen* is a French fantasy about a Roma (or Gypsy) woman who has for nearly a century been reimagined as black. The content of André’s chapter ranges from the 1840s novella on which Bizet’s opera was based to three films: the 1954 film of the Oscar Hammerstein African American musical theatre version of the opera, *Carmen Jones*; the 2001 MTV film *Carmen*, a hip-hop version starring a young Beyoncé; and the 2005 film *U-Carmen eKhayeliisha*, a version performed by a semi-professional cast in one of the largest townships in South Africa. With *U-Carmen*, André takes the reader across the Atlantic, where they will remain for the rest of the book. There is, of course, a substantial literature on *Carmen*, including on how the opera depends for its expression on literary, musical and visual stereotype. André is nonetheless one of few to speak frankly about race, for previous discussions have not been as direct as they could have been about the extent to which, even in her original form, *Carmen* is different phenotypically from those around her. The *Carmen* of the novella, for example, in a passage restated at the start of *U-Carmen*, is repeatedly described as ‘dark’ (in the original French, ‘noir’). Bizet and his collaborators ensured that audiences heard this, the composer settling for the heroine’s most important number on a habanera, a dance-based genre associated with neither the Roma nor Spain but with the Caribbean.¹⁶ And historically, right up

¹⁴ ‘Lift Every Voice’, Los Angeles Opera Conversation on Racial Disparity and Inequality, initiated and hosted by the mezzo-soprano J’Nai Bridges, with the sopranos Julia Bullock and Karen Slack, the tenors Lawrence Brownlee and Russell Thomas, and the bass Morris Robinson, 5 June 2020, <www.laopera.org/discover/laoathome/lift-every-voice> (accessed 4 November 2020), at 49’ 25”. I have slightly rephrased Thomas, whose original statement was addressed to singers. For Thomas as Otello, see a brief clip from his performances with the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto in 2019, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WJbSThnSaA> (accessed 4 November 2020).

¹⁵ For BBC minstrelsy, see <www.bbc.com/historyofthebbc/100-voices/people-nation-empire/make-yourself-at-home/the-black-and-white-minstrel-show> (accessed 4 November 2020). See also Graham Devlin Associates, *Opera Training for Singers in the UK: How Should It Evolve to Meet the Changing Needs of the Profession? A Study Commissioned by the National Opera Studio*, August 2016, <www.nationaloperastudio.org.uk/news/opera-training-report> (accessed 4 November 2020), 15. This report was based on exchanges with around 200 opera professionals, including staff at leading British conservatoires and opera companies.

¹⁶ The decision to give *Carmen* a habanera involved the first *Carmen*, the mezzo-soprano Célestine Galli-Marié, who had previously created several exotic (trouser) roles: see my *Opera Acts: Singers and Performance in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 48–87.

to the present, Carmen has been cast and costumed with less flexibility than many female roles. Even in the twenty-first century, with all the freedoms that directors have, how many have put Carmen in a blonde wig?¹⁷

Those who have adapted *Carmen* have understood this aspect of the heroine's characterization and taken it as an invitation to transform the entire cast into racial Others. In the case of *Carmen Jones*, Hammerstein was to some extent reworking Bizet's exoticism for a white American film audience. With *Carmen* and *U-Carmen*, on the other hand, two multiracial teams sought to transform the opera for a global audience. And with *U-Carmen*, André argues, this transformation extends to Carmen herself, who is no longer presented as different from those around her, but rather very much at 'home' in Khayelitsha (p. 157). The fact that the British director Mark Dornford-May was able to achieve this is impressive given that *U-Carmen* presents a relatively faithful version of Bizet's music.¹⁸ He and his team nonetheless present the score with enough surface-level changes that Bizet's musical contrasts and distinctions recede in favour of a new sonic reality. (The characters sing in isiXhosa, one of South Africa's many distinctive click languages; traditional and popular South African music is combined with the score in certain scenes; and the soundtrack makes extensive use of diegetic sound, or sound from the reality of the film.) And this new sound is only part of a larger approach, whereby the opera is presented, documentary-style, in a setting that is appealing but also poverty-stricken and violent. Carmen is the obvious victim of the violence, but the film shows it affecting all the characters, from Don José (now called Jongikhaya or Jongi) to Zuniga (Captain Gantana), who is led away and shot at Lillas Pastia's (Bra Nkomo's) in Act 2.

I was surprised that André did not make more of the fact that *U-Carmen* portrays several of the protagonists as active in South Africa's long tradition of black choral singing, or *amakwaya*. Much of the vibrancy of the South African operatic scene is a result of this tradition, which since the nineteenth century has been a source of engagement with opera for some of the country's poorest communities.¹⁹ If André had drawn attention to this, she would have been able to draw out one of the most important implications of the book, which is the importance to the shadow culture of what one could call extra-theatrical or unofficial versions of opera. In this respect, André makes a remarkable claim (towards the start of the book) that '*the performance of any operas in the shadow culture is a momentous event*' (p. 12; emphasis added). In other words, this is a culture in which opera has to a large extent existed and been defined not, as it is in the mainstream, in terms of a group of works performed by professionally trained singers in opera houses; rather, it has existed through appropriations such as those by *amakwaya*, those in the form of semi-staged concerts and related events, and creation and consumption via popular and modern media forms – from sheet music to social media.

¹⁷ Predictably, one of few to have imagined Carmen as blonde is the iconoclastic Spanish director Calixto Bieito in a production for English National Opera that was running until recently. See eno.org/whats-on/carmen (accessed 4 November 2020).

¹⁸ The film originated in a production by Dornford-May's theatre company Dimpho di Kopane; he and the South African soprano and actress Pauline Malefane (who plays Carmen in the film) later co-founded the Isango Ensemble, whose opera productions have been successful internationally but had a more mixed reception in South Africa itself. For more, see Sheila Boniface Davies and James Q. Davies, "So Take this Magic Flute and Blow. It Will Protect Us as We Go": *Impempe Yomlingo* (2007–11) and South Africa's Ongoing Transition', *Opera Quarterly*, 28 (2012), 54–71.

¹⁹ For more on *amakwaya*, see Markus Detterbeck, *Makwaya, South African Choral Music: Song, Contest, and the Formation of Identity* (Innsbruck: Helbling, 2011).

The importance of such appropriations is at once unsurprising and shocking – shocking because it reminds one of how many people have been not only made to feel uncomfortable in opera houses, but literally, legally, excluded from them – and it suggests that a third priority of an engaged opera studies would be to take these versions of opera more seriously. A good deal has already been written on opera's modern media circulation, and recent trends in operatic composition and performance have led to some interesting work on whether the art form's boundaries are currently being expanded.²⁰ André's book could be the starting point for broadening this discussion so that it includes – indeed *learns from* – the large numbers of individuals in time and across the globe for whom opera has surely always been very open ontologically. Could traditions such as *amakwaya* encourage opera scholars to engage in a way that they have not yet done with ethnomusicology?²¹ And since *amakwaya* originated in a partly British (Scottish missionary) context, could it eventually feature in a history of operatic music-making across the British empire – one that is already being uncovered by a new generation of scholars, including Trevor Nelson, Uchenna Ngwe, Maria Ryan and Wayne Weaver?²²

André's final chapter focuses on one of the many operas being written by black South African composers, Ndodana-Breen's *Winnie* (the other composers she discusses include Mzilikazi Khumalo, creator of the breakthrough *Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu*, and Neo Muyanga, author of the more recent *The Flower of Shembe*). André's choice here is motivated by her commitment to intersectionality, for the work is, of course, centred on a powerful female figure. It also allows André to address the ways in which, in post-apartheid South Africa, opera has become not only one of the country's most vibrant high art forms, but also a means of facilitating 'national healing' (p. 187).²³ Towards the start of the chapter, André draws comparisons with Philip Glass and John Adams and their explorations of great men and events in world history. *Winnie* could be thought of as a minimalist opera, though here as in his other music Ndodana-Breen combines repetitive rhythms and an essentially tonal language with elements of African musical tradition and practice. However, André could have paid more attention to Verdi, not only because of his nationalistic reputation, but also because of his gift for creating flawed yet deeply sympathetic female protagonists. It is exactly this kind of woman that Ndodana-Breen and his

²⁰ See, for example, *Technology and the Diva*, ed. Henson. See also Jelena Novak, *Postopera: Rethinking the Voice-Body* (New York: Routledge, 2015), and the 'Articulations' section of *Opera Quarterly*, 35 (2019), 130–46, which includes brief thought-pieces on operatic ontology by Wayne Heisler, Gundula Kreuzer, Ryan Minor and Heather Wiebe.

²¹ For more, see Juliana Pistorius, 'Predicaments of Coloniality, or, Opera Studies Goes Ethno', *Music and Letters*, 100 (2019), 529–39.

²² Trevor Nelson is working on a doctoral dissertation at the Eastman School of Music on mid-twentieth-century British music and decolonization. Uchenna Ngwe is working on a doctoral dissertation at Trinity Laban Conservatoire in London in which she explores the lives and contributions of historical black British musicians from the perspective of a performer–curator–activist. Maria Ryan is working on a doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania on how Africans and individuals of African descent engaged with Western art music in the nineteenth-century British colonial Caribbean. Wayne Weaver is working on a doctoral dissertation at the University of Cambridge on the roles of globalization, migration and the slave trade in musical life in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British colonial Caribbean. I am grateful to Jennifer Oates for letting me know about these scholars and to the scholars themselves for discussing their work with me.

²³ See also *New Voices in Black South African Opera*, ed. Naomi André, Innocentia Mhlambi and Donata Somma, special issue (on *Winnie*), *African Studies*, 75 (2016), 1–97; the issue includes articles by André, Mhlambi, Somma and the composer Neo Muyanga.

librettists, the film and television moguls Warren Wilensky and Mfundu Vundla, had to create for *Winnie*. As is well known, Nelson Mandela's second wife was a crucial figure for South Africa, but in her later years became implicated in kidnapping, torture and murder.

Ndodana-Breen and his librettists produce a version of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela who (to continue the Verdian analogy) is a little bit Abigail, a little bit Lady Macbeth, a little bit Azucena. The opera begins and ends at the public hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which were held in the first years of the post-apartheid regime and included sessions devoted to Madikizela-Mandela's wrongdoing (in 1997). But if this puts (the soprano) Winnie's damaged reputation front and centre, the opera presents the commission as literally a spectacle, one that sought to appeal to global and media interests as much as to national ones. This spectacle is contrasted with a group of eight unnamed female characters, the 'Mothers of the Missing', who return throughout the opera dressed traditionally in white and singing an unaccompanied hymn in isiXhosa (Wilensky and Vundla's libretto is bilingual, in isiXhosa and English). These characters represent the many ordinary South Africans who lost loved ones during apartheid but did not receive any kind of truth, and with whom Madikizela-Mandela, long known as South Africa's 'Mother', is associated.

In a series of scenes that move back in time and then forward, Winnie is surrounded either by the Mothers or by male authority figures (though tellingly, Mandela himself never appears onstage). She is at once isolated and never alone, nor does she often express herself on her own, tending instead to be joined by another soloist, the Mothers or the chorus. In these scenes, André argues, Ndodana-Breen and his team present 'a Winnie the audience [...] never knew, who [...] does not exist any more' (pp. 191–2) and who is ultimately shown to be neither heroine nor villain but rather another black woman trying to create a space for herself amid complexity. *Winnie* has received only a handful of performances to date, so it is too early to speak of it having accomplished healing, but at the première at the State Theatre in Pretoria something important took place. Madikizela-Mandela herself was present and, at the end, went onstage to speak. The moment is preserved on YouTube, showing the audience enthralled by her presence. And she is enthralled by the welcome, launching into old rallying cries and reminiscing about how she once plotted to blow up the theatre.²⁴

Although André's coverage of South Africa in *Black Opera* is as extensive as her coverage of the US, her explorations of *U-Carmen*, *Winnie* and other South African subjects are, as she herself warns, not sufficiently in-depth. This is not *Black Opera*'s only weakness. The writing is at times awkward; the content and arguments of each chapter are presented in a way that can lack focus; and although André draws on major thinkers outside musicology including the African American feminist writers bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, the post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha and the philosopher of education Paulo Freire, on the paragraph level her work is rather traditional. And yet because it opens up such a large subject and raises so many important questions, *Black Opera* should be widely read – and suggests a final priority for an engaged opera studies.

Until recently, opera scholarship has been very limited – hopelessly Eurocentric? – in its geopolitical scope, with work on Italy, Germany and France (and then Britain, Russia and the US) dominating in journals and book series. The situation is changing. Scholars of early opera

²⁴ See <www.youtube.com/watch?v=tozZudTny2M>, at 1' 40" and 8' 15". For brief clips from the première itself, from the torture scene in Act 1 and the scene at the Mandela United Football Club in Act 2, see <www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SUxjOJImVs> and <www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tex7NXCqkx0>.

including Gary Tomlinson and Olivia Bloechl have long argued for a global approach to music history, while two essay collections, *Opera Indigene*, edited by Pamela Karantonis and Dylan Robinson, and *Opera in a Multicultural World*, edited by Mary Ingraham, Joseph So and Roy Moodley, have opened up the field to indigenous and multicultural perspectives.²⁵ Another collection, *Operatic Geographies*, edited by Suzanne Aspden, raises the very issue of geography, and there is now a subfield of scholarship on opera in South America.²⁶ These developments are important, and *Black Opera* combines with André's co-edited volume *Blackness in Opera* and a research network that has just been launched, the Black Opera Research Network (or BORN), to give them a potential focus.²⁷

Black Opera's significance in this respect is not simply that it expands even recent scholars' view, though it is important that André explores operatic activity in two non-European, non-white, partly colonial and partly Global South contexts. Opera outside Europe and among the profoundly marginalized is not an extension of or foil to a fundamentally Italian, German or French history. It is the norm and the centre. It is also that the book conceives of geography the way it has been conceived of in African American studies, post-colonial studies and related fields, which is in terms of movement, exchange and dynamism across oceans and continents rather than the more European categories of nations, identities and borders.²⁸ This approach brings with it an understanding of geography as always political and inherently bound up with oppression and bloodshed. Finally, the book is the work of someone with lived experience of these issues and their implications in the present, one of few such figures among opera scholars. For though the situation is (again) changing, the field has for decades been even more 'mono-cultural' – that is, white – than opera itself, and also more white than the larger discipline of musicology. With typical optimism, André does not refer to this fact, mentioning only briefly the 'emotional weight' (p. 208) of working in isolation. In her last sentence she is more direct. *Black Opera*, she says, was 'written by a member trained inside the [...] tribe' – the use of this word is no accident – who occupies 'a vantage point outside many of [its] shared experiences' (p. 208).

²⁵ Gary Tomlinson, 'Monumental Musicology', review of Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 132 (2007), 349–74 (esp. pp. 365–8), and Olivia Bloechl, *Native American Song at the Frontiers of Early Modern Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). See also *Opera Indigene: Representing First Nations and Indigenous Cultures*, ed. Pamela Karantonis and Dylan Robinson (New York: Routledge, 2011), and *Opera in a Multicultural World: Coloniality, Culture, Performance*, ed. Mary Ingraham, Joseph So and Roy Moodley (New York: Routledge, 2016).

²⁶ *Operatic Geographies: The Place of Opera and the Opera House*, ed. Suzanne Aspden (Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press, 2019). See also Maria Alice Volpe, 'Remaking the Brazilian Myth of National Foundation: *Il Guarany*', *Latin American Music Review*, 23 (2002), 179–84; Sérgio Bittencourt-Sampaio, *Negras líricas: Duas intérpretes negras brasileiras na música de concerto (séc. XVIII–XX)* (Rio de Janeiro: Letras, 2008); Benjamin Walton, 'Italian Operatic Fantasies in Latin America', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 17 (2012), 460–71; and Rogério Budasz, *Opera in the Tropics: Music and Theater in Early Modern Brazil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

²⁷ For the Black Opera Research Network (BORN), see <blackoperaresearch.net>.

²⁸ Three of the many important texts on geography in African American studies and post-colonial theory are Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practising Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).