

SOUNDING AND SIGNIFYIN':  
REPRESENTATION AND THE THEATRICAL BLACK VOICE

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## ABSTRACT

### SOUNDING AND SIGNIFYIN': REPRESENTATION AND THE THEATRICAL BLACK VOICE

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This qualitative dissertation identifies musical strategies that black theatre singers use when presenting and re-presenting music that integrates western classical vocal aesthetics with stylistic genres of traditionally black forms like gospel, jazz, and blues. This study investigates the use of the voice by five black opera and musical theatre performers and the approaches that they take in the representation of music that requires integrated vocality, which integrates elements from western classical traditions with those from black popular and folk idioms. Data were collected through audio/visual analysis, interviews, and video stimulated recall, presented through narrative analysis. Three emergent themes are explored as follows: Authenticity is rooted in the singer's experience of cultural traditions and expression; technique is a means of personal and cultural expression and provides the opportunity for personal liberation, and; a singer positions themselves at the nexus of their cultural legacy as a learner, exemplar, advocate, and transmitter of culture.

The implications for educators at the tertiary level are discussed in the final chapter. Alignment of technique, personal expression, and identity infuses a singer's sound with meaning; fostering the black singer's use of their cultural capital helps them transform their life experiences into artistic interpretation. Representation, the use of signs that link a person to their cultural circles, is an act of re-humanization, combating dehumanization caused by systematic and societal exclusion by placing positive images at the center of their cultural legacy. In higher education, pre-professional training becomes humanizing when expression is viewed as a means of critical understanding of a student's lived experience. Also, inspiring persons with marginalized identities requires re-centralizing power toward those who can imagine themselves transforming the entertainment industry into a more inclusive artistic space.

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## DEDICATION

To my father and mother who inspire my brothers and me to lead with intelligence and kindness.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My own enthusiasm for this project increased along the path to completion with each interview and each conversation I had with others. I first must express gratitude to the participants of this study. Each of these incredible artists invited me into their thoughts and processes with immense openness and truth. The four other members of my doctoral cohort as well as my fellow Team 4 Doctoral Seminar mates were integral to the development of the work, culminating in this document. I thank my professors at Teachers College who have left indelible imprints on my thinking and educating. Much appreciation is extended to my defense committee: Dr. Kelly Parkes, Dr. Randall Allsup, Dr. Jeanne Goffi-Fynn, and Dr. Mark Anthony Gooden.

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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

African American culture began as various traditions from multiple African peoples brought to North America during slavery (Gilroy, 1991). Sharing their cultural capital with one another, black people developed amalgamated pan-African social capital within the framework of pan-European hegemony. Black cultural forms exist in relationship to white cultural and power structures. Symbiosis exists between black vernacular forms and standard English, the significance of which is based in the sharing of cultural values. For example, people of African descent preserved musical elements of their African heritage while integrating them with forms and aesthetics of European music. Music of the African diaspora from the era of chattel slavery developed the importance of vocal work. Consequently, vocal sound and the way singers sing have been racialized. Black vocalities emerge as simultaneously historically aware of the slave experience and aspirational toward succeeding in modern society. The perception of vocal sound is part of the discourse of race that permeates American culture.

Individual expression is grounded in a history of cultural patterns; however, these patterns must be looked at in the context of the wider society. The focus of the present study is on how black performer uses their skill set, including vocal technique, to navigate musical expression at the intersection of performance and identity. Five elite performers were interviewed about self-identification, preparation, and performance. The participants reveal that a voice is black not from sound quality but from the

circumstances the person has experienced. A black voice emerges from a person with black ancestry rooted in a meta-reflexive demonstration of their cultural heritage.

In understanding the context of aural and idiomatic signifiers that impart an awareness of black vocality, the listener constructs meaning from their perceptions of the sound emerging from a black body. Singing traditions throughout the African diaspora include timbral, melodic, and rhythmic variations of the musical material (Wilson, 1992). These vocal sounds carry significance through the social construction of meanings associated with the connotations of blackness. The performer creates the sign, and listener assigns meaning to the sounding elements. The listener interprets the performance from the position of their own understanding and the structures of their cultural traditions.

Representation, or the ways that communities are portrayed, link a person to their cultural circles. Each participant in this study positions themselves at the nexus of their cultural legacy as a learner, exemplar, advocate, and transmitter of culture. As such, they act as a representative of their cultural legacy. The performer represents meaning according to the listener's cultural framework of reference. Authentic black representation comes from the performer portraying themselves in a public sphere within the context of their values or ideologies. The performer uses an objective medium such as opera or musical theatre in order to express themselves and become liberated from limitations put upon them from their society. For the listener, positive representation comes from experiencing a performance that reflects the expanse of the life experience of the performer. Representation becomes an act of rehumanizing black people, targets of

the dehumanizing effects of racism. Both the performer and the listener experience the emancipatory effects of playing in the liminal space between the sign and its meaning.

Training singers (actors, humans) must help them go beyond *repressive desublimation*, the concept that social reality incorporates culture as a means of perpetuating institutional authority (Marcuse, 1964). Students reflect and transform life experiences into interpretation, navigating the complexities of combining cultural wealth from disparate sources.

Vocal technique must reflect not only the physical body, but also habits of thought and cultural signifiers to understand the deep meanings of social contexts. Examining the negotiations made by black performers can lead to new ways to look at how to train integrated vocality and its implications for the representation of race by black performers on stage. I am examining performance techniques that black performers employ on stage when presenting music theatre based on black themes because I want to explore what performers do to navigate musical idiom and personal expression in order to understand the intersection of performance and identity.

### **Personal Narrative**

I work regularly as a performer and as a stage director, most of my gigs being in standard opera and musical theatre repertoire. But I often look at how the intersections of my multiple identities – mixed heritage, Caribbean, immigrant, queer, classically-trained singer, modern-trained dancer, and raised in the rural Midwest – affect my work in intended and unintended ways. My particular steering through the human condition not only leads to the decisions I make in my life and my art, but also affects the way that others see me and, frankly, hire me as an artist. I have found that I am often engaged in

musical and theatrical styles with themes that intersect with at least one of my identities. If a company hires me to direct a piece that explores black themes, my duty as a black artist is to explore the implications of race in that story. The overlapping of my multiple identities sometimes makes me the most appropriate performer to embody a specific role. Holding up the meanings of intersecting identities in a public forum like theatrical performance puts them in conversation with each other.

In 2007, the Oakland Opera Theatre hired me to do stage direction and dramaturgy with a team to complete Duke Ellington's unfinished opera *Queenie Pie*, whose title character is a beautician threatened by a younger, more glamorous competitor and looks for a magic flower which promises eternal beauty. Ellington worked on the opera on and off for over 40 years, having neither a completed score nor a performance scheduled during his lifetime. We worked from two manuscripts (a copy from the Smithsonian Institute and one from the University of California at Irvine) as well as scribbled ideas on drink napkins, the backs of programs, and torn pieces of paper.

Some of the pieces that Ellington did complete and intended for *Queenie Pie* had a life on their own, such as “Second Line,” shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1 “Second Line” from *Queenie Pie*, Oakland Opera Theatre (2007).



This piece is the number that welcomes Queenie Pie's albatross (a Louisiana Creole woman) to town. In the choreography, I was trying to depict the feeling of a Second Line parade, the assemblage of revelers and onlookers who follow behind a band marching down the street in New Orleans. My duty was to theatricalize a tradition which merges European and African customs into a uniquely American form. The work had to be anchored in questioning what we thought we knew and identifying ways to denote the interpretive elements of the score and the script that we were re-creating.

As a performer, I am often engaged in music that crosses over between western lyric and popular genres. Black classical singers negotiate vernacular music to which they listen and sing in less formal settings and formal performances such as operas and oratorios. For me, musical code-switching is effortless, and dropping into a range of styles (usually reserved for karaoke) is not inauthentic. Challenges arise when performing music that combines western classical vocal aesthetics with those of other stylistic genres. In 2016, I performed in the ensemble in the premiere of a new orchestration of Terence Blanchard's *Champion* (2013), a theatrical work that combines the disciplines of opera and jazz.



Figure 2 “Fight Scene” from *Champion*, Opera Parallèle/SF Jazz (2016).

The composer mixed post-structural musical techniques with sophisticated intricacies of modern jazz to tell the story of bisexual boxer Emile Griffith, best known for inflicting fatal blows in a contest after being taunted by a homophobic slur. The topics of intersectionality of race, aging, and sexuality are explored in a score that synthesizes disparate musical and performance elements. The performance required me to tap into a range of skills from operatic singing to dramatic scene work to 1970s funk dancing. My goal as a performer was to find truth in every moment through authentic performance practice; my challenge was to synthesize vocal, acting, and movement techniques in order to do my part in the storytelling, which travelled across decades and musical styles.

These productions – like others I have worked on, including *Once on this Island* (Flaherty, 1990), *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* (Davis, 1986), and *Porgy and Bess* (Gershwin, 1935) – address themes that are connected throughout many black theatrical works: cultural identity, African American based spirituality, and alienation due to racial inequality. My work has led to my interest in searching for approaches to music that require western classical techniques enhanced by other musical forms.

### **Problem Statement**

Vocal sound and the way singers sing have been racialized, or marked with racial identity, in the United States. Throughout the last century, many works written for the stage have used musical techniques that integrate elements from western classical traditions with those from black popular and folk idioms. Performers who sing in such hybrid forms are required to understand the authentic phonatory, articulatory, and expressive aspects of the distinct styles. However, rarely are the signifiers of vocal

technique and stage craft discussed in direct relation to authentic representation of race by black performers on stage.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this exploratory study is to identify musical strategies that singers of the theatre use when presenting and re-presenting music that integrates western classical vocal aesthetics with stylistic genres of traditionally black forms like gospel, jazz, and blues. This study aims to investigate the use of the voice by black opera and musical theatre performers and the approaches that they take in the representation of music that requires integrated vocality.

### **Research Questions**

1. How does a black performer employ vocal and acting techniques when performing a musical or theatrical idiom that includes racialized themes?
2. How does a performer navigate performativity and vocality?
3. What can the answers to the above questions reveal about what happens at the intersection of performance and the performer's identity?

These questions explore the use of the voice by performers in theatrical works representing black themes. I postulate that in understanding the context of aural components which infuse the sound of perceived black vocality with meaning, idiomatic signifiers that singers use are equally as crucial as timbre. The main goals of identifying and documenting cultural wealth are to transform education and to empower people of color to use assets already abundant in their communities (Yosso, 2005).

## Theoretical Framework

As a researcher, I adopted an approach based on signification, specifically through the lens of Gates's groundbreaking study *The Signifying Monkey* (1988/2014). Individual expression is based in a history of cultural patterns; therefore, these patterns must be looked at in the context of the wider society. Music carries meaning through its sounding elements which connote tradition and complex institutional relationships that emerge from tradition. Singing conveys expression similarly to prosody, the pattern of rhythm and intonation in language. Affective patterns associated with the use of the voice represent the relation between musical structures and societal connotations. Signs emerge from their connection to meanings associated with social constructions. A signifier cannot escape its received meanings, no matter how dramatically concepts might change through time.

Gates (1988/2014) neologizes the complex relationship between literal and figurative meanings in black verbal play with the term *Signifyin'* (with a capital "S" and an apostrophe). By looking at the history of tricksters of African diasporic narrative traditions, Gates's theory relies on three related points: myths as focal points for black theories about formal language use, the role of the figurative as double-voiced formal revision, and the indeterminacy of interpretation through the tradition of vernacular discourse. Formalizing concepts that are second nature to a culture is difficult. As early as 1787, with the spread of slave narratives, black texts were already informed by complex negotiations of pan-African culture and European literary heritages. The African system of meaning that black slaves recreated from memory, preserved by oral narration, and

improvised upon in ritual fuses with forms of writing practiced by Europeans. Tradition is itself the process of formal revision.

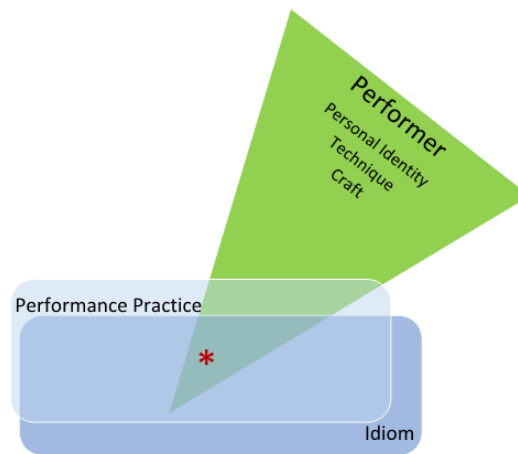
The most important defining features of Signifyin' are as a formal device of indirect intent and the use of metaphor. Gates (1988/2014) writes, "The originality of so much of the black tradition emphasizes refiguration, or repetition and difference, or troping, underscoring the foregrounding of the chain of signifiers, rather than the mimetic representation of a novel content" (p. 86). Black people signify motifs from cultural aesthetics but alter them to create their own meanings. Signifyin' represents the process of "meaning-creation and its representation" (p. 52). In the case of this study, singers use auditory material as a means of expression of afferent emotional content.

The approach of signification as it relates to music as used in this dissertation relies on the idea that the use of signs is a conscious strategy of manipulating black aesthetic tropes. For example, jazz music is based on the art of improvisation and riffing. Signifyin' in jazz performances is a mode of formal revision by using repetition of musical phrases to extend rather than articulate the musical structures. The play of musical, spoken, and body language names something figuratively, and dialogue develops between what the artist plays and what the listener expects. The observed artist adopts musical strategies that maneuver tempo, amplitude, and registration in order to extend and disrupt anticipated musical aesthetics. The listener functions as a participant by forming culturally variable meanings of interpretation. The focus of Signifyin' is on the system of sign, object, and interpretant that sustains and alters the discovery of meaning. Music hosts several simultaneous actions, the interrelationship of which is not

immediately apparent, but is a dynamic process manifested in discrete acts. These aesthetic practices reflect cultural values.

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework sets out the basic concepts behind this study's relationship between performer, idiom, and performance practice.



*Figure 3* Performer Navigation of Idiom and Performance Practice.

Figure 3 shows that the focus of the study is where the performer uses her or his process to create a performance that is authentic to the idiom in which she or he is working. Data-gathering for this study used participants who are professional performers identifying as having black or African American heritage. My assumption is that as a working performer, each participant has developed his or her skill set which includes vocal technique, acting technique, and movement experience. Most vocal performing styles differ substantially from normal speech (Sundberg, 2014). Additionally, how a performer brings the character that he or she is playing to life affects the way he or she

embodies the role. The performer synthesizes personal expression and technique in order to construct their understanding.

*Idiom* refers to the defining components of a performance style, including composition, physical materials, and aesthetics, the set of artistic, thematic, and formal qualities by which an artistic piece may be classified. Each idiom contains specific stylistic traits to which singers must adapt their instruments. For this study, the stylistic genres of opera and musical theatre that include music that synthesizes western classical and black folk and popular forms will be explored. Performance practice is the set of performed techniques employed in idioms during specific musical eras. Quite often, techniques are implied, and not notated such as types of ornamentation, the use of expressive tools, and manipulated timbre. Interpretations are based on cultural references and contextual information. Looking along these lines involves both systematic approach and a coexistence of multiple value systems, including integration of high and low cultural forms (Butt, 2002). Linear progress and invention are not mutually exclusive from ideas, actions, and cultural undertakings being conscripted by contextual information. The methods, styles, and techniques that the performer uses to probe the idiom and performance practice in the process of creating a performance.

### **Operational Definitions**

Listed below are operational definitions of terms as found in this document.

- *Authenticity* – Aykol, Aksatan, and Ipek (2017) depict *authenticity* as “a verification process referring to the assessment of some truth or fact with regard to some property or dimension” (p. 256). Moore (2002) writes that “artists speak the truth of their own situation; that they speak the truth of the situation of

(absent) others; and that they speak the truth of their own culture, thereby representing (present) others” (p. 209). In performance, an audience ascribes authenticity to the perceived expression of an individual through his or her acts and gestures.

- *Culture* – Culture is a set of practices, subject positions, and social institutions people invoke when performing actions and telling stories. Tylor (1871) defines *culture* as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits” that one acquires by being a member of a society (p. 1). Boas (1930) attests that societal traits and behaviors are, “learned adjustments” that are accomplished through habituation and are coherently interrelated through the context of the particular society (p. 260). It is the totality of the ways of thinking and acting and the materials that shape an individual through historical foundations and contemporary ways of life.
- *Diaspora* – The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines diaspora as “the movement, migration, or scattering of a people away from an established or ancestral homeland” (n.d.). According to Palmer (2000), major African diasporic movement “is associated with the Atlantic trade in African slaves” which “may have delivered as many as 200,000 Africans to various European societies and 11 to 12 million to the Americas over time” (p 28). After the end of chattel slavery in the Americas, Africans and peoples of African descent resettled among and within various societies. The communities that emerged comprise the idea of the modern African diaspora.



- *Grain of the voice* – In a seminal essay by Barthes (1972/1977), the semiotician describes the *grain of the voice* as the relationship between language and music mediated through vocal production. Performance is in service to communication through the acknowledged tastes and expression according to genre. The voice also signifies meaning below the level of consciousness in the encounter between the musical text and the listener. Barthes writes:

The “grain” of the voice is not—or not only—its timbre; the signifying it affords cannot be better defined than by the friction between music and something else, which is the language (and not the message at all). (p. 185)

It is the body of the voice that affects a listener.

- *Identity* – Identity is the distinguishing personality of an individual. According to Erikson (1956), the term “expresses such a mutual relation in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (self-sameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others” (p. 57). It is a construct of defining the unity of oneself within the context of cultural influences. In relation to vocalism, Welch (2005) writes that “voice is an essential aspect of our human identity: of who we are, how we feel, how we communicate and how other people experience us” (p. 8).
- *Performativity* – The term *performativity* derives from Austin’s (1962) concept of a “performative utterance” as the way persons use language “not merely [to say] something but [to do] something” (p. 25). Butler (1993) expands the notion to identity, defining *performativity* as “the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (p. xii). In the performing arts,

it is the construction of the interplay between all of the practices of stage performance and the embodied behavior of all participants (Worthen, 1998).

- *Representation* – Representation is the collection of ways that media portray communities, experiences, or ideas from the perspective of values or ideologies. hooks (1992) describes this “image making authority” as the kind of images being produced and the way about which they are written and talked (p. 4). According to Hall (1986), representation involves making meaning by linking subjects to the signs that communicate the concepts that an individual carries with them. Representation is constitutive of the subject itself; the subject represents meaning according to the onlooker’s cultural framework of reference.
- *Vocalism* – Vocalism refers to the use of the voice in speaking or singing. Below the term will often refer to a style of singing in relationship to idiom and performance practice. Fisher, Kayes, and Pompeil (2014) write, “In Western lyric pedagogy, it is conventional to refer to four established principles of voice: respiration, phonation, resonance, and articulation” (p. 5). Vocalism is exercise of the voice and its associated mechanics.
- *Vocality* – Vocality encompasses all the voice’s manifestations, each of which is invested with social meaning not wholly determined by its linguistic content (Dunn & Jones, 1996). Zumthor (1983/1990) is attributed to have neologized the term *vocality* to describe the use of the voice as cultural construct. The distinct ways of speaking and singing contain aural markers based on learned behavior and are considered valid ways to express cultural identity. Vocality takes on a

deliberate representation of what it projects to the world as well as a series of effects without the performer's intention.

- *Western lyric* – Western lyric is used to describe the performance practice of European-based classical music “across epochs and geographical regions” (Kayes & Welch, 2017).

### **Summary**

This study discusses the strategies of performance technique that black performers use in relationship to authentic representation of race on stage. It examines theatrical vocal performances that develop from the intersection of racial identity and stage craft. I use a three-part system of interviewing, audio/visual analysis, and video stimulated recall to prompt the performers' ideas when faced with the challenges of representation when playing roles in the theatre. This research attempts to continue the conversation regarding authentic representation in the entertainment industries.

## Chapter II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction**

The proceeding literature provides the basic rationale and background for my research related to race, representation, and the theatrical voice. In asking questions about the use of the voice by black performers and the authenticity of what we think of as “black” sound, the role of ownership and appropriation of cultural capital is examined as well as its integration into the dominant culture. Performativity includes the meanings that arise from the behavior that result from performance. Idiomatic signifiers that singers use are crucial to the way a viewer interprets what they are experiencing as authentic. Epistemological and ethical issues intertwine in the creation strategies of singers when presenting music that utilizes integrated vocality. Types of ornamentation, the use of expressive tools, and manipulated timbre is constructed by the consumer in order to create meaning. Musical expression which replicates the acoustic properties of the emotions found in speech patterns is identifiable to audiences. Finally, Critical Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Intersectionality are explored as lenses through which the methodology for the study will be centered.

#### **Cultural Capital**

Culture is a set of practices and positions of a particular people, defined by shared meaning and “systems of concepts” (Hall, 1997, p. 5). The set of symbolic elements that

one acquires through being part of a social class is how Bourdieu (1986) describes the concept of *cultural capital*. He identifies the three types of cultural capital as *embodied* (knowledge that is consciously and passively inherited), *objectified* (material possessions and the meaning attached to owning them), and *institutionalized* (formal recognition of the expressions of credentials). Sharing similar forms of cultural capital with others creates a sense of collective identity and group position. Bourdieu posits that cultural capital is also a major source of social inequality. Certain forms of cultural capital are valued over others and can help or hinder social mobility. Additionally, the educational system increases the clandestine circulation of capital. In the transmission of cultural capital, the question of appropriation, which will be discussed in further detail below, arises when the holders of dominant capital aim to amass power and privilege by legitimizing the cultural wealth of the weaker class. Reproduction strategies, which may cause a minor loss of capital, is capable of better-disguised transmission of dominant culture.

### **Black Aesthetics**

Wilson (1992) attests that the combination of singing, dancing, and playing instruments embodies ideal aesthetic connections at a deep structural level of music across the African diaspora. At the essence of the “heterogeneous sound ideal” is the combination of separate elements which constructs a whole, but “the whole is not a unified blend of sound” (p. 160). The essence of black music traditions is comprised of the following: Organization is based on rhythmic and metrical contrast; singing and playing instruments are performed in a percussive manner; a high density of musical events occurs in a short musical timeframe filling up all the musical space; and physical

body motion is integral to music-making process. The combination of diverse timbres creates a “kaleidoscopic range” of contrasting qualities of timbres (p. 160). Integrity of individual sounds exist within a group.

African diasporic singing traditions include a wide range of vocal nuances which move freely between speech and singing (Wilson, 1992). Vocal music such as secular blues and gospel music include judicious use of timbral and rhythmic variations. Singers develop highly distinctive timbres, musical sensitivity, and timbral changes in expressively powerful ways at precisely the right moment. A ritualistic quality of the performance situation emerges when the power of the performer is so overwhelming that it demands a spontaneous response from the audience. Cultural solidarity occurs through a communion of all participants – performers and audience.

The history of racial aesthetics points to an evolving effort to offer a compelling philosophy of black culture. Sorret (2016) follows the transition from the ethos of racial catholicity in the 1920s to the increase of nationalist sentiments that would come to define the Black Arts movement of the 1960s. Sorret surmises that African American aesthetics stem from the relationships between religion – either Christianity or African-derived spirituality – and the politics of black culture. However, the character of black culture is not adequately accounted for within the binaries of the sacred versus the secular. Blurring or blending sacred and secular makes things new.

Many of the writers whom Sorret explores attempt to understand the role for black artists outside the constraints of racial categorizations.

[Ralph] Ellison had spent the preceding decades making a claim that jazz and the blues were quintessentially American and universally significant aesthetic forms. [LeRoi] Jones argued, in contrast, that this music narrated the particular story of oppression and exclusion that was the black experience. (p. 210)

For Gwendolyn Brooks, black churches and nightclubs proved most effective at illustrating class differences and authenticating competing definitions of racial aesthetics. In this regard, she carried on a commonly drawn comparison between churches and nightclubs as incubators of black identity and cultural expression. (p. 140)

[Ishmael] Reed's Neo-HooDoo was animated by an oppositional politics based on cultural hybridity. In contrast, [Alice] Walker's arguments refused the political binary altogether and engaged anew with the everyday sources of black American life. (p. 210)

The unifying idea is that "cadence and rhythm become more important than doctrine or theology" (p. 186).

The paradox of the existence of slavery in a country that defined itself by its dedication to the concept of freedom "had nurtured a people who embodied the American experiment" (Sorret, 2016, p. 212). The blues, a musical form that developed in the United States, is based on paradigmatic expressions of the paradox, irony, and experimentation that defined democracy. Ellison claimed that the blues, rather than religion or race politics, offered an authentic black aesthetic vision (p. 211). Baraka posited that the blues "best embodied the black experience" though an essence of black music was pliable enough to connect a wide range of idioms (as cited in Sorret, p. 181). Racial aesthetics help "build a better world" (as cited in Sorret, p. 114) by creating cultural resources to contend with the American context in which citizenship is understood through white male heteronormativity.

Baham (2015) performed a historical and ethnographic study of the St. John Coltrane Church in San Francisco. Founded in 1965, the church fostered a spiritual, cultural, and political practice that would combine the populism of early black Pentecostal worship, spiritual universalism, Marxist class consciousness, radical black nationalist policies of self-help, and the progressive impetus of free jazz music. The

analysis of music as means for personal conversion and as community building comes from literal readings of music as language. Coltrane's methodology based in repetition creates concrete practices through abstract emotionalism of sound. Through the process of repeated listening, one deduces metaphorical images from the initial sensory perception toward the realization of more concrete ideas. This concept is not dissimilar from Byron's (2017) notion that knowledge is an active process often born of the crossing and colliding of disciplinary concerns. The "language of jazz," which includes dissonant harmonies, non-harmonic tones, and syncopations, disrupts traditional notions of western tonality and rhythm (Baham, 2015, p. 245).

Cobussen (2011) gives three possible meanings of *intermusicality*: the relation between two (or more) musical texts; the relation between a musical text and music as a cultural, historical, and political institution; and the relation between musical texts and "extra-musical" texts. Baham (2015) writes that intermusicality deals with jazz performance as "discursive practice" (p. 43), specifically linking improvisation and discourse on human rights. Improvisation creates culturally variable meanings that inform interpretation and "emotional content" (p. 49). The musical practice of improvisation permeates into other cultural practices. "Coltrane Consciousness" emerges as a counter-hegemonic dialectic on a profound belief in the mysticism of sound, universal love, selfless devotion to God, black Womanist theology, racial equality, gender inclusion, a universal communication of freedom, and an ethic of change and evolution.



## Black Vocality

Americans tend to hear voices according to their current sociocultural climate. In turn, the conceptions of vocalism have become part of American society. The distinct ways of speaking are aural markers based on learned behavior and are valid ways to express cultural identity (Shulman, 2016). In the case of singers, vocalism can be a sign of expressing one's own or co-opting another's cultural identity.

Vocality encompasses all the voice's manifestations, each of which is invested with social meaning not wholly determined by its linguistic content (Dunn & Jones, 1996). If vocality is performative, it produces a series of effects without the performer's intention. If vocality is performed, it takes on a deliberate representation of what it projects to the world.

Black culture, like most cultures, includes a way of speaking that wields slang and expressions as well as an accent. McWhorter (2017) claims that Black English (or *African American Vernacular English* as it is called in the study of linguistics) is a complex vernacular that is legitimate language to be studied without the pretense that there is no such thing as a black way of talking or sounding. Black English is neither bad grammar nor incorrect pronunciation, but a system of grammar and accent, requiring proficiency to control fully. Speakers develop vernacular language alongside standard English, not in opposition to it. Variationist sociolinguistics, the study of the highly structured social variation in dialects, have discovered variations between formality and informality in diglossia, the intentional changing of dialect due to situation, and code-switching, the subconscious variation of syntax and phonology of speech. Black English is spoken not instead of Standard English, but alongside and in addition to it. As such, a

“bidialectal black American” speaks a larger English than persons who speak only Standard American English (p. 108). A person is more likely to use vernacular construction when in personal, intimate situations such as for expressions of solidarity and gratitude and for group identification. Dialect expresses cultural fellowship among a community determined not necessarily by geographic propinquity as much as by “social identification” (p. 77).

In the 2011/2012 academic year, Newland (2014) performed a large-scale case study of Fisk University to examine how vocality is racialized as “black” in the United States. In 1871, the Fisk Jubilee Singers was formed as a nine-person chorus of black singers to raise money for Fisk University. Aesthetic and political tensions arose from their repertoire, which was comprised mostly of arrangements of spirituals, a strict departure from the popular style of minstrelsy (Gilroy, 1991). Newland attests that the legacy of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers’ concert spiritual performances still impacts performance practices and audience expectations of black classical singers. Fisk University expects vocal ideals from its students, grounded in a black cultural heritage. Ritualized forms of vocalization at Fisk exemplify a mode through which the university promotes the self-worth of its students, as well as a commitment to social justice. Newland claims that these black university students use their vocality in a way that is simultaneously historically aware and aspirational toward their professional objectives. This idea complicates the emergence of “black” voices from slavery or inequality, demonstrating institution building that is grounded in non-violent, public presence resisting racial oppression and insisting upon citizenship. Vocalizing enables students to

debase modern constructions of “black” singing styles and of speech patterns as a parameter for judging race, class, educational level, and gender.

### **Signifiers of Vocality**

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is ethnic and regional dialect spoken by black slave descendants that can be identified by phonological, morphosyntactic, lexical, and discourse features. Pollock and Meredith (2001) clarify that not all black English speakers utilize AAVE and that there is variation between geographic regions, socioeconomic backgrounds, and educational levels. However, according to Holt (2018), evidence suggests that AAVE speakers with no linguistic contact share common features of vowel production. The sound of AAVE can be attributed mostly to the specificity of vowel sounds (McWhorter, 2017). The AAVE vowel system shares a unique vowel system with Caribbean creole dialects, pointing to a common heritage from West African languages distinct from vowel space and phonology of Standard American English (Bailey & Thomas, 1998).

American music practices embrace performers manipulating racial vocal styles. The grain of the voice, the body of the voice that affects a listener, can be categorized as a codified set of musical behaviors that can be manipulated by a performer, including the perception of effort and effortlessness, roughness and smoothness, trained and untrained (Kainer, 2007). Black singing traditions employ wide ranges of vocal nuances in which an individual voice can be discerned within a mass of sound (Wilson, 1992). Hyper-vocalized emotion through tactics like sobbing, sighing, yodeling, moaning, and glissandi points to the sentimental archetypes of “Southern nostalgia” (Kainer, 2007, p. 109). The “shout” or “belt” emerges from female minstrel performers mimicking perceptions of

black singing and speech patterns (Hunt, 2016, p. 82). Leibowitz (2011) describes belting as an extension of the chest register upward in frequency beyond the expected middle voice range into the range that characterizes head voice or falsetto. In female voices, the lower tessitura of the belt range on theatrical stages begins as a signifier of black vocality (Stras, 2007). Scat, imitating the polyphonic styles of early jazz bands, became part of the performance practice of white vaudevillian comic singing and later reclaimed by black singers (Stras, 2007).

### **Hybrid Forms and the Challenges of Hybridity**

In his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), DuBois coins the term *double-consciousness* to describe the duality of a culture that is both black and American. He describes the internal conflict experienced by a suppressed group in an oppressive society: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” Blacks view themselves not only from their own perspective, but also as they might be perceived by the predominantly white culture.

The present study is focused on the presentation of musical and theatrical forms that integrate western classical vocal aesthetics with stylistic genres of traditionally black folk and popular forms, such as the spirituals in concert, operas like *Porgy and Bess*, and post-Civil Rights era populist theatre. Levinson (1984) describes hybrid art forms as “art forms arising from the actual combination or interpenetration of earlier art” (p. 6). The hybrid forms indicate artistic activities and concerns from disparate antecedents which “exist independently of and prior to the hybrid in question” (p. 7). Music theatre

incorporates hybridization through elements including “the practices in narrative structure, multiplicity of character portrayal, instrumental and vocal portrayals, vocal writing, and soundscape narrative” (Seward, 2014, p. 1). Weiss (2008) states that through the work of artists “intentional fusions or juxtapositions of at least two different genres or culturally disparate ideas” are combined, resulting in a performance genre not exactly like any of its predecessors (p. 206). According to Werbner (2000), intentional hybridities can emerge to “resist and shock an authoritarian older generation and induct it into the new realities of, diasporic life” (p. 11). Artists and audiences enter into dialogue with “otherness” through familiar contexts of their own performance traditions (Weiss, 2008, p. 216).

Gilroy (1991) puts the aesthetic and political tensions of the Fisk Jubilee Singers within the context of his landmark concept of the *Black Atlantic*. The term describes the cultural construction caused by the interaction and communication from Europeans enslaving Africans and traveling together to the Americas. Gilroy offers the theme of double-consciousness to describe the dynamic and fluid way that both black and European influences have transformed the trajectory of modern history.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers represent a shift in the narrative of black self-representation, even in a civil society where they experienced powerlessness, poverty, and modified patterns of racialized domination. Freedom represented the termination of slavery. Black people singing slave songs as mass entertainment established new public standards of authenticity for black cultural expression, through their distance from the racial parody of minstrelsy. Gilroy (1991) argues that modern experiences shape new “traditions” though affected by enduring African traditions and those forged from the

slave experience (p. 126). The ways culture is engaged by its producers and users involves the transmission of distinct traditions through covert responses and reconfigurations. History is simultaneously insubordinate and reverent to the present in the way we interpret it. Dialectics within the black public sphere regarding the concept of freedom and its philosophical and political significance express the complex historical connections between slavery and freedom in the United States. Artistic forms of black culture invoke cultural traditions while conceptualizing modern practices.

Middleton (2000) uses the concept of double-consciousness to examine music that assimilates and projects social differences, specifically in *Porgy and Bess* (Gershwin, 1935). The piece gains its power in part to the tension between (“low”) popular and jazz musical elements infused in the (“high”) structure of structural conventions of late-romantic opera. Gershwin is unavoidably yielding to power relationships between high and low by choosing to compose in this manner. The endeavor to bring musical and social multiplicity simultaneously exposes and exploits the limits of genre conventions and cultural situation. The complex negotiations of high-low hybridity open up internal dialogics inherent in “cultural miscegeny” (Middleton, p. 77). Ultimately, black idioms are enveloped and put in their place by a Eurocentric conception of theatricality.

Issues surrounding race, representation, and performance represent the limit of the musical politics available to the “low” other. By looking at the theatrical aesthetics and the political commitments of the “Negro People's Theatre” movement from the Great Depression to the Civil Rights Movement, Barton (2012) poses the question “What is real?” To explore this question, Barton looks at the 2011 Broadway production of *Porgy and Bess*. The production attempted to transform the show into a “musical theatre” piece

from its usual operatic performance practice. Repertoire itself helps to racialize vocality (Newland, 2014). Newly written dialogue, adjusted musical keys, a conceptual set, and a revised (later dropped) ending tried to encompass modern sensibilities and the African American experience. Barton critiques the production team's gestures toward realism as interferences with an anti-realist aesthetic. By blurring the line between acting and reality, the production reflected a certain level of contemporary discomfort with theatrical portrayals of African Americans since the original was an example of the problem with the treatment of race in the American theatre.

Barton (2012) also asks the questions "What is black people's theatre?" and "What is acting?/What is black?" (p. 229). One can see the multiplicity in black performance since the Civil Rights era by looking at the writing of theatre-makers and the careers of professional actors. A tension exists in the dichotomy of theatre that explores themes of survival and prosperity and populist theatre that shows and legitimizes the lived experience of audiences. Though remaining in a duality, the broader scope of black theatricality remains challenged to explore the concept of freedom, in a history of referencing social forces even within an increased emphasis on individual experience.

### **Singers who Define and Transcend Conceptions of Vocalism**

I have chosen to look at literature that investigates four female artists whose singing style disrupts assumptions made due to their respective physical appearances in order to investigate what signifiers constitute racialized performance.

Marian Anderson (1897–1993) is considered one of the most remarkable operatic contraltos of the twentieth century. Anderson's vocalism adhered to the ideals of classical western lyric technique (Eidsheim, 2011). Opera singers employ established aesthetic and

stylistic conventions of pronunciation, timbre, and stylistic conventions determined by a work's composer, historical period, and language. In her prime, Anderson had a career in concert work, and her concertizing of African American spirituals connected to her outstanding vocal abilities make her a symbol of the struggle for racial equality. Her debut with the Metropolitan Opera in 1955 coincided with the time that minstrelsy is finally no longer being performed. By the time of her appearance at the Met, she was past her vocal peak. However, her role as the outcast gypsy Ulrica in *Un Ballo in Maschera* (Verdi, 1858) let audiences connect the voice with the sight of her. As such, she becomes associated to the sound of the "other," thus confirming the otherness of blackness.

At the beginning of the burgeoning phonograph market, interest concurrently grew in black cultural forms. By developing a convincing "black" sound, white artists could retain control over a lucrative and socially powerful music industry. The Boswell Sisters (active 1925 – 1936) are frequently acknowledged to be the first white singers to gain popularity convincingly sounding "black." Stras (2007) analyzes sound recordings, film appearances, and printed scores to examine how they cross cultural, racial, and gender boundaries in the U.S. in the 1930s. They are recognized as leading vocalists and arrangers of their era with hit records showing their expressive tonal variety, low tessitura, and New Orleans accent. They curated their sound by actively incorporating all musical influences, from classical to minstrel shows to the blues, in their hometown of New Orleans into their composition and performance style. Their musical racial ambiguity, as well as their positions as creative women in jazz, was mitigated by their ultrafeminine "Southern belle" personas.



In the 1930s to the 1950s, when black women were disempowered significantly regarding economic means, political strength, and social stature, Ella Fitzgerald (1917 – 1996) was at the height of her career. The output of her more than 1,100 recordings balances between the wider acclaim of popular music and the artistic prestige of jazz. Kainer (2008) discusses her vocal quality, often described as bell-like, clear, even girlish, within the context of the time period. Fitzgerald used standard English enunciation and a smooth vocalism which contributed to an aural understanding of a white middle-class voice. Perceptions of the grain of her voice as cheerful detached her from the history of blues singing, her cultural history to the suffering of slavery, and thus lacking the “soul” to sing with deep emotion (p. 176). Kainer writes that critics view her early swing repertoire and her later ballad work as a perceived performance of white vocalicity; however, her scat singing complicates this assessment by exemplifying “real” jazz singing (p. 228). The recordings from her bebop era demonstrate her rhythmic proficiency, musical imagination, and vocal pyrotechnics which contrast with the tuneful, precise declamation of her ballad and swing singing. The discourse, produced by well-known jazz writers who were almost exclusively male and white as well as by musical contemporaries, had the ultimate effect of normalizing her outsider status as an African American woman.

Mary Martin (1913 – 1990) was a musical theatre performer who created leading roles in some of Broadway’s greatest shows, including *South Pacific* (Rodgers, 1949), *Peter Pan* (Charlap, 1954), and *The Sound of Music* (Rodgers, 1959). Her vocal technique integrated the classical soprano of operetta, the conversational speech-level singing of the musical play, and the belt (Hunt, 2016). She modified her vocal technique

in order to adjust to disparate styles of performance, supporting a broad range of vocal styles. She was integral to instigating changes to female musical theatre vocal styling during the 1940s and 1950s as she navigated through societal shifts post-World War II and technological advances. Her successes on Broadway and in the budding television industry across many styles of music allowed her to establish a persona as America's everywoman, while using a range of vocal colors from the heights of her soprano range in "Un bel di" from *Madama Butterfly* (Puccini, 1903) to the sexualized raunch of "The Saga of Jenny" (*Lady in the Dark*, Weill, 1941).

By looking at these artists, one sees that not just the timbre of voices, but idiomatic signifiers of aural components infuse the sound of perceived black vocality with meaning. Timbral blackness is not only from the sound that emerges from a black body; instead, it comes also from the perceptions created "in the listener's ear" (Eidsham, 2011, p. 646).

### **Performativity and Authenticity**

By looking at performativity, or embodied behavior, of the performer, we pay attention to indirect, extra-linguistic modes of communication that identify cultural influences, take aesthetic cues from participants, and look to a wide range of performances for aesthetic inspiration (Snyder-Young, 2010). Demonstration of expressive elements is embedded in the representation of musical and dramatic tools that a singer uses in front of an audience. The performer brings the desired effect of the intent into being through action (Schechner, 2001). Through utterances the performer brings meaning by describing a given reality and changing the social reality they are describing through the contractual interaction between performer and audience (Zelezny, 2010). In

the field of performance studies, performativity is reiteration of a set of norms (Butler, 1993) which defines and maintains identity (Derrida, 1993) through the meta-meaning of text and gesture. In theatrical experiences, the text or music alone does not prescribe the meanings of the performance; the construction of the interplay between all of the practices of stage performance and the behavior of all participants create performative force (Worthen, 1998). Theatre is a collaborative art form that brings together artists with different disciplinary skills for the end of creating a performance (Snyder-Young, 2010). The realm of complex meaning that is intoned, gestured, improvised, and shared points to concealed meanings (Conquergood, 2002). Text and music are transformed by the performative environment (Worthen, 1998).

The drama is seen within the context of current understanding of behavior, where an audience gains understanding as a consequence of performance. Artistic creation requires an audience and is built on the work of predecessors. With a focus on audiences, performers take aesthetic cues consumed by a participatory audience (Snyder-Young, 2010). Performativity reenacts social institutions and signifies a reiteration of various ideological and behavioral regimes beyond words (Worthen, 1998). The gesture that consummates an action and constructs an identity, or a “performative,” signifies to consumers whether such subjection by the performers appears to be accepted, resisted, or negotiated with (Moore, 2002). Dramatic performance – like all other performance – engages in reiterating regimes, which operate outside the theatre in contemporary social life. The practices of the stage (e.g., acting styles, directorial conventions, scenography) transform text and music into an experience with performative force. Audiences perceive performance based on behavior with little distance between its setting and its physical

manifestation. Performance gives concrete shape to unreal (or unrealized) worlds (Schechner, 1994). Different performances are required for different purposes, and usages do not necessarily exclude or include each another. Audiences assume that artists speak the truth of their own situation; that they speak the truth of the situation of others; and that they speak the truth of their own culture, thereby representing others (Moore, 2002).

An increased focus on the specificity of audiences helps to find aesthetic forms that fit the necessary contexts (Snyder-Young, 2010). As such “authenticity” becomes a relative concept used in absolutist terms (Moore, 2002). Aykol, Aksatan, and Ipek (2017) examined the relationships between authenticity and flow in the enjoyment experienced by theatre audiences. Data were collected from 219 theatre audience members through a self-administered questionnaire and analyzed with structural equation modeling. The authors describe *authenticity* as depicting “a verification process referring to the assessment of some truth or fact with regard to some property or dimension” (p. 256). It is the use of people who appear to be real and located in real situations. The audience assesses the believability of what they see on stage as well as the extent of honesty of the relationship between the performer’s self and his or her own performance on stage. Another indicator of authenticity is whether attending the performance brings about shared emotions and self-authentication for spectators. Flow is defined as “the mental state in which the individual is deeply immersed in an activity” (p. 254). As a concept in theatre consumption, this freely invested attention is one of the primary motives for going to theatre. Finding flow means that audience expectations are met, resulting in a positive emotional state.

The results of the study showed that an audience can and do evaluate authenticity of offerings even in the absence of objective criteria, reference to reality, and expertise needed to make the assessment (Aykol et al., 2017). Based on this view, individuals can even assess the authenticity of performances based on pure “fantasy” (Aykol et al., p. 256). Audiences seek authenticity through historical verisimilitude. Authenticity reflects back to an earlier observable practice. How rooted the performance is with a history is a matter of interpretation within a cultural and historical position (Moore, 2002). Aykol et al. found that authenticity is expected to produce “positive emotional states” (p. 260). As a vital experience-related factor of theatre consumption, authenticity not only brings audiences enjoyment, but also enhances the flow of the audience. Authenticity is influences flow because when consumers believe they are in the presence of something authentic, they can feel transported to the context to which the performance is authentically linked, and thus, feel more connected to that context. The audience senses a place of belonging, specific to a cultural form, beyond mere entertainment (Moore, 2002).

### **Appropriation**

An expression is perceived to be authentic if it can be traced to an initiatory instance, equating authenticity to a concept of culture. Authenticity then arises from an act of judgment legitimated within a particular community, validated by an individual, or evidenced meta-reflexively through the author (Moore, 2002). However, subordinated people do not have the privilege of explicitness and transparency or the presumptive norm of clear and direct communication that the privileged classes take for granted (Conquergood, 2002). Folk and traditional idioms are mediated through bourgeois views,

and when the material is deemed “authentic” and “good,” the conception of a folk aesthetic is deemed as robust as that of high culture. No great distance occurs between the invention of a tradition and appropriation by members of the dominant culture (Moore, 2002). By appropriating and exhibiting trust in a broader audience, the patterns of performance authenticate the audience and the form of the performance. To add to or substitute for the imperialism of Eurocentric forms is to alter the conventional ideas of performance materials (Worthen, 1998). In a postmodern world where appropriation is evident, the original force of either form has been transformed.

### **Expressivity**

In this section, I look at research that discusses how an audience constructs meaning and interpretation of expressive performance. Listeners can identify an emotion despite their level of musical experience, through both aural and visual stimuli. Next, acoustic strategies used by performing artists are explored. Singers imitate the acoustic properties of the emotions found in speech patterns in order to create expressive performances. Also, singers’ interpretations of emotion are largely determined by the musical score which affects the singing voice. The third section looks at some strategies used to teach expressivity. Observation of musical models, fluency in the language of music, and exploring the intention of the music are discussed.

### **Audience Construction of Meaning**

Snyder-Young (2010) describes the theory of an “aesthetic of objectivity” as a way that contemporary performance ethnography and arts-based research can reinforce, rather than subvert, traditional aesthetic forms, undermining practitioners’ stated desires

to “critique hegemonic discourses and democratize scholarship” (p. 884). Elements central to this aesthetic include naturalism, dramatization of objective reality, and the presentation of facts in a credible, authentic way. Yet live performance can provide knowledge construction through “embodied, collaborative experience” (p. 887).

Participants have agency to create interpretations and engage imagination. Snyder-Young writes that to rupture the aesthetic of objectivity “arts-based researchers [might] take more aesthetic cues from the artistic forms made and consumed” by the participants, moving focus away from text and toward visual, aural, and physical components (p. 890). Inspiration may come from focusing on the creation of participatory experiences for audiences that include practices from a wide range of disciplines. As such, knowledge is constructed in relationship within performance events, but “it is fundamentally individualized, and individual audience members and participants in performance events have agency in how they interpret live performance” (p. 887).

Multiple studies have shown that humans are adept at identifying the emotions of music performance. Mohn, Argstatter, and Wilker (2010) tested the possibility of six basic emotions (happiness, anger, disgust, surprise, sadness, and fear) recognized in the acoustic stimulation of three- to five-second-long musical segments on a variety of instruments administered to 115 participants. The primary finding is that participants were able to identify the aforementioned emotions in unknown stimuli. The ability to recognize the emotions seem not to be influenced by the musical experience of the listener. Happiness and sadness were the easiest to classify, followed in order by disgust, surprise, sadness, and fear. According to the researchers, most people who grow up in western music traditions “learn at an early age to associate slow music in the minor mode

with sorrow and faster music in the major mode with joy” (p. 9). The recognition rate might be when the sound stimuli contain formulations from one’s auditory culture, in this case western music. Each emotion considered negative (anger, disgust, and fear) had less than a 50% recognition rate and were most often mistaken for a different negative emotion. The researchers offer multiple reasons, including the sharing of musical elements such as loudness and quick tempo and the impossibility of music to convey discrete emotions.

The perception of expressive and structural features of music comes primarily from sound. However, a cross-modal effect of vision and sound exists regarding the perception of musical expertise. Rodger, Craig, and O’Modhrain (2012) performed two experiments measuring the effects of musicians’ movements on musician and non-musician participants. In the first experiment, participants rated performances by novice through expert clarinetists from point-light animations of their movements, sound recordings, or both. In the second experiment, movements and sound were switched for half of the presentations and matched for the other half of novice and expert players. The results show that “audio information is a stronger indication of skill” (p. 1144), but perception of skill “can be influenced by the interaction of audio and visual modalities, each contributing to the overall perception of performance” (p. 1147). Musicians use a range of skills to create “the stimuli on which perceptual judgments” are made, allowing sound and movement to interact “to form and amalgamated percept” (p. 1149).

### **Acoustic Strategies Used by the Performing Artist**

Juslin and Laukka (2003) find parallels in over 145 studies between vocal expression and music in the accuracy that listeners had in distinguishing between discrete



emotions and in patterns of acoustic cues used to communicate emotions. Using the perspective of evolutionary psychology, the authors attest that emotions are communicated non-verbally, emotions are adaptive reactions to life problems, and vocal expression of discrete emotions reflect physiological patterns of emotional behavior in reaction to these situations: “By imitating the acoustic characteristics of these patterns of vocal expression, music performers are able to communicate discrete emotions to listeners” (p. 771). Music is evocative of vocal expression. The authors write that “music may really be a form of heightened speech that transforms feelings into ‘audible landscape’” (p. 807).

Scherer (1995) claims that emotions shape human vocal expression in both speech and music and that listeners can infer from the voice alone the emotional state of a speaker “or an actor/ singer’s attempt to portray such a state” (p. 236). The physiological and communicative functions of the voice make it a primary source of emotional expression. The effects of emotions on vocalization are controlled by the limbic system in the brain, which controls emotions, drives, learning, and memory. Scherer writes that “given the manifold determinants of voice production processes, even slight changes in physiological regulation will produce variations in the acoustic pattern of the speech waveform” (p. 240). In vocal music, an assumption can be made that “the singer’s own underlying emotional state during a performance will have similar effects on the singing voice” (p. 242). The artist’s interpretation of the emotion or mood, largely determined by the musical score, affects the singing voice.

Vocalization has developed in part as social externalizing signification of internal states with display mechanisms for recognition by the listener. Scherer (1995) addresses

three points that relate to speech research: inference or “the ability of the listener to perceive emotional quality,” acoustic cues in the inference process, and the underlying encoding of emotion (p. 244). The author writes that music allows for virtually infinite variations, systematic adjustment of acoustic cues may be the most productive way to describe expressive states in singing and the effect on listener evaluation. Results of such studies show patterns similar to those of speech research: “fast tempo for fear, slow for sorrow, high vocal energy for anger” (p. 245).

Studies looking at the emotional power of the voice often focus on the acoustic cues used by listeners. Scherer, Sundberg, Tamarit, and Salomão (2013) examine the similarities and differences in emotional expression between singing and speaking. Acoustical analysis was done of the recordings of the three opera singers (a soprano, a mezzo-soprano, and a tenor) singing vocalises on a schwa covering 12 different emotions each. The results show significant differences in emotions on the voice according to the parameters measured by a spectrum software: “measures relating to the energy distribution of high and low frequencies in the spectrum, and measures reflecting the variability of the signal in both frequency and in intensity” (p. 221). Even in the absence of lyrics, singers can modify voice quality to render expression. Anger has strong energy in the higher partials. Anxiety, sadness, and tenderness have lower intensity and little waveform irregularity.

Sieglwart and Scherer (1995) write that,

A highly complex mixture of factors, (including the personality of the singer, the interpretation of the piece by the director, and the emotional climate in the opera house on a particular evening) determine the way the character and his or her emotions at particular points in the action will come to life (and to sound) through the interpretation of the singer. (p. 249)

Expression of naturalistic emotions is presented within stylistic factors of the music and technical requirements to execute the vocalism. Siegwart and Scherer acoustically analyze five recordings of two excerpts from the mad scene from *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Donizetti, 1835). Additionally, 11 judges knowledgeable in opera listen to each recording in pairs, indicate their overall preference for each pair, and decide if each recording reflected passion, fear, madness, or sorrow. The study aims to investigate which emotion was attributed to each interpretation. Results show that although rating for overall preference for an individual artist varies, agreement in the perception of expression is “strongly above chance” (p. 253). A listener has personal expectations about the emotion that is required of the musical moment and prefers the singer that conforms to the expectations. Each listener’s frame of reference aligns to the appreciation of the individual performance. Acoustic characteristics of the voices contributed to listener enjoyment. Low energy in the singer’s formant and higher upper frequency peaks as well as sadness and tenderness ratings strongly influence the participants’ preferences. The researchers find that objective acoustic characteristics can predict listener attributions of emotional expressiveness.

### **Strategies for Teaching Expressivity**

The performing artist is responsible for “the expressive intentions and the produced sounding music” (Woody, 2000, p. 14). The performer’s communicative procedures contribute to the transition from intentions for expressivity to sounded music. Woody (2000) questioned 46 college musicians about how expressivity is learned based on their experiences and what they have been doing to develop their expressive skills in performance. The instructional approaches considered by Woody are attention to the

emotions of the performer, acoustic properties of performance, and aural modeling/imitation. Observing other musicians, including teachers, peers, and professionals, is the most cited source of learning expressivity. More respondents report that private instruction provides instruction on expressivity as compared to music ensemble or classes. Modeling was the predominant approach utilized in applied studio lessons. Woody, however, attests that verbal-based approaches may be “more effective” for students to translate into expressive performance (p. 21). Extramusical sources, such as imagination and life experiences, were also cited as advancing the learning of expressivity. Reflecting Rodger et al. (2012), the study finds that many vocalists identify that non-aural aspects convey expressivity, such as body movement and facial expression. Several participants distinguished their first exposures to expressivity and their first efforts to implement it into their music making. The performance of prescribed expressive maneuvers is replaced by the implementation of personal moods, emotionalizing, or mental visualization.

Crouch (2010) understands musical literacy in the vocal studio analogous to second-language acquisition. Fluency as “the natural, automatic, easy and expressive way in which a strong reader reads [...] is the very essence of musical expression” (p. 125). Attention to musical comprehension aids the singer to interpret the composer’s melodic and rhythmic choices for setting text with the goal of a unified expression of music and words. For example, the ability to execute the rhythm that the composer wrote gives the singer a foundation for interpretation other than the singer’s emotional depths. Expression emerges as the convergence of musical elements. The singer being proficient in the

musical and verbal language of the piece transforms meaning into performance through analysis and interpretation.

Regarding the interpretation of black spirituals in the concert setting, Steinhaus-Jordan (2005) analyzes four recordings of the baritone William Warfield for his interpretive practices. The stylistic elements that are discussed are rhythmic alteration, percussive vocal style, contrasting vocal sounds, real or implied antiphonal texture, dialect usage, and melodic embellishment. The author makes multiple suggestions for teaching strategies for voice instructors. To understand the musical culture, a teacher might create a list of media resources and readings that relate to the genre and time period. Mimesis of passages by exemplars of the genre allows the students to follow an immediate model. Having students inform themselves of the genre and the contiguous musical stylistic elements helps students modify the acoustic properties for expressive purposes. Through the declamation of the text, students may experiment with word emphasis and emotional content. Students also may plan for the emotional build and climax.

### **Lenses as Methods: Literature**

This section explicates the supporting literature around chosen methodology which will be discussed further in Chapter 3. Critical Pedagogy emerges out of critical theory and postmodernist thought. The training of vocal habits and stage craft must train not only the physical body, but also habits of thought and cultural signifiers in order to understand the deep meanings of social contexts and dominant myths.

### **Signification through Discourse Analysis, Hermeneutics, and Semiotics**

Foucault (1969) views history as a way to understand the interrelations and transformations of processes that have led to the present. Discourse analysis compares and opposes “discourses,” or sequences of abstract constructs, allowing the semiotic signifiers to assign meaning according to complex institutional relationships. A “statement” is the most detailed level at which discourse can be analyzed, operating below consciousness. Each discourse contains the power to say something other than what is actually said. The “signifying” structure of language always refers to something else (p. 111); thus, one must analyze a plurality of meanings of the “signified” in relation to a single “signifier” (p. 118). Meaning is discovered through the succession of statements within the conditions of the field of discourse. The identity and persistence of themes enable groups of signs to exist and reveal rules in discourse itself.

Hermeneutics as a methodology of interpretation starts from the position that a person seeks to understand human actions or other meaningful material through a bond to the subject matter that comes into language from tradition and acquires a connection with the tradition. Gadamer (1975) attests that the ontological structure of understanding relies on the primacy of dialogue. The interpreter looks at a work of art in terms of already familiar meaning as well as something that says something on its own; thus, it becomes independent of the prior knowledge that it conveys. The hermeneutical discipline becomes of itself questioning and inquiring to seek truth through interpretation by conversation. In the performing arts, especially music and theatre, a work is explicitly left open to re-creation; it holds an identity and a continuity open towards its future. Performances at different times and on different occasions are, and must be, different.

Salgar (2016) examines music semiotics, the study of signification pertaining to music, as a means to unify disciplines that focus on musical text as sound, those that focus on the hearing subject, and those that focus on social discourses about music. The act of speaking about music implicates reflections on the meaning of music on the level that lies on the surface of musical perception and on that which signify true aesthetic moments. Between these perspectives is the possibility of studying the encounter between the musical text and the particularity of the listener. Though a challenge for music semiotics is in the development of theoretical models that facilitate study across disciplines, the author identifies three approaches that might allow for a methodology: *Semiotic-hermeneutic*, tracing musical meaning directly from the score; *Cognitive-embodied*, emphasizing the listening subject and the importance of the subject in meaning making; and *Social-political*, centering on the role of music in relation to power to influence society, politics, and economy (p. 23). Posing questions that orient musical signification along these three approaches integrates definitions and concepts of different disciplines, simplifies guidelines for the application of concepts, and emphasizes the political nature of music.

### **Critical Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Intersectionality in Music and Applied Theatre**

In the last 20 to 30 years, the quality and accuracy of singing has risen to a very high level as the public has become more sophisticated as they have become more inundated with vocal music through the media (Richardson, 2016). Through varied and integrated music and theatre techniques, stage singers are expected to engage with these disparate styles of music, each with its own unique characteristic qualities and with a

separate praxis. Critical Pedagogy offers a way to contextualize practices and aesthetic standards in a comprehensive and pragmatic way. This section will begin with a discussion of Critical Theory, which sets the foundation for Critical Pedagogy and Postmodernism in music and theatre education.

The primary significance of Critical Theory is its role within the larger context of Marxist thought (Antonio, 1983). The Frankfurt School, the collection of social theorists and philosophers who shared a similar paradigm of social change and the establishment of rational institutions, aimed at preventing the collapse of Marxist materialist critique by stressing meta-assumptions deriving from Hegelian dialectics (p. 344). As such, Critical Theory is not categorized by a particular methodology or theory; however, it does have a definable position about the social world. Bourgeois society generates and perpetuates dominant societal understanding in order to legitimize the domination of people by capitalism and, thereby, misrepresent human interaction in the real world. Ideology gives the sense of a false unity of the ideal and the real. But the greater this distortion, the deeper its contradictions, and the more vulnerable the system is to criticism. Even art, which has “otherness” at its source since it contradicts existing society, is displaced by conformist mass culture, which manipulates the pleasures of the consumer (p. 333).

To address cultural and economic critiques of alienation and exploitation, Critical Theory stresses emancipation through the creation of a public sphere that promotes social change through free communication and democratic participation (Antonio, 1983, p. 347). The goal of socialist transformation can be achieved through a voluntaristic framework and collective subjectivity (p. 328). For example, Marcuse (1964) theorized that the source of a cultural revolution will be a reaction to the general prevalence of a



consumer society and will be led by marginalized groups. The substance of Critical Theory is in its remodeling of Marxist theory as responsive to existing societal constructs.

Critical Race Theory is a theoretical framework that applies Critical Theory to the intersection of race and power as an examination of society and culture (Tate, 1999). Its foundation is linked to the development of African American thought in the post-Civil Rights era and to the rise of Critical Legal Studies, which attests that the law tends to serve the interests of the powerful by protecting them against the demands of the subaltern. Configurations and distributions of power are not natural, and hierarchy irrationally results in part from judicial support (p. 209). Critical Race Theory integrates experiential knowledge framed by racial inequality into situational analysis. The language of traditional Civil Rights rhetoric of color-blindness is replaced with a forceful analysis of race. Significant progress for African Americans is achieved only when their goals are consistent with the needs of the white constituency (p. 214). Voice scholarship, the sharing of personal narratives, and “other nontraditional methods of analyzing race, law, and U.S. society” can address the situational nature of legal, political, and moral realities (p. 223). Antidiscrimination discourse contains transformative potential. Also, intersectionality frames the interplay between race, socioeconomic status, and gender.

*Intersectionality* considers that a person’s identity is comprised of multiple aspects that do not exist separately but are complexly interwoven in the understanding of the human condition. The term emerges in the late 1980s within the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). The focus is on the awareness of people and experiences, contending with the realities of multiple inequalities and thinks about the way those inequalities interact as

multidimensional dynamics (MacKinnon, 2013). Post-structural feminist approaches encourage significant questions about power relations, the nature of truth and its relationship to power, and the construction of identity (Grady, 2003, p. 73).

Intersectionality has its grounding in black feminism and adapts to different discursive and research protocols across disciplines – humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences – to describe the intertwining of race, gender, and other social dynamics and to identify the social categories of interlocking identities.

Intersectional praxis can be seen as an interdisciplinary, analytical tool that engages in contextual dynamics of power (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 788). The role of context (both micro and macro) and of economic and socio-political narratives impacts the process of teaching (Grady, 2003). In “engaged pedagogy” (hooks, 2014), learning becomes reflection on the world and action to change it through the connection between ideas from educational settings and those learned in life practices (p. 15).

Working across disciplines and merging theory to practice may allow for the emergence of new knowledges (Byron, 2017). Complex questions that cannot be answered adequately within the boundaries of a given discipline engender knowledge as an active process evolving from crossing and colliding of disciplinary concerns (Condee, 2004). Thinking across boundaries, such as placing poststructuralist notions of performativity next to phenomenology, can provide the basis of looking at how identities, awareness, and transformation are fostered.

Critical Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Intersectionality assert the need for individual and collective action plans for change through pragmatics of critical knowledge. In the realm of education, curricula should be guided by knowledge of

personal action. Regelski (1998) states that a music curriculum should be most concerned that students have agency to enrich themselves through a wider range of musical choices than would have been the case without formal schooling. Critical Pedagogy in music, therefore, is a teaching praxis in which students are empowered to improve the quality of their lives through music (p. 19). Teachers who are empowered with critical knowledge and critical consciousness help their students rise to a level of critical consciousness that enables them to be their own effective agents. Students would develop the critical knowledge that permits them to have an enhanced range of informed musical choices. Praxis generates personal knowledge on the part of the practitioner (p. 38).

If knowledge is to be valid, it must consider subjective, contextual, and situational factors. Gruhn's (1999) Postmodern viewpoint on music education asks the question: "How do we develop a strong musical sense that allows us to bring meaning to sound?" The author states that the first step of learning music is being able to give meaning to a perceived sound, which comes from understanding the context in which the musical elements are connected. Constructing meaning in art is acquired through life experiences and environment; cultural values are taught through interaction through social life. As such, teaching must focus on context instead of content. Understanding is trained through practical experience in the way that language is taught to an infant. Music in its most general sense is primarily a mode of self-expression. Music creation is basic for the perception of musical art forms, just as talking and listening is basic for understanding speech. Music as an art form makes the student reflect and transform life experiences into interpretation. The process of reflection moves students into a meta-level of describing and explaining musical knowledge.

The process of becoming conscious of one's knowledge, by engaging in learning that connects concepts to the learners' own realities, leads students to the point where they know that they know. Schmidt (2005) developed frameworks to define Critical Pedagogy for music education through the theories developed by Friere (1970). Students must be able to establish cognitive and emotional connections as well as relate to the realities as individuals and in their communities. Music education has the potential to be a method to transformation by going beyond accepted forms of aesthetics and performance. Expression connects not only to the individual's emotions, but also more importantly as a critical understanding of the reasons behind the experience. Students view music as something to be constantly questioned and transformed.

Critical understanding and personal transformation are major goals of critical pedagogy; however, the transition from theory to praxis can be difficult. Howard (2004) offers the enactment of performance techniques of Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal (1974), its creator, developed theatre techniques in which all participants act in the creation of improvisatory drama with the intent to explore decentering power and social change. Performance becomes a method for personal understanding and social dialogue. Participants examine their own beliefs and their capacity for empathy. Boal contends that traditional, Eurocentric forms of theatre are agents of oppression, since they separate those who speak from those who watch. Speaking power rests with the playwright and director in traditional theatre, both of whom use powerless performers to communicate with a captive audience. Yet, theatre has the capacity to liberate by teaching participants about action.

In applied drama, psychic, kinesthetic, and emotional training promotes a range of experiences from artistic self-expression to active learning (Grady, 2003). The term *applied drama* describes drama practice which is intended to have educational or social purpose. Even despite Boal's (1974) critique of traditional western art forms, the functions of theatre making (e.g., the efficacy of engagement, the productivity of participation, the regard of reflection) are similar to facets of Critical Pedagogy. Teaching applied drama is not just about pedagogy and method, but also heightened awareness of context through discussion. Without dialogue, there is no communication; and without communication, there is no liberating education. Teachers are to become revolutionary agents who facilitate critical awareness and empowerment toward positive action for change. Through collective struggle and praxis, critical consciousness emerges.

Critical Race Theory research begins with the perspective that communities of color are places with multiple strengths (Yosso, 2005). Those who become conscious of their position and are enabled to pursue their own trajectories can begin to acknowledge the multiplicity of differences lying beneath authoritarian binaries and cultural chimera (Middleton, 2000). The political dimension of black cultural memory, which includes participation in African American cultural practices, has always been policed by middle-class intellectual elites (Barton, 2012). Appropriation and current sociocultural ideas of the loop of vocal stereotypes is part of societal control. Students asked to critique power structures and collective expressions are given the difficult task of striving to comprehend the reproduction of cultural traditions through the problematic transmission of culture in a postmodern society (Gilroy, 1991).

## **Research in Recorded Material**

Phonomusicology is “the study of recorded music” (Cottrell, 2010, p. 15).

Ethnomusicologists, for example, use recordings as tools for research projects to analyze musical content, social significance, and reflections of those on the recordings (Stock, 2010). By analyzing recordings, the complex relationships between sounds, contexts, and meanings are illuminated in order to increase understanding and appreciation of the creative process in terms of composition and performance (Bayley, 2010). Stock (2010) writes that “historical recordings bear the traces of the practical knowhow of former generations, and so analyzing these gives us a vantage point from which to reconsider critically present-day explanations of music-making.” Researchers of recordings must work back from the fixed mechanisms of replay to the unpredictability of human play that encompasses the music itself.

Recorded music provides exclusive insights which require careful consideration of methodology (Bayley, 2010). A recording represents the truth about one particular performance (Tackley, 2010). It is a product of the context in which it is created. However, unpacking the music recording as a location, or a moment, in society reveals its discursive content (Krimms, 2010). It is a cultural artefact revealing musical creativity and performance practice (Cottrell, 2010). The ultimate significance of a music recording is as an instance for musical practice into the development of the traditions to which it provides access (Elsdon, 2010).

Phonomusicology places musical sound at the center of its study, away from the concern of the notated score. For Cottrell (2010), recordings are analogous to musical scores, particularly in contexts where music-making is not underpinned by a tradition of

musical literacy (p. 29). The attributes that notation does not capture reveal details of musical practices and systems, bridging the gap between performance and musicology. The interdisciplinary approach to phonomusicology emphasizes the idea of studying music from a performative position rather than from the notation. For example, Lacasse (2010) indicates that an interesting aspect of performance resides in the variety of vocal strategies used by singers when altering range, resonance, attitude to pitch, and attitude to rhythm.

Gingras, Lagrandeur-Ponce, Giordano, and McAdams (2011) performed a study to examine the influence of performers' expertise, performance expressiveness, and listeners' musical training. Professional performers recorded two expressive and two inexpressive interpretations of the same piece to which musicians and non-musicians listened and sorted according to whom listeners believed were played by the same performer. The results showed that performer individuality was conveyed more efficiently through expressive recordings. The use of distinctive expressive features may be closely associated with a well-defined musical personality. Timing cues appear to inform the detection of identity common to many types of biological movement, including aural identification according to voice and visual identification from body movement.

In a study to examine the effects of black and white listeners' and performers' race on music preference, McCrary (1993) played 20 recorded music examples for college-age and middle school-age subjects with a rating scale on which they selected a point closest to the racial identifier that they believed described the performer's race. Overall, the listener groups were able to identify correctly the differences in the performances by

black vocalists and white vocalists. Listeners depended on music style when determining the performers' race, which caused challenges in identifying performers who conformed their performance practices to the styles in which they were singing outside of their expected racial category. When identifying the white performers' race, agreement was stronger among the black respondents than among the white respondents. Only the black listeners showed a stronger preference when they identified the performer's race as black. White listeners' preferences were virtually equal for the black and white performers.

If the expectations of timbre emerge from the sociocultural factors, how does a listener perceive genre? Kayes and Welch (2017) investigated perceptual and acoustic differences between professional female singers of classical western lyric and non-legit Musical Theatre styles. They found that experts know style when they hear it. Recordings of scales and songs were made of seven female singers, two of whom self-identified as classical western lyric singers and five as musical theatre. Seven judges listened to the recordings three times in randomized order and rated each on a Likert-type scale. All judges were more successful in identifying WL singers than MT singers. They were somewhat less accurate in locating the MT singers by genre, with ratings skewed toward the middle ("could be either"). The judges matched the singers by genre by song and scale together and separately. Using technology to measure the spectral measurements of the voices, the researchers find that female classical singers use different resonance strategies to sing in different register mechanisms than female CCM singers. Classical singers have a steep spectral slope, characteristic of head register, and use a small portion of chest register; MT singers have a weaker fundamental and sing at the speaker's formant, especially noticeable at the belt range.



The movements that musicians make during performance can influence the perception of expressive and structural features of the music. Rodger, Craig, and O'Modhrain (2012) examined whether the actual skill of a musician is perceivable from vision of movement. Musicians and non-musicians rated performances from sound recordings and point-light displays of motion capture, independently and concurrently. Audio information proved to be a stronger indication of skill. However, visual information seems to influence perception of skill. The interaction of audio and visual formats contributes to the overall perception of performance, suggesting that body movement reflects information represented verbally or can add nuance possible only through visual modalities.

Although precise definitions of ways of singing do not currently exist, listeners know style when they hear it. Vocal production in conjunction with interpretive elements indicates the idiom of the music to which they are listening.

### **Summary**

From these sources, one can see that music across the African diaspora contains a high density of musical events occurring in a short musical timeframe, keeping the individuality of distinct timbres. Improvisation becomes a process of meaning-creation within complex connections between cultural traditions and modern practices. As research on black vocality continues to emerge, music written for minstrelsy and forms thereafter shows a complex way that black performers “Signify” (Gates, 1988/2014) motifs from cultural aesthetics, but alter them to create their own meanings.

Music expresses emotions, and expressivity is one of the most important aspects of music performance. By synthesizing sound through idiom as a tool, performers

manipulate their instruments according to acoustic environment, the musical accompaniment, and the type of musical emphasis. Teaching practice can be seen in terms of the degree to which individual students have been enabled to engage themselves in rewarding and empowering ways after graduation and in life (Regelski, 1998). In arts education, determining the context by which students gain musical experience becomes the transformative practice to envision solutions and paradigms of new realities.

My research is focused on creating a context to look at how performers use their vocal instruments when faced with the challenges of representation on the stage. The practice and praxis of theatrical vocal performance that arise from the intersection of racial ascription and identity bear significance to cultural activity, the meaning of which is underrepresented in the academy. As such, I utilize the following research questions in the present study: *How does a black performer employ vocal and acting techniques when performing a musical or theatrical idiom that includes racialized themes? What can the answers to the above question reveal about what happens at the intersection of performance and the performer's identity?*

## Chapter III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

This study examines the experiences of singers who identify as black or African American in representing their respective singing voice on stage. Three research questions were created to explore the use of the black voice by performers in theatrical works representing black themes:

1. How does a black performer employ vocal and acting techniques when performing a musical or theatrical idiom that includes racialized themes?
2. How does a performer navigate performativity and vocality?
3. What can the answers to the above question reveal about what happens at the intersection of performance and the performer's identity?

The findings in relation to the research questions revealed each participant's experiences and perceptions of black representation in their respective entertainment industries.

This chapter provides a description of the study's methodology to collect data in order to answer the research questions. The chapter includes discussions on the rationale for the research approach, research design overview, pilot studies, the participants, analysis and synthesis of the data, ethical considerations, and limitations and delimitations of the study.

### **Rationale for the Methodology**

This research design was a qualitative, multi-case study. This methodology was essential to the study's exploration of the cultural capital within genres of theatrical black vocal music. Wiersma and Jurs (2009/1969) defines *qualitative research* as "a phenomenological model in which multiple realities are rooted in subjects' perceptions" (p. 13). The values of a qualitative approach allowed me to investigate each singer's experience with and construction of black vocality. The perceptions of the participants were collected through semi-structured interviews. According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), the purpose of qualitative interview "is to understand themes of the lived daily world from the subjects' own perspectives" (p. 27). Interviewing can produce "reports" of the interviewees' reality and "accounts occasioned by the situation" (Brinkmann and Kvale, p. 53). The interviewer accounts for both the person's beliefs about the subject and about the situated interaction to infer ideas held by the interviewee (Halldén, Haglund, and Strömdahl, 2007).

I chose to present the findings from the interviews in narrative format. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) writes that descriptive accounts in research bridge "the realms of science and art, merging the systematic and careful description of good ethnography with the evocative resonance of fine literature" (p. 6). Carless and Douglas (2017) describe narrative methodology as "a way of theorizing psychological and social phenomena" (p. 307). Narratives can point to how "individuals negotiate their identity, morality, and behavior within their particular life context," focusing on the personal and the social (Carless & Douglas, p. 307). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) argue that narratives and other poetic modes of expression created through critical race methodology offer exploration of

the experiences of a person of color within a sociohistorical context. Telling “racialized, sexualized, and classed” stories of people with marginalized identities creates counter-stories to hegemony by using data collected from research, existing literature, the researcher’s professional experiences, and the researcher’s personal experiences (Solórzano & Yosso, p. 33).

A *case study* is a research strategy focused on the analysis of a single unit. A research study on multiple cases aims to understand the comparisons between individual units. Slake (2006) writes that multicase research:

begins with a quintain [the phenomenon to be studied], arranges to study cases in terms of their own situational issues, interprets patterns within each case, and then analyzes cross-case findings to make assertions about the binding. (p. 10)

By cross-referencing the data, I was able to identify the salient themes from the lives and experiences of these individuals, aiming to generalize conclusions over several units.

### **Research Design Overview**

Through the lens of critical pedagogy and cultural performance, I used a three-part methodological system: interview, audio/visual analysis, and stimulated recall. Data-gathering for this study happened after vetting and procuring five participants, professional performers identifying as black or African American. The three phases were closely interwoven, in order to investigate practitioners’ intentions and what they do in practice.

My methodological choices were influenced by Rosamond (2017), who examined how three contemporary visual artists engage with their respective practices. Rosamond adopted a hermeneutics approach through a process of understanding works through the dialectics between the interpreter and serious attention to the work itself. Portraits were

created for each artist and emerging themes were clustered and analyzed. Also, I modeled my research design after Avery (2017), who created professional narratives of six self-described African American female choreographers, for which data were reviewed and analyzed. Avery also offered a critique of the black female performer in the media and entertainment industries.

## **Interview**

A semi-structured interview method of research was used. The process was open, allowing new ideas to be brought up during the interview in reaction to what the interviewee was saying. The list of around 20 questions were put into framework of themes to be explored as well as effortless flow from one idea to the next. I could tailor the questions to the individual whom I was interviewing.

The protocol, based on Salgar's (2016) three musical semiotics approaches, focused on the following concepts: *semiotic-hermeneutic*, tracing musical meaning directly from the score; *cognitive-embodied*, emphasizing the listening subject and the importance of the subject in meaning making; and *social-political*, centering on the role of music in relation to power to influence society, politics, and economy (Please see Appendix A for the protocol). Concentrating on self-identification, preparation, and performance, the questions explored how vocalizing confirms and debases modern constructions of "black" singing styles and of speech patterns as related to race, class, educational level, and gender. The performers were asked to explain how they employ vocal and acting techniques when performing a musical or theatrical idiom that includes racialized themes. Answers to the research questions about what performers do to create a performance and how those methods affect their personal identity emerged.

### **Audio/Visual Analysis**

I analyzed an excerpt provided by the interviewee in regard to performance techniques and performative implications. After receiving permission from each artist, I performed an initial examination of the submitted recording. I also looked at existing literature about the piece of music or theatre. Analysis of these excerpts provided empirical support of the complex relationships between sounds, contexts, and meanings that arise from the creative process. Through the fixed mechanism of replay, I had a way into viewing and reviewing the unpredictability of performance. The second research question was illuminated through the examination of the complex ways that the performers Signify (Gates, 1988/2014) motifs from cultural aesthetics but alter them to create their own meanings.

### **Stimulated Recall**

Analysis of the data from the interview and from the audio/visual excerpt provided a framework to create a protocol for a phase of semi-structured interviews with stimulated recall. I also used stimulated recall (SR) as a means of analysis. SR offers a way to reflect on one's practice (Fernqvist, 2017). According to Meier and Vogt (2015), data collection for SR consists of two main phases: Participants are video recorded while working and this video recording is shown to the participants for the stimulated recall, which is recorded as well. Participants' retrospective self-reports on their thought processes during recorded sessions draw together cognitive thinking and decision-making processes from their point of view. In lieu of performance, the use of SR can help performers observe themselves in a way that is not normally possible and use the discoveries as a springboard for discussion (Rowe, 2009).

With the focus toward the Signifyin' of expression based on cultural representations, my goal was to seek emerging patterns and describe broad style trends in relation to the first research question of what vocal strategies performers use when altering range, resonance, attitude to pitch, and attitude to rhythm (Please see Appendix B for the protocol). Langer (1997/2016) argues that skills are rarely taught by the real experts. As such, the goal of the SR process was to gather information about strategies, processes, and opinions by performers working at arguably the highest level.

### **Pilot Studies**

In the first pilot, I interviewed two professional performers who identify as black and perform in genres that include African diasporic themes. Second, I analyzed a performance of “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man” from the 1936 film version of *Show Boat* (Kern, 1927). This section details the findings from small exploratory projects involving questions to singers about their strategies when presenting music that utilizes integrated vocality. The pilot studies represent early findings for the three steps of data collection I used for this study.

### **Interviews**

The interviews were conducted as part of a graduate-level course at Teacher’s College, Columbia University: *Interview Design and Analysis in Music Education Research* (A&HM 6041). The protocol asked the participants a list of questions about their self-identification and background, their processes in preparation and performance in music and theatre, and their ideas about authenticity. Both interviews were held in person, audio recorded, and lasted approximately 50 minutes. I then created verbatim



transcriptions of the interviews. Additionally, I created narrative descriptions of both participants, bringing together empirical information, the personality of the participant, and the context in which the interview happened.

**Themes and interview questions.** The protocol was created to test questions about singer strategies when presenting music that utilizes integrated vocality. The goal of the interview process was to assess the kind of questions to pursue in the interviewing section of my dissertation. The questions were designed to gather information on self-identification and processes in preparation and performance. I explored how a performer employs vocal and acting techniques when performing a musical or theatrical idiom that includes racialized themes.

The themes of the protocol developed from conceptions of vocalism and of cultural capital: Introduction – what is the interview topic (how the professional black performer use craft, technique, and personal identity to create a vocal performance); Self-identification – work highlights and personal background information; General Preparation in rehearsal and performance – vocal and acting techniques that the subject uses, particularly in pieces based on black themes; Authenticity – the subject’s views on what makes a performance authentically black; and Conclusion – opportunities for the subject to summarize and draw attention to information that they find is important. These themes were to focus the questions toward individual performer’s self-identification and performance techniques.

**Participants.** For this project, two performers were interviewed. Their pseudonyms are as follows: Darrin, a singer who performs western lyric opera and gospel, and Kailah, a musical theatre actor. The sample of participants was initiated

through Facebook Messenger communication. I decided to look for professional African American performers who sing a range of styles. Both interviewees are people whom I know from professional settings. The participants were informed of the purpose of the interview as well as the possibility of the minimal risks that might be involved in their voluntary participation. They were briefed and debriefed about the procedures of the interview, including their agency to decline to answer a specific question or to stop the interview at any time. They were also informed that the information would be used for preliminary research only and to help formulate the questions that will be used in the official study. After the interviews were transcribed, each participant was sent via email the transcription of his or her respective interview for member checking.

**Emergent themes.** Grounded theory analysis techniques guided the process of finding codes and conceptual categories. In the process of sorting through the data from the two interviews, sets of ideas began to emerge. The concepts that came up most strongly are as follows: [B] Background – personal history, family background; [SI] Self-identification – how the subject describes herself or himself in the present; [PP] Subject’s performance & preparation (non-vocal specific); [PPV] Subject’s performance and preparation (vocal); [M] Musical instruments; [H] History – references to time period or historical event; [C] Culture – references to a social practices, subject positions, and customary beliefs; [DI] Diversity/ Inclusion –multicultural or culturally responsive practices in the workplace; [A] Authenticity – subject’s perception of performance that is truthful to one's own personality, spirit, or character; [VS] Signifiers of black vocality (lowered tessitura/conversational attributes, belting, hyper-vocalizations) – representative elements of black sound as illustrated in the literature; [I] Idiom/ Music style; [ST] Show

title; and [STP] Show title in which the subject has performed. From these two interviews, the idea that emerges is that black cultural forms exist in relationship to white cultural and power structures. Also, for a black performance to carry authenticity, it must be based in historical and cultural contexts. To illustrate these points, I will look more closely at four of the emergent themes: subject's vocal performance and preparation, culture, history, and authenticity.

Both subjects' descriptions of components of black vocality were aligned with the literature. Belting and an emphasis on intelligibility of text frame the words-first approach in many black styles of music. Hyper-vocalizations (e.g., grunts, breathy effects, straight tone) manipulate the grain of the voice for the purpose of expressivity. In their individual practice, they use these effects within the context of western lyric classical vocal technique. When asked about such effects, Kailah states, "That's not something I was trained in, so therefore it's not something I can naturally do. It would take me a little bit of time to learn how to safely 'screlt, wail, things like that.'" "Screlting" is a term used by many musical theatre practitioners to describe the vocal quality of performers forcefully singing at the top of their range. It comes from a combination of the words "screaming" and "belting" (Sisco, 2014). Though she talks about using straight and breathy tones when describing the way that she breaks down a particular song, those effects are created within the ideals of seamless line of Eurocentric training. Darrin attests that he, too "always [tries] to sing with one voice."

Both participants stated that there is a sense of having to create a sound or an image when performing non-specifically black music. Darrin states, "If I am doing something classically, often I want to hear an African American do it. Mainly because

there's this sense of feeling like it is so *other*... And I've struggled with that.” He goes on later in the interview to say, “I notice my blackness very much when I’m singing non-black composed music.” The sense of double-consciousness arises in which blacks view themselves not only from their own perspective, but also as they might be perceived by the predominantly white culture. Kailah states:

Because I use my voice in that capacity especially in a black show, I feel comfortable just using it. Then in other shows where the character is not necessarily or doesn't have to be black, I put on, especially if it's a musical, the musical theatre bright, fun, big sound.

The endeavor to bring musical and social multiplicity simultaneously exposes the complex negotiations of personal identity and expression.

The representation of culture and history was important to both subjects. These two aspects create the context for a performer's expressivity. Darrin states, “Everybody has their own way of signifying their circumstance.” He is using the concept from Gates (1988/ 2014) in which he states that African Americans “signify” motifs from cultural aesthetics but alter them to create their own meanings. Even individual expression is based in a history of cultural patterns; however, these patterns must be looked at in the context of the wider society. In a discussion about the hypothetical creation of a show by a person of color that is not specifically on a black theme, Kailah states:

We live in a world where white is the majority and they're the “chosen.” So we already know their realities and we can speak to it. We see it all the time. They're the “preferred.” And therefore, they are the default.

Ultimately, black idioms are enveloped and put in their place by a Eurocentric conception of musicality and theatricality.

Authentic performance is steeped in the representation of culture and history. The two participants, however, have rather different ways to describe authenticity in

performance. For Kailah, for a performance to be considered authentically black, it must share the experience of what black people have gone through in their history and their shifting cultural circumstances. The performance must act as a reflection of the community. For Darrin, authentic performance comes from an individual's expression of cultural capital. There are inherent elements that are passed between generations formally or informally and the individual artist must use those things to find the kernel of "truth." Though the subjects may have similar aesthetics regarding authenticity, the means by which that authenticity is expressed may manifest differently.

The interview questions that were strictly about personal background did not yield the most direct information for the study. I adjusted the questions to have more straightforward connections to the research questions. Using Salgar's (2016) three musical semiotics approaches mentioned above focused the protocol.

### **Recording Example**

As a demonstration of scholarly analysis, I presented an examination of the vocal identifiers and acting practices of the artists in the "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" scene from the 1936 film version of *Show Boat* (Kern, 1927). This was part of the certification requirements, for the approval of my dissertation proposal. The musical tells the story of Magnolia (played by Irene Dunn), a white show boat actress who learns how to sing from the boat's black servants and eventually becomes a successful vaudeville singer (Oman, 2016). It was revolutionary not only in its synthesis of music, plot, and fully realized characters but also in being one of the first fully racially integrated musicals on Broadway (Lewis, 2005).



Figure 4 “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man” from *Show Boat*.

This scene takes place in the kitchen of the show boat. The leading lady Julie (Helen Morgan who also originated the role on stage), of mixed ethnicity passing for white, sings a few lines from “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man.” Her singing reflects the Broadway “legit” sound, a soprano rooted in the western lyric tradition with a clearly enunciated, conversational delivery (Hunt, 2016). Queenie (Hattie McDaniel), one of the black workers on the boat, interrupts Julie’s singing and questions how Julie knows the song since only “colored folks” sing it. In this moment, Julie is in danger of revealing her secret, miscegenated identity; however, her response alludes that the song, reflected as wide-spread black culture, is popular enough for her to know. Julie starts the song from the beginning, this time adding more vocalisms mirroring those of belters or “coon shouters.” The key has been taken down a third in the film from where Morgan performed the song on Broadway. In this tessitura, the performer explores the distinct colors of the different ranges of the voice: breathy sounds in the lower tones, defined *passaggio* breaks in a yodel-like fashion, and *portamenti* on words to be emphasized.

Queenie takes over the song after her husband Joe (Paul Robeson) comes into the scene. He has entered a female space, where the dominance is displayed by the woman who ribs him. Her lyrics are meant to tease, calling him “shiftless” and “good for

nothing,” since throughout the musical Joe is a sympathetic character that provides an entrée into the black community of the world of the show. Queenie’s lowered tessitura and words-first approach is indicative of black vocality. She sings the tune an octave below Julie, making alterations to the vocal line, and her singing style approximates speech. Joe (Paul Robeson) responds in a similar manner emphasizing text intelligibility. Queenie and Joe banter not only through words but also through gesture and expression which are exaggerated with eyes rolling and stiff neck shimmying. One might see these body movements as being derived from minstrelsy (which I will discuss further below). However, this acting style also reflects the dominant aesthetic that Naremore (2012) describes as imitative and gestural in nature, rather than the methods evaluated in terms of psychological naturalism which took hold in American drama in the late 1930s. This stylized mode of performance allowed actors to cultivate their identities through the roles they played, their physical characteristics, and their ability to fuse apparent naturalness with eccentricities of expression (p. 38). The black characters are simultaneously humanized because the performance practices used by the black performers reflect those used by the white performers and othered by adhering to the history of minstrel portrayals.

As the ensemble joins in the singing, Magnolia performs an exaggerated version of the shuffle, a version of a minstrel dance derived from the African derived slave dance called *Juba* (Winter, 1996). Her routine is intercut with black characters dancing on the shore in a seemingly extemporaneous manner. Minstrelsy, while an exaggeration of racist caricatures, is a window into “the history of black expression” (McWhorter, 2017, p. 125). Magnolia’s performance, bound by expectations of audiences of the time, is

juxtaposed with folk representations of black culture. Though minstrel shows were no longer in fashion by the time of the film, white audiences might have decoded the performance according to the prevailing racism of the day, while audiences familiar with black folk culture might have had a more complex knowledge of what was being performed (Schroeder, 2010). According to Lopez (2018), in order not to be considered parody, a white character in film who performs in modes of minstrelsy engages in conversation with a black character about what it means to be black: the black character is needed to critique or authorize the blackface performance and the “minstrel” white character can take on the speaker role of animator and author, but not principal (p. 23). When Joe compliments Magnolia’s dancing, he is legitimizing her performance and interpreting it for the audience. All the while, the community is having a seemingly authentic experience outside. The song and scene exemplify the ideological tensions addressed by *Show Boat* as a cultural product: racism, miscegenation, appropriation of black culture, and the independence of women (Oman, 2016).

Through looking at the vocalism, acting, and movement language, the relationship between the themes of the musical (specifically racism, appropriation of black culture, and the representation of women) was explored. The above analysis was offered to the proposal committee as an example of my intended way of writing about performance that was at once reflexive and interpretive. The interviewees of the present study were asked to submit examples of their own performances of traditionally black vocal styles. I compared the data given by the participants through interviews with my own analysis of the recorded material.



## Participants

After my Advanced Dissertation Proposal on November 18, 2018, approval by the Institutional Review Board of Teachers College, Columbia University was obtained on March 10, 2019. The study was granted Exempt status and assigned Protocol ID 19-239. The following are brief biographies of the artists and descriptions of the intaking processes.

### Karen Slack



*Figure 5 Karen Slack as Serena in Fort Worth Opera's Porgy and Bess.*

I first got to know Karen by performing with her in a production of the opera *Champion* (Blanchard, 2013), produced by Opera Parallèle in San Francisco in February 2016. However, I first knew of her singing when she was an Adler Fellow at the San Francisco Opera. She has gone on to perform roles at the Metropolitan Opera, where she is covering the role of Serena in *Porgy and Bess* at the time of this writing, as well as Arizona Opera, Austin Opera, Nashville Opera, Lyric Opera of Kansas City, Vancouver Opera, the Scottish Opera, and Atlanta Opera. Additionally, she portrayed the Opera Diva in Tyler Perry's (2010) movie and soundtrack *For Colored Girls*. In concert, she was a

soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra with conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin and with the St. Petersburg's Philharmonic in celebration of the 80th birthday of Yuri Temirkanov.

On May 15, 2019, I sent a Messenger correspondence to Karen to ask if she would be interested in taking part in my dissertation research as a participant. Within a couple of hours, she affirmed that she would be interested, and I followed up with her via email.

### **Julia Bullock**



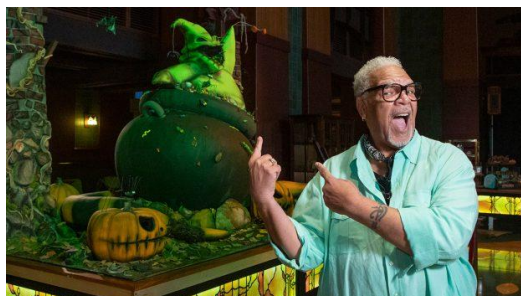
*Figure 6 Julia Bullock and composer-percussionist Tyshawn Sorey in **Perle Noire: Meditations for Joséphine** at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.*

Julia and I were introduced over email on May 16, 2018 by a mutual friend. He knew my research goals and her interest in integrating activism with her musical career. We tried for over a year to find time to connect; however, with her international engagements and my load as a teacher, performer, and doctoral student, we were not able to talk about our convergent interests. On March 12, 2019, I sent her a letter of recruitment via email to which she responded a few weeks later in the affirmative.

The *New York Times* has written that Julia “has arrived at the precipice of an important but unconventional career” (Woolfe, 2019). She is an innovative programmer who has had residencies as an artistic curator at the Metropolitan Museum and the San Francisco Symphony. At the time of this writing, she has been touring a project called

*Zauberland*, a theatre piece conceived for her which tells the story of a pregnant Syrian refugee through a combination of Robert Schumann's song cycle *Dichterliebe* (1840) and new music by composer Bernard Foccroulle (2019). Her opera credits include the world premiere of John Adams's *Girls of the Golden West* (2017), Kitty Oppenheimer in Adams's *Doctor Atomic* (2005), Anne Truelove in Igor Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* (1951), and the title role of Henry Purcell's *The Indian Queen* (1695).

### Ken Page



*Figure 7* Ken Page at Disneyland in front of a statue of Oogie Boogie, the character he voiced in the film *A Nightmare Before Christmas*.

When I explained my research design to my coworker, he explained that his colleague might be a great candidate to be a participant. My coworker Michael Horsley is the Music Supervisor of the St. Louis Municipal Opera Theatre (known as “The Muny”), and his colleague was the Broadway veteran Ken Page. Ken was part of the original productions of *Ain't Misbehavin'* (1978) (Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Actor in a Musical), *Cats* (1981), *The Wiz* (1974), and *It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues* (1999). In London's West End, he was seen in *Children of Eden* (1991) (Father, Original Cast) and *My One & Only* (1983). Film audiences know him best as the voices of Mr. Oogie Boogie in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) and King Gator in *All Dogs Go to*

*Heaven* (1989). In Fall 2019, he starred in the West Coast premiere of *Grumpy Old Men: The Musical* (2018) alongside Hal Linden and Cathy Rigby.

Michael sent a message to Ken to tell him about my research interests. On March 13, 2019, I sent Ken a letter of recruitment via email. On April 13, he responded to say that he was very interested in talking with me. When I found out that Ken would be performing in *Guys and Dolls* (1950) at the Muny at the same time that Julia and Karen would be performing *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* (2019) at Opera Theatre of St. Louis, I arranged my schedule to be able to fly to Saint Louis and interviewed the three of them June 14 – 17, 2019.

### **Kenneth Overton**



*Figure 8* Kenneth Overton performing the role of Friar Lawrence in Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette* at the Oregon Bach Festival, 2019.

In January 2019, I was introduced to Kenneth Overton as we were both vetted by Amplified Opera, a company in Toronto launching a concert series speaking to social issues, to create a program around the ideas of black identity alongside pianist Rich Coburn. I sent a letter of recruitment over email to Kenneth on May 15, 2019. We held the interview on July 27, 2019 in New York City.

Kenneth has performed with the New York City Opera as Jake Wallace in Giacomo Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West* (1910) and with San Francisco Opera in the world premiere of John Adams' *The Girls of the Golden West* (2017). At this writing, he is scheduled to perform the role of civil rights leader Ralph Abernathy in the World Premiere of Douglas Tappin's *I Dream* (2010) with Opera Grand Rapids, Toledo Opera, and Opera Carolina. He has performed the role of Porgy in *Porgy and Bess* (1935) over 100 times at houses such as the Deutsche Oper Berlin, Palacio Bellas Artes in Mexico City, L'Opéra Montréal, and the Royal Danish Opera. Kenneth is a regularly featured soloist with the American Spiritual Ensemble. Amidst performing, Kenneth serves as co-founder and artistic director of Opera Noire of New York.

### **Taylor Iman Jones**



*Figure 9 Taylor Iman Jones and the original Broadway cast of Head Over Heels.*

Taylor Iman Jones and I held our interview on September 19, 2019 over videotelephony. I had sent her a letter of recruitment via email on June 9, 2019. I first got to know her in the San Francisco Bay Area theatre scene. About a year after I directed her in a show in the San Francisco Bay Area, she made her Broadway debut in *Groundhog*

*Day: The Musical* in 2016. In following seasons, she originated the role of Mopsa in the Broadway production of *Head Over Heels* (2018) and starred as Pat in the off-Broadway musical *Scotland, PA* (2019) with Roundabout Theater Company. She played Extraordinary Girl in the final National Tour of *American Idiot* (2010). Her regional credits have included *The Tale of Despereaux* (2019) at The Old Globe in San Diego and *The Who's Tommy* (1992) at The Kennedy Center. Soon after our interview, it was announced that she would be creating the role of Andy Sachs in the Broadway-bound production of *The Devil Wears Prada* (2019) and performing the role of Peggy in the Los Angeles cast of *Hamilton* (2015).

### **Analysis and Synthesis of Data**

The purpose of this exploratory multicase study is to investigate the experiences of five black singers in the representation of their race using their respective singing voice in their entertainment industries. The research questions were addressed through the triangulation of interviews, audio/visual analysis, and stimulated video recall. Table 1 illustrates the Research Questions and the data garnered for exploration.

Each interview was audio recorded on my smartphone and transcribed on an online transcription platform. A transcript of the interview was sent to the respective participant for member checking. Interview responses and field notes of observations were analyzed to form narratives of the participants.

A cross-case analysis of the interviews was conducted to reveal similarities, differences, and emergent themes. The data were organized systematically through coding. According to Saldaña (2009), a *code* is a word or phrase that attributes

summative or evocative meaning to a datum in qualitative inquiry. Classifying codes into categories of information enabled patterns of thinking and behavior to emerge.

Table 1

*Data Collection Instrumentation*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Data Analysis</b>
1. How does a black performer employ vocal and acting techniques when performing a musical or theatrical idiom that includes racialized themes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviewing</li> <li>• Audio/ Visual Analysis</li> <li>• Stimulated Recall</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transcribe interviews</li> <li>• Review footage</li> <li>• Review transcriptions</li> <li>• Field notes</li> <li>• Member checking</li> <li>• Initial coding</li> </ul>
2. How does a performer navigate performativity and vocality?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviewing</li> <li>• Audio/ Visual Analysis</li> <li>• Stimulated Recall</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transcribe interviews</li> <li>• Review footage</li> <li>• Review transcriptions</li> <li>• Field notes</li> <li>• Member checking</li> <li>• Initial coding</li> </ul>
3. What can the answers to the above question reveal about what happens at the intersection of performance and the performer's identity?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviewing</li> <li>• Audio/ Visual Analysis</li> <li>• Stimulated Recall</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transcribe interviews</li> <li>• Review footage</li> <li>• Review transcriptions</li> <li>• Field notes</li> <li>• Member checking</li> <li>• Initial coding</li> </ul>

### **Ethical Considerations**

Discussing the artistic process, in which performers examine their own frailties and strengths for creating a dynamic theatrical experience, can be intensely intimate. Due to the potentially sensitive issues uncovered from the interviews and stimulated recall, the

research was conducted in a way to cause the least possible amount of harm to the participants. Each participant voluntarily signed the “Informed Consent and Participant’s Rights” form before their respective interview. The raw data was stored on my personal, password-protected electronic devices.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

The current study presents a multifaceted presentation of five black professional singers and their experiences of representation relating to vocality in theatrical musical performance. It does not offer an analysis of the experiences of a broader range of singers with minoritized identities. My initial intent was to vet three western lyric singers and three musical theatre singers across gender identification. Despite recruitment efforts, this study was not able to identify another participant who identified as having a male-identified voice type and/or as a musical theatre performer. Mortality of the collected participants was avoided through the use of email and messaging applications. While there was no financial reward for them, I supported their involvement with written reinforcement of their specialized expertise.

To aggregate data about the professional practices of these five performers, in-person interviews were deemed the most appropriate means to do so. Interviewer bias is difficult to avoid in qualitative research design. The interviewer may subconsciously and subtly give cues that influence the interviewee’s answers toward the interviewer’s own opinions. Admittedly, I share some level of professional and cultural identity self-assignation with each participant and understand their experiences through my own framework. As such, I had acknowledged and accepted my own positions going into the



interviewing process. However, I aimed to set aside my personal biases when recording and analyzing the data. My goal was to present the participants' experiences accurately.

Qualitative interviews tend to generate large amounts of data. The interview protocol was constructed based on literature, my own experience, and feedback from faculty members and colleagues. According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), the phenomena being studied exist within the context in which they are gathered. Since data were collected during a defined duration of time, the study offers a glimpse of the performers' experiences and not a longitudinal perspective. The setup of the interactions between the researcher and interviewee affects the content of what is said. The researcher's challenge is reporting not just what is said, but also discussing the information given. According to Geertz (1973), written accounts that provide scientific descriptions of studying human behavior and opinions are interpretive, interprets "the flow of social discourse", and presents what is said in "perusable terms" (p. 47). Such thick description records a semiotic account of explanations and meanings given by the interviewees who are engaged in the reported behavior. Cultural signs add deeper meaning to the observable data.

Polkinghorne (2007) writes, "Narrative interpretation often develops implications by comparing and contrasting assembled stories with one another or with other forms of social science literature" (p. 483). Validity is the degree of the believability of a knowledge claim. The assumptions of a community affect that community's acceptance of evidence and reasoning. Specific kinds of evidence are required for specific knowledge in order to convince readers. Judgments about how valid a claim depend on the "force and soundness of the argument in support of the claim" (p. 474). The evidence

and argument must contain plausibility or trustworthiness. Validity of the narrative researcher's interpretations requires evidence from the text in support of the claim be cited. As much as possible I used verbatim quoting after opportunities given to the participants for member checking in order to establish validity. Additionally, the participants in this study have been on record in journalistic publications stating similar sentiments to the answers given to the protocol of the current study; this adds to the consistency of the data collected in the current study (Cohen & Howard, 2019; Cooperman, 2012; Franklin, 2018; Salazar, 2019; Woolfe, 2019).

### **Summary**

This study in the representation of the theatrical black voice used the research methods of interviewing, audio/visual analysis, and stimulated recall. The three phases were closely interwoven, in order to investigate the intentions and practice of the participants, professional opera and/or musical theatre performers who identify as black or African American. Looking at the performance techniques and performative implications used by these performers has implications regarding representation in the entertainment industries and the importance of discursive praxis that leads to self-expression and empowerment for voices and bodies of students with minoritized identities.

## Chapter IV

### NARRATIVES

#### Introduction

The present study aims to understand the perceptions and experiences of black-identified performers related to race, representation, and the theatrical voice. This chapter provides a lens into the professional narratives of five performers: three opera singers and two musical theatre actors. Each narrative is based on interviews and stimulated recall with each of the performers and audio/visual analysis and research executed by me, the researcher. The interview protocol is structured on three themes: tracing musical meaning directly from the score, the importance of the participant in meaning making, and the role of music in relation to power (Salgar, 2016). Each participant provided access to a video of themselves singing, and this video recording was shown to the participant for stimulated recall, which was recorded as well. Additionally, I did an audio/visual analysis of the video and literature research around the material prior to the stimulated recall interview.

Throughout this study, the terms *black* and *African American* are often used concurrently. The practice is based on how the participant self-identified and on how they used the term in regard to connecting to the information that they shared. This study aims to explore the specific experiences of the participants. Accordingly, I use language reflecting that of each participant.

This study discusses the strategies of performance techniques that black performers use in relationship to representation of race on stage. It will examine theatrical

vocal performances that develop from the intersection of racial identity and stage craft. This research will continue the conversation regarding authentic representation in the entertainment industries.

### **Karen Slack: Singing to the Root of Cultural Expression**

*I found the connection to the storytelling. The art comes from the culture.*

As I walk into the Sally S. Levy Opera Center, which houses the administrative office and rehearsal spaces of the Opera Theatre of St. Louis, I am struck both by the open, welcoming lobby with a waterfall feature wall and how quiet the building seems. The company runs its season's productions in repertory, meaning in alternation or rotation. The next night is the world premiere of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* with a score by Terence Blanchard and a libretto by Kasi Lemmons, based on the memoir by Charles S. Blow. Karen Slack has agreed to meet me on her day off, before originating the role of Billie, the character based on Blow's mother. Karen arrives to our meeting dressed in a stylish athleisure ensemble meant for comfort and style, clearly a prima donna at ease. She leads me into a space that she has reserved for us to talk. When discussing this current production, Karen admits to asking herself "How did I find Billie?"

Yes, I know her, but I don't really know her. But it's so distinctively Karen in a roundabout way. Terence, when he saw me do *Champion*, he was like, "Yeah."

And when it's particularly, when it's like Imelda [from *Champion*] and Billie, black women specifically, you know. I wasn't a woman who had children and I got Imelda has seven and Billie has five. But I know women like them. I know I've loved and I've lost. I've been in relationships that weren't good for me. You know, I've had the experience of walking the earth as a black woman. I mean, it's just in me. It's a part of me so I don't even have to think about who they are, how I'm going to interpret them. You know I just always feel like it's natural.

I performed alongside Karen in a production of Blanchard's first opera *Champion* produced by Opera Parallèle (see p. 67). Karen says that she finds Blanchard's music easy for her to sing because of its connection to black culture being rooted in jazz, blues, and gospel:

He has gorgeous, amazing chord structures. And that's the direction, that's how he starts the piece. And so the flavor is in the core. And then he writes and vocal line and I always feel like there this clear map of what it is that he wants you to do which is born out of how you feel by the chord structure and the way the direction of the phrase and the text and everything.

When I look at Terence's music, it's just this clear map of all of the things that I feel, like, okay now I want to do this, now I want to and I can add my thing on it which is not what every composer writes.

I was able to see the opening night of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*. The score was an amalgamation of a traditional structure of Western lyric opera and a wide range of compositional techniques from orchestral writing that mirrors the composer's work in cinematic scoring to the rhythms of step dancing.

Karen is a black opera singer who fell in love with Western classical music at the age of 15.

I've always felt like I was always this puppy with big paws and trying to figure out my way. My potential was always undeniable and this thing that I just sang. I always just sang. I was a natural performer, I think.

She won her first international competition at 18 and went on to study at the Curtis Institute of Music for undergraduate and graduate degrees. She eventually garnered a coveted spot as an Adler Fellow with the San Francisco Opera.

### **Being Black, Performing Black**

She attests to having a great deal of pride in her black American heritage which has influence on her artistry: "It colors the whole thing. Because there is something." She describes the identity of the black singer having "a style, a flair, a thing, a personality.

[...] The expectation is that you do have it because you are a black person.” Some part of this thinking comes from her upbringing in middle class Philadelphia.

We grew up listening to music, the food we eat, the music that we listen to, those of us who were raised in the church. I was raised on Earth, Wind, and Fire and soul music. You know what I mean? That was kind of [...] Chaka Khan and Philadelphia, the sounds of Philadelphia. It’s in the air in Philadelphia. It’s in the atmosphere. Yeah, that colors how I am as an artist and I never even thought about it like that, but yeah. I am black. I feel like I’m black first. That’s in the forefront of who I am and everything else falls into line. I don’t run away from that. I don’t make excuses for that because that’s who I am. That’s what makes me Karen, that’s what makes me special.

She looks to the mixtures of cultures and people from her life when preparing a piece that is specifically black. She draws her inspiration from the context of her cultural influences.

A role for which Karen is well known is that of Serena from *Porgy and Bess*. In the 2019 – 2020 season, she will be covering the role at the Metropolitan Opera. Serena was not a role that came naturally to her: “I didn’t feel so connected to her the way I felt a little bit connected to more modern women. But I approached her no differently than I approach a lot of people.” Karen began her research on Ruby Elzy, the operatic soprano who originated the role: “I was fascinated by her story and fascinated that she was the actual real star.” Elzy was featured on Broadway and film and died very young. Karen also went to the opera’s source material, the novel *Porgy* (Heyward, 1925). She states that the novel describes the men more than the women. Serena is portrayed as a religious figure in the community and as having eight children. Karen did not initially have a personal connection to these aspects of the character’s life. She examined as much as she could in order to have as much contextual information as possible: “I also feel like I’ve

always been a good student and know how to be a good student...I feel like that's informed me as a mature artist, the way I was a student."

The title role of Puccini's *Tosca* (1899) is another character that Karen performs often. In March of 2019 she did the role with Opera Birmingham in a production placed in a modern setting with contemporary costumes.

I could be and I was an actual black woman. Noah Stewart was the tenor. He was the Cavaradossi and so you know there was a natural comfort and sexiness and freedom and rhythm in the body that was different. That was clearly black, you know.

She states that the production did not shy away from having two black performers as the central love interests:

[The director] encouraged me to be me. For it to be mine. I think he loved the fact that I was spicy and saucy and all these things, and our scenes were very intimate and sexy. He encouraged that because he would not get that flavor in another group of people.

The freedom of resetting the story to a contemporary location allowed for a more immediate connection to the body movements, allowing for the reality of the given circumstances. However, tensions can arise when the production team does not take cultural expressions into consideration. In the moment traditionally where Tosca jumps from a bridge, Karen was asked to walk downstage and shoot herself. She felt as if she had to advocate for finding another option for this staging. With the current climate of gun violence, she did not want to leave the audience with that visual.

About 45 minutes into our conversation, we hear a knock on the door. Someone had reserved the room after us for a musical coaching. My heart drops because I realize we have only begun to skim the surface of the topic at hand and that I had barely gone through half of the questions I had intended to ask. Karen's air is easy, and she assures

me that she is enthusiastic to continue to talk about her experiences. We go back to the stone laden lobby, and Karen investigates what is inside an open door. It is clearly the company's conference room where I imagine many productions had been pitched and planned. We explore in the empty room as a space to continue our conversation and sit 90 degrees from each other around the corner of the large conference table to begin again.

### **Reframing as Advocate and Creator**

Being a black performer in the traditionally white space of opera often means having to advocate for oneself. An example is the use of cosmetics.

We know this as black singers you go into a theatre and your fingers and toes and everything is crossed when you're for your first day when you go in for your makeup because you already know that it's a 95 percent chance that it's going to be problematic. They're not going to have your color, then that won't have ever worked on particular people of color, that the hair is going to be a mess. You know this is all of these things so you already go in with that and so you know there's so many other things happening.

Along a similar vein is the practice of painting the skin of white singers when performing roles that are traditionally portrayed as having darker complexions such as the title roles in *Aida* (Verdi, 1870) and *Otello* (Verdi, 1887). Karen estimates that people in the name of being allies, not people of color themselves, are the ones making the biggest protestations against using body makeup to darken singers. She sees the root of the issue being in the lack of people of color who are in positions to help usher in systemic change, such as administrators, agents, and creatives.

I just think that it's noise. It just distracts us from the point of the matter that there are so few black singers who even have management which means you're not even in the running. You are not in the conversation, at the table.

She suggests that institutions create programs to train people of color interested in becoming general directors and artistic administrators of arts organizations.



Karen sees another option for singers is reframing themselves as creators, building careers curating and creating their own projects. For a #metoo movement themed concert, she commissioned the song “Nobody Knows” (2019) from Mahzi Kane to write poetry and Nailah Nombeko to compose the music.

I always think of myself as a singer, never as a creator, someone who creates art, and that’s that whole blindfolder. I went to Curtis, I was raised a traditional American singer, all you think about is the Met, la Scala, Berlin. But when you take the blinders off, there’s this whole world of art happening all around you that has nothing to do with opera. And it’s kind of like, “Oh yeah, I can do this. I can do that.”

Reframing one’s thinking affords one the knowledge of the possibility to know that they are more than just the enterprise that they are pursuing.

### **Range of the Black Voice**

When talking about the characteristics of the sound of the black singing voice, Karen suggests that range, perhaps even more so than vocal color, can be confusing to voice teachers and casting directors:

You can have a bass-baritone, but they can have the top of a Cavalier baritone but really be a bass. [...] You get to really hear how they have this full range. You could come from singing in church and then switching in and out of head to chest voice. But I think that that oftentimes hinders black singers because you don’t fit in the box. You don’t fit in.

She recounts that she once took an audition at a major company that requested to hear music by Puccini and Strauss. After singing music from those composers, the auditionees asked for her to provide another piece so she performed an aria from *Alcina* (1728) by Handel. Afterward, the casting director said that she should not sing that aria in public again due to his opinion that it is confusing for his view of her career. She responded, “Well, was it good? Because if it wasn’t good then that’s the problem. It’s not actually

that it's confusing." She did not get the job. She states that she believes that race did play a part in the thinking of the casting director.

Because if I was a white girl, he wouldn't had told me, he wouldn't had said that. He would have given me a job. He would have went, "Wow, she can do this or she can do that. I could see her in this." Not *hear* her. "I can see her in that. I can see her in this role. Oh yes, she can do this she can do that." They're not thinking like that but I know that that's the conversation, that that's what it is.

Black American classical singers, like most American classical singers, are trained to sing a wide range of genres, from musical theatre to opera, including baroque, classical, and verismo idioms. A professional career can feel limiting because singers are trained one way and then forced into a box of a restricted range of repertoire.

Karen understands the black sound coming from genetic makeup, "Something in the structure, of course. Of course, you have that. The facial structure, the bone structure." Societal traits and habits also influence the manifestations of the voice:

It's a part of you. [...] You can start a piece of music and sing it a certain way and not even be thinking about it, but it can come out. All the flavor comes out because it's in you, it's in the root. They talk about slavery and talk about the fabric of America, it's in the root. Racism and all these things in the soil. Same thing for all your cells and all your everything. It's just a part of you. [...] It's unexplainable.

In music that is influenced by black idioms, the singer colors their vocal line through expression and intention: "I think once you learn the score, you learn the score, right? And then you inflect your emotion on it." Musical tools include "bending notes, coloring things to make them soulful." Another approach is to focus on the text. This requires a balance between the intention of the words, the pronunciation as dictated by grammar and accent, and the acoustic needs of the vocalism "trying to find the right vowel that particularly resonates in this particular house too or how it would sound in a certain way...I do, mostly going with how it feels in my throat." For her, an approach to vocal

technique based in “clean singing” is at the basis of her vocalism which affords her the freedom to shade the music through the lens of her black cultural heritage.

Karen states:

The spiritual is the first song of America, period. There is no music before the spiritual in America. Nothing. The folk song, all that was born out of the spiritual, work music, the song. Everything else that comes after that is after that. Nobody can tell me anything different. We are America.

She believes in knowing and keeping alive traditions, especially for the upcoming generations who may not be exploring cultural traditions as a vis-à-vis technology and social media.

I think that we have to keep doing this and keep sharing it and keep being accessible and keep the fact that the culture is a good thing. Culture is an important thing and not to assimilate because you feel like you have to fit in.

The idea of a black vocal legacy also extends to studying singers that have come before.

She states that Leontyne Price “just unapologetically got out there and was all her beautiful, black, soulful, expressive, expansive self.” The vocality associated with Price’s singing is rooted in black cultural traditions, “The way she would bend the phrase and swoop and soar.” In Karen’s estimation, black musical traditions stem from the musical form of the spiritual and its exploration and application to a singer’s artistry can elevate their work.

## **Witness**

During the next portion of our time together, Karen and I look at a video of her on YouTube performing Hall Johnson’s arrangement of the spiritual “Witness.”



*Figure 10* “Witness” (arr. Burleigh) as performed by Karen Slack.

With the popularity of his arrangement of “Deep River” published in 1916, the composer Harry T. Burleigh ushered in the prominence of the “‘solo art song’ spiritual” (Wilson, 1996). Black composers, including Hall Johnson, used the melodies of spirituals to create piano-vocal arrangements of songs, comparable to the musical styles of eighteenth-century European art songs. As such, “the defining elements of black music” present in the spiritual are synthesized with the features of musical settings intended for concert performance in the Western lyric tradition. Johnson was particularly interested in using the melodies and rhythms of folk songs as “material for compositional development into art and extended forms” (Simpson, 2003). “Witness” is representative of some of his most elevated compositional techniques including chromaticism, imitation, and tone painting.

According to Newland (2014), concertized spirituals “abound with conflicting musical and social ideals of ‘black’ music and ‘black’ people” (p. 73). In the case of this musical form, racialized performance cannot be separated from the history of slavery and, arguably, minstrelsy even within the precincts of the concert hall stage. Building bridges between Western classical and vernacular forms puts them in conversation with each

other. As such, the singer must make connections between the disparate styles.

Contextualizing the elements of the distinct musical traditions deepens cultural and emotional meanings (Allsup, 2011). The singer's individual artistry emerges from the relationship between their cultural values, acquired experiences, and genetic traits.

The video we watch was made as a marketing tool. Karen's agent wanted her to record a range of repertoire, including a piece that may be of interest of someone from the pops concert world, "Because I don't sing music theatre, I said this would be the closest thing because I always do spirituals on my recitals." One of the first questions I ask her is about her use of AAVE pronunciation in the text, specifically the changing the word *this* to sound like *dis*: "Because Hall Johnson wrote it in the score. He very specifically asked that you do the dialect, I think, when singing his pieces even though they're for concert." Karen acknowledges that when looking at a score, she starts *come scritto*, or with what is on the page, and then "I'll figure to add other seasonings." Her seasonings include vocal embellishments based on rhythmic and melodic contrast such as vocal slides, straight-toned notes, scoops, and riffs. The embellishments come from gospel music traditions.

Another strategy is the way that she approaches the text, "Certain inflection, I think, it's just I wanted to put an emphasis on *nation*. 'All *nations*. All *nations* in him are...' You know, it's a word choice." Even the tempo of the performance of the song was chosen for optimal declaration of the text and storytelling, "It's just about getting the story across, being very clear." She goes on, "That's the arc of the phrase, not just this run on kind of sentence and no one understands the intention. Always do the text. Always do the text, always being detailed in that way."

I comment on the ease with which Karen adds movements to this performance, including a ventral body roll initiating in the chest and sinuously traveling down her torso to her pelvis. Movement is a component of performance which she feels makes a performance authentically black. Yet movement is not just from her cultural heritage, but also embedded in her DNA.

That's my grandmother though. When she would get the spirit, she would always do a shoulder. She's a little lady and you couldn't tell if she was standing up or sitting down because she was so short but she would get her praise on. I would think that's where that comes from.

Other actions she notices in herself are foot stomps and hand clap, "The foot stomp is always a thing and a clap. Somewhere in my family, in my history, I must come from rhythmic people." Body motion is also a personal expression of her spirituality:

Yeah, it's a movement. It's also a way to let it flow through you. I always feel like I'm a vessel. I'm this vessel for the things to pour in me and God to send them through me and that's just how it goes, that's how it feels, music.

"Witness" retells several stories of the Bible, including that of Samson and Delilah. Karen seems to surprise herself when watching her enactment of Delilah asking where Samson's strength lies: "When you're experiencing it, you're doing the thing. You're doing the thing. You don't know." In the video, she strikes a pose in which she strokes her hair with one hand and runs the other hand across her body while whispering in a half-sung voice: "But if you do sexy, something that is sensuous, then people are going to go, 'Okay'... It's the way you move your body, a certain way, without speaking, you know it's sensual, right?"

## **Generativity and Generating**

As we wind down our conversation, the topics of generativity and generating fill the conversation. Karen has recently joined the board of the Women's Opera Network of Opera America:

I'm going to find my place. I don't know exactly where that's going to be, I don't know what it's going to be because I know my talents and my skill but just don't know how it's going to fit right now. But before they turn the light on and shut the door, I'm going to find a place for myself.

She questions how long the trend of practices that expand diversity will be sustained. In the meantime, she advocates that black classical artists of her generation dig deeper into exploring their musical cultural expression and share that information with younger singers coming up. Status gives an artist agency and a responsibility to help others in their rise to the next level. For Karen, it is not only about generating and curating new work, it is also about creating an environment of inclusivity where black artists can thrive in all positions in the opera industry.

## **Kenneth Overton: Reaching Forward, Reaching Back**

*Part of my mission, in addition to being a great singing actor, is being an activist within the industry.*

In the front room of the Harlem eatery Kitchenette, I sit staring at the plentifully filled pastry cases lined with tall layer cakes, iced cupcakes, and flaky fruit pies. I get to the venue early in order to secure a spot in the classic looking diner with bright green walls, tiny hexagonal white tile floors, and a hodgepodge of simple tables and chairs against the wall opposite a counter with stools. Kenneth Overton and I had previously met over video chat, discussing the possibility of doing work together with Amplified Opera which hosts a concert series in Toronto for artists to tell their stories through

operatic and vocal repertoire. I instantly recognize him as he walks through the door escaping the New York City summer heat. We greet each other with a warm hug and reacquaint ourselves, though this time in person.

### **The Limitless Black Voice**

Kenneth is a classical singer who identifies “fully and completely now as African American.” The results from a genetic testing service show that the top three countries from where he shares highest levels of DNA were in Nigeria, Ghana, and the Ivory Coast. Inspired by these findings, he fashions his concert wear from fabrics from these countries. He says:

It’s sort of fun to shake it up. Status quo bores me. Wearing tuxedos bores me. It bores me. I see my people or colleagues in these gorgeous gowns in different colors and styles and shapes and it’s like I have to wear a penguin suit and look like every other man here. That bores me.

Even in the Western lyric repertoire that he performs, he refuses to be limited by Fach, the method of classifying vocal types according to range, weight, and color of voice.

If you say you’re a baritone then you’re supposed to do these roles and not the other ones. You say you’re a bass baritone, it’s the same way. And I can do some from both. So why be limited?

He wants to be pigeonholed in neither what he sings nor how he presents himself on stage.

As he matures, Kenneth is interested in how he can bring himself into his artistry and into the opera industry. He says that when he was a younger singer, he was just trying to do things in the “right” way. Now in his early 40s, he feels the more grounded in his singing technique than ever before, able to do things with his voice that he could not just a few years ago. Additionally, he can connect his experience of blackness to his



performance: “When you go through some shit in your life and you can relate more to your people, [...] then it’s like I can put some of that experience in.”

Reflection is an integral part of Kenneth’s artistic process, making empathetic connections with the characters that he is portraying: “I always try to imagine those shoes on my feet: how I would react, how I would respond, how grateful or not so grateful that I’ve not experienced that myself. Like, what does that look like in my world?” When he was in graduate school at the Hartt School of Music, his opera director would make each student do a character analysis with parallels of a day in the life of the character and the performer.

I do like to bring my own self into it. And again, that’s the fun part for me dramatically speaking because I don’t just like to sing the notes. I like to make it as real and human of an experience as possible. And if it’s being transmitted through me, then some of me is going to be in there, you know. When there are standing ovations at the end, then it’s like, “I guess they liked ... me.”

He relates this process to a recent performance of Berlioz’s large-scale choral symphony *Roméo et Juliette* (1839) in which he played the role of Friar Lawrence: “The way Kenny, black man, interprets that will bend a phrase differently than the way that I heard José van Dam do it in my listening.” He also relates the process to watching Audra McDonald as Billie Holiday in *Lady Day at Emerson’s Bar & Grill* (1986) on Broadway.

I was completely transfixed. Never seen anything like it in my life. And that level of artistry, that level of greatness is what I aspire to. I want to go so deep in a character that I can barely recognize me. But *me* is in there like Audra was in there. But Billie was in the room. *Billie was in the room.*

Kenneth listens to recordings of an array of singers for entertainment and educational purposes: “I listen to people who instinctively inspire me. [...] I like voices that are unique, special, in that within like one measure I know who it is without looking.” He says that he looks to singers like that for inspiration across genres: “I listen

to hip hop, R&B, Broadway tunes, and all the rest of it.” Whitney Houston is, in fact, his favorite singer.

When I ask him what an authentically black performance looks like he lists the artists Jennifer Holliday, Lillias White, Andre De Shields, and Ben Vereen and describes them as “unmistakenly, unapologetically black.” I ask him to explain his description to which he says:

They’re not trying to be anything other than themselves. They’re not trying to give you what they think your version of that role should be. “You’re going to get mine. You’re going to get “And I Am Telling You” [from *Dreamgirls*] my way every time. I don’t care who else does the role, when I do it, this is what you’re going to get. Leontyne Price gives that to me, too, whether it’s *Forza* or whether it’s, you know, whatever she [sings]. [...] You’re going get some Price. And you’re going to get Laurel, Mississippi in that performance.

In addition to personal situations, authenticity reflects one’s culture. He uses the performance of concertized spirituals as an example. He says that Price sings them “like she’s sitting at the foot of her grandmother in a rocking chair in Mississippi.” He also says of mezzo-soprano Florence Quivar’s album of black music, “The first note, I visualized plantations. The first note. It’s just something in the ingredients of her voice. That’s a black woman.”

Kenneth made his Broadway debut in *La Bohème* (1895) during the last three months of the run of the show. The company made him watch performances every day for a week before they put him in. The cast included multiple lead sopranos and multiple leading tenors so by the eighth show he thought he had seen all the combinations of the singers in the production. He goes on:

Well, the last show of the week came, and Mimi’s first entrance, she sings off stage, and she sings, “Scusi.” And I was like, “That’s a black girl.” But mind you, none of the other girls had been black thus far. There was an Asian Mimi, a Russian Mimi, and a Hispanic Mimi or a white American. [...] And I was like,

“That’s a black girl.” And then a black girl came onto the stage, my dear friend Janinah Burnett who is now Carlotta in *Phantom*.

He says that he can identify a black singer through the sound of the voice though he can pinpoint it more easily with women than men. He names mezzo soprano J’Nai Bridges and sopranos Karen Slack (who he has known since high school), and Julia Bullock (with whom he performed in John Adams’s *Girls of the Golden West* (2017) at San Francisco Opera).

Kenneth describes the black voice as *limitless*. He refers not only to range but also to a distinctive timbre.

Look at Marian Anderson. She labeled herself as a contralto. But she had high C’s, low C’s, and everything in between. Jessye Norman can sing everything, anything. Leontyne Price can sing anything. Robert McFerrin, Sr., one of the greatest. Ben Holt. These men had these low notes, high notes, big notes, small notes, [...] Grace Bumbry and Shirley Verrett, too. Incredible examples of having an amazing career as a soprano and an amazing career as a mezzo-soprano.

Blackness is a layer to one’s artistry, not affecting how one uses technique: “Being able to put some African-ness, some blackness onto that is fun actually. It’s like you get to play around with it.” As such, the singer can go back and forth between genres and composers. For him, black singers can perform a wide range of musical styles seemingly without vocal limitations due to having access to wide ranges and vocal colors innate to black singers.

Kenneth defines the vocal quality that he uses when singing black roles as *comfortable*, *authentic*, and *natural*. When he catches himself using vocalisms that align with black aesthetics in Western lyric repertoire, he knows the vocal sound is in relationship to his interpretation of the text. Though he does not sing gospel music himself, he grew up in the church and still relates to the music “on a very visceral level.”

But even when he sings pop style musical theatre, he applies a Western classical approach, pointing to soprano Renée Fleming's (2004) description of singing for the stage as a "cultivated scream" (*Inner Voice*, p. 40). He says, "With the limitless black throat, I can make it sound like whatever I want without hurting myself."

For the last two years, Kenneth has been studying with Gregory Lamar, the first African American voice teacher he has ever had. The first session lasted for two hours; the first half hour was about getting to know each other and developing a vocal language that they both understood. He continues, "And we connected being African American men." Right away, Lamar understood the ingredients of Kenneth's voice as a black voice, an experience Kenneth had never had previously: "He understood where I was coming from. He understood exactly what I needed." Kenneth says that teachers may not know what to do with the dark sound associated with a black voice: "If your voice is darker in color, they either want to push it down in Fach or push it out and try to make it bigger." Lamar was able to break down vocal technique in a language that Kenneth could understand, "Finally, it was like, 'Wow.'"

### **Black Male Idols and Legends and Mentors**

Two roles that Kenneth uses to demonstrate his vocalism are Stephen Kumalo in Weill's *Lost in the Stars* (1949), which he performed in 2018 at Union Avenue Opera in St. Louis, and the title character in *Porgy and Bess*, which he has performed over 100 times, most recently in 2016 at Utah Festival Opera. He attests that the individual roles carry different vocal demands. For him, Weill's score is filled with traditional Broadway melodic lines with an intimation of South African culture. Gershwin's is more operatic, "It's like mushing together spirituals and Wagner." Kenneth says that in the role of Porgy

the singer requires a breadth of vocal demands, “You have to have beautiful lyricism for ‘Bess, you is my woman’ and you have to be able to think in a declamatory way and then in a heroic way at the end.” The singer must balance the ideals of legato within the Western lyric singing tradition with an expression of blackness integral to the narratives.

Kenneth points to Todd Duncan who originated both roles as an inspiration.

Kenneth: Can I tell you how much of a badass Todd Duncan is? So in my research for both *Porgy* and *Lost in the Stars*, Porgy, he was asked to come to Denmark to sing it with the Danish people. The Danish people had mounted *Porgy and Bess* in retaliation to the Nazis. The Nazis said, “If you do this piece again, we will attack you.” And they were like, “Bring it on.” They called Todd Duncan and said, “Will you come and sing it with us?” And he was hesitant at first. Then he went over and he observed them. He did it. He sang in English. They sang in Danish. Yep. And that was in the 30s. And then it was done again in Denmark in the 70s. And then I was the next one to do it in 2014.

Michael: Wow.

Kenneth: Yeah. 16 performances I did. Sold out all of them. It was insane but amazing. But Todd Duncan with *Lost in the Stars*, he was doing it in Virginia on a tour and they took him to the theatre. And he said, “Who sits up there?” That’s where they had the blacks. He said, “Take me up there.” They took him and he said he had to squeeze through a back door, tiny. And went up there and he said, “I will not sing. Unless my people can sit anywhere they want. And that means down there.” They said, “Well, we have a contract and you have to sing.” “Sue me. But there will not be a show if my people have to sit up here.” And that theatre was desegregated that night. And it has remained so until today.

Kenneth holds a list of “idols and legends and mentors” who are African American men, both historical and personal: “These men are—they’re everything to me. Everything to me.”

Kenneth communicates that he received training and grooming by principal artists while in his 20s singing comprimario roles:

[I would] go into rehearsals that I wasn’t called for just to watch not only how they worked but how they were in relationship with the conductor, with the director, with the artistic director, with the stage management. How they navigated getting what they needed and the way they did it.

He identifies baritone Mark Rucker as a mentor from when he was in the Young Artist Program at Connecticut Opera. Rucker was a frequent artist at the company, performing major roles in Verdian repertoire. Between performances, Rucker, alongside his wife Sadie who is a pianist, would coach him on his repertoire free of charge.

Kenneth names four baritones in particular who have inspired him: Alvy Powell, Arthur Woodley, Donnie Ray Albert, and Gordon Hawkins. The first three shared the role of Porgy in a production at the Bregenz Festival 1997 in which Kenneth had his first job in Europe in the chorus. During that time, he was able to connect with each of them on their processes:

I got to have lunch with them and dinner with them and private coachings with them. And to talk to them, “How do you do this? How do you manage this? And the physicality of it? And the speech of it? And your approach to the singing of it? And what parts of it are difficult for you?” And they all had some similar answers but a lot more different answers. And it was amazing.

When Kenneth got his first offer to play Porgy, he contacted Powell, who has performed the role over 2,000 times, in addition to the leads from the Bregenz production. He felt like he needed permission from the four of them before he could take on the role, like a rite of passage. Emotion wells up in his voice when he tells me, “[Arthur] said to me, ‘I’m not singing Porgy anymore. I’m glad it’s in your hands.’ And for somebody like that. I was [...] he is everything to me.” Woodley had such an effect on Kenneth that he still remembers what Woodley was wearing when they met: “Linen pants and a beautiful linen shirt. No shoes.”

Kenneth received practical information from the four legends. For example, Powell advised him on the types of knee pads he would need to sustain being on his knees for a three-hour show. Whenever possible, Kenneth insists on playing the role the

traditional way on his knees, rather than modifying the staging with a crutch. His decision emerges from his desire to have an authentic representation of the character grounded in information about Samuel Smalls, the real person on whom the character of Porgy is based: “When I was in South Carolina I went to his grave site, Porgy’s grave site. And I saw some actual photos of what he looked like in his cart with his goat. And I said that’s where I want to stay.” When he performed the role at Opera Memphis, director Larry Marshall gave him the same advice that he gave Powell: in order to avoid getting tired, the singer performing Porgy must go into the performance knowing that being on the knees is the reality of the character. Kenneth says:

If I’m on my knees and I’m in the show and I’m like, “Shit, I’m on my knees,” then I’m tired. Then there are times where I forget I’m on my knees and I’m just like, “Oh, I can do this again.”

He attests that his portrayal of the role is an amalgamation of the information he received from the four baritones and his own experience. At this writing, he has performed the role over 100 times in twenty different states and seven countries.

### **I Loves You, Porgy**

The video that we watch together is the duet “I loves you, Porgy” from a 2011 production of *Porgy and Bess* with the Lexington Opera Society (now called Opera Lex) through the University of Kentucky Opera Theatre.



*Figure 11* “I loves you, Porgy” (Gershwin) performed by Kenneth Overton and Angela Brown.

The production directed by Lemuel Wade featured a rear projection system developed by the University of Kentucky College of Engineering called SCRIBE (Self-Contained Rapidly Integratable Background Environment) (Wells & Hale, 2011). Because the performances extended over two weekends, Kenneth alternated with another baritone while three sopranos shared the role of Bess: “Because they were all different physically, they were all different age-wise and size-wise. There was a lot of catering to, ‘Well, honey, I can’t put my leg up there so we can’t do this.’” This video features him with Angela Brown, who he says was the most physical of the three.

The plot of the opera centers around Porgy and his attempts to rescue Bess from her violent, possessive lover Crown. After committing murder, Crown goes on the lam to escape the police. When he returns to retrieve Bess, she refuses to go with him since she has become involved with Porgy. Crown retaliates by sexually assaulting her, leaving her in the woods, and threatening to come back again to take her away. Bess finds her way back to the community, but experiences fever hallucinations after being lost in the woods for a week. According to André (2016), “after the scene with Crown on Kittiwah Island, Bess is never quite the same, as her spirit has been broken” (p. 113). In this scene, Bess emerges from her week-long, fever-induced psychosis as a different person than any time she has been seen thus far in the opera: first as a drug-addled Jezebel, then as a reformed respectable lady, now as a broken soul in need of salvation.

The scene begins with Porgy invoking a prayer to God. Seemingly, Bess’s fever has broken, and she says that she needs fresh air. Porgy reveals that he knows that she was with Crown. Bess tells Porgy that Crown is coming back for her and that she is



supposed to go with him. Starr (1984) describes the recitative throughout the opera as “potential song, a musical language that grows into song with considerable ease and smoothness whenever the drama renders it appropriate or necessary” (p. 33). The lyrical phrases are interspersed with text with ghost notes, musical notes with rhythmic values but no pitches. The tension between sung and spoken sounds becomes heightened as the two characters struggle to find common ground. Kenneth says:

See, it's the stuff that's not the duet part that I love the most because that's where the drama is, that's where the movement is, the dialogue moves there. Technically, too, these are spots where you could rest. That was one of the things that Alvy taught me -- Alvy and Arthur-- because it depends on who your Bess is that really dictates how much you have to work in a night. Find spots where you can vocally rest and fill that vocal rest with drama. This is one of those moments where you can-- because the orchestration is not very big when you're singing and so you can have these dramatic outbursts over, a lot of time, silence or minimal orchestration.

The duet proper begins with Bess declaring that she wants to stay with Porgy but knows that Crown has a hold over her that she cannot fight. Bess's soaring vocal line denotes the level of her sincerity. Bess is self-aware enough to know that “she is caught between a primarily sexual and a very idealistic love relationship” with Crown and Porgy respectively (Starr, 1984, p. 28). She asserts that she cannot resolve the situation herself and that Porgy must act accordingly. Kenneth says that this is his favorite moment in the opera:

Because he forces her to make a decision. No more back and forth, no more straddling the fence. “Either you'll be here or you've got to go. If you're going to be here, I can work with that. We can fix that and I have the solution to that. If you're not, I can't open my heart up to you because I've never opened it to anybody. So you've got to go and I'll go back to my hardened heart. But if you're going to stay, let's do it. I will fight for you against not only Crown, but the rest of this community.” For me, it's just the turning point in their relationship. It's the first time they both used the word *love* in the whole opera.

In this moment, the audience sees that Porgy is also not quite the same: “the gentle, good-hearted beggar, through the intensity of his love, paradoxically becomes capable of murder” (Starr, p. 28).

I mention how impressed I am with how active Kenneth is while performing the role on his knees. When he performs the role, he travels with the multiple pads that Powell encouraged him to use. He also tells me about his most recent performance as Porgy with the Utah Festival Opera and Musical Theatre in 2016 where director Daniel Helfgot asked for extreme physicality:

Daniel had me, before the fight to kill Crown, climb up the spiral staircase on my knees to the roof of the house. Crawl across a bridge to the roof of another house. Jump from the roof of the house on to Crown’s shoulders and wrestle him to the ground and kill him. Eight performances. I was up for it. I was like, “Let’s do it.”

The libretto of the opera mentions that although Porgy has limited use of his legs, he has powerful upper body strength.

Porgy and Bess both share outsider statuses – hers from her sullied past, his from his physical idiosyncrasies – and they realize that they only have each other on whom to rely. André (2012) writes that, “in traditional opera, only people who are truly in love can sing that passionately to each other” (p. 11). The musical continuity “supplies the emotional information missing from the text” (Grant, 2004, p. 113). Kenneth says, “This duet usually makes me cry in the show, it’s that visceral.” The libretto is written in a colloquial style, mimicking AAVE; the rhapsodic composition of the vocal lines and the orchestration points to the fervor of the connection between them. The mimetic black English Signifies nuanced significance for each of the characters, and the complexity of the musical score supports the dynamism of a plurality of meanings (Gates, 1988/ 2013).

Instead of being in a world of opposing binaries, the synergy of the “high” and “low” aspects of expression supports the intense drama of the given circumstance.

### **Seeing and Being Seen on the Opera Stage**

Early in his career, Kenneth was dissuaded from doing the role of Porgy: “‘It’ll ruin your voice. It’ll pigeonhole you. You won’t get asked to do anything else.’” He goes on to say, “Porgy bought my condo.” The role opened many professional doors to him. He can now at a place in his career where he does not feel obliged to take it if he does not want. He had received a call from the Metropolitan Opera for their production of *Porgy and Bess* opening the 2019/2020 season; however, the offer was for a “substandard fee” to understudy a comprimario role that he had performed 10 years earlier at the San Francisco Opera:

There are offers that came in, and my manager and I, we had a big conversation. If there’s nothing else on the table that comes along with the offer, thank you but no thank you. It happened with the Met and I can speak freely I’m not afraid to talk about that. I did not audition for it. They came to my agents and made the offer. The offer was beneath what I thought I deserved. And we said, “Thank you but no thank you.”

He says that when he was in his 20s, one of his major goals was to sing at the Met. But a point came where he decided not to be fixated on performing in that house. He did make the hard decision to turn down the contract because he did not want to make his debut there in that opera: “I know so many singers who sang there in the last production in the 80s that have never been back. And I told my agents I didn’t want to be a statistic, that statistic.”

As pertaining to black roles, he has a policy for himself to balance those with roles from standard repertoire: “You’re not going to *Porgy* me to death. You’re just not. You’re not going to *Show Boat* me to death. You’re not going to *Ragtime* me to death.”

He believes that if an opera company wants black people to come to their performances, they need to see black performers on the stage in both black and standard repertoire.

Whenever I do *Porgy* or *Ragtime* or *Showboat* or *Lost in the Stars*, “Oh, Kenneth,” the media department or the development department, “Would you mind coming to speak at this black organization or this black luncheon or this church or this [...]”

And I say, “Well, why don’t you ask me to do that when I’m here to sing Sharpless [from *Madama Butterfly*], when I’m here singing *Traviata*. I want black people to see me do that, too.”

He points to San Francisco Opera, where he is currently preparing to perform in their production of *Billy Budd* (1951), as a company making an effort to increase their inclusive practices. A Department of Diversity, Equity and Community has been established to demonstrate the institution’s, “commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) both within the organization and externally” (San Francisco Opera, 2019). Kenneth says, “I think the performing arts organizations should look like the people that they serve, the communities that they serve.”

Kenneth does believe that opera companies should expand their palettes of operatic offerings because audiences want to see shows that feature black artists:

New works by black composers starring black people with black subject matter with a black choreographer. We need black directors, we need black conductors, black scenic design people. We need us on the production team calling the shots. That’s what’s going to change the industry.

He mentions the success of *Fire Shut Up In My Bones* at Opera Theatre of St. Louis. He also discusses *Blue* (2019), the opera by Jeanine Tesori and Tazewell Thompson that premiered at Glimmerglass Opera summer of 2019. The story was inspired by the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014 which made national headlines. Kenneth explains, “Artists are doing what’s happening in the times.

And it's resonating with people. It's the show that's most sold out in that whole season.

The data is there. You know? It's there." He points to the aesthetics of black identity and cultural expression during the Harlem Renaissance:

The Harlem Renaissance period, they sang their stories. They wrote their stories. They wrote what was going on at the time. You know, Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes and all these people, they wrote about what was going on. And I think we have to get back to that.

In addition to seeing themselves on stage, Kenneth says, black artists need to be respected by the companies for which they work. He attests that a singer must know their worth and must be willing to live with the outcome of decisions that they make:

And as a black man, I have to say, "Do better by me or I'm not coming. Offer me better. Do better." And I'm not afraid to say, "Thank you but no thank you." I'm not afraid to say, "That amount is not good enough. Try again." Because no company is going to give you their highest for the first time around. But you have to be bold enough to ask for what you want. All they can do is say, "No," or meet you in the middle. But it will be better than when they came. So take the risk. Put it out there.

He attests that black artists deserve the same amount of respect as their white counterparts, including those whose actions might be excused because of their star status. At this writing, Russian soprano Anna Netrebko has recently sparked controversy for allegedly being racially insensitive in using dark body make up in her portrayal of the role of Aida in multiple productions around the world. Kenneth states that her make up does not take away from the issues that opera houses have when putting make up and lighting on people of color:

She said, "I want to darken," Go ahead, girl. I don't care. I have bigger fish to fry because whether you darken or not, you are getting hired. You're going to work. I'm trying to fight for the folk that don't have it that easy.

## Reaching back

Kenneth says that he feels the weight on his shoulders to work for a company or an orchestra not in a black show, being one of few or no other black people in the room: “People are watching you. People are listening to you with ears that are way more critical than [toward] everyone else.” Feeling that what he does on that job will affect every other person of color coming behind him, he acknowledges the responsibility he feels to show up to the gig completely prepared and to be a good colleague. He says that he senses that he has another ten years’ worth of “selfish singing” before he goes more deeply into artistic administration: “I think by me singing more and singing in bigger places and better places and with higher profiles, I can use that for my other agendas.”

One of his goals as an arts administrator is to fix the opera industry from the inside out in order to be more hospitable to persons of color. Kenneth is a founding member of Opera Noire of New York, a performing and networking resource for African American opera artists. He fears that *diversity* is becoming a buzzword which ultimately lumps all non-white singers into one category without examining the issues that are specific to each specific group:

We all have different issues that need to be addressed differently. And so, the industry at large has to learn how to deal with all of these different groups and not to lump them under the umbrella of *people of color*.

Another future goal might be to build a foundation to start a management company for artists of color. He argues that the percentage of black singers that have managers is significantly lower than their white counterparts: “It’s a chain reaction. You don’t have a manager, the company is not going to hear you. The company doesn’t hear you, you can’t get a job. Can’t get a job, you’re not onstage and nobody sees you.” To him,

*representation* in the occupational sense is important: “We’ve got to think bigger and more broad,” he says.

Kenneth often receives messages from young singers to discuss the opera industry. He feels responsible to take the time to talk to them because the same opportunity was afforded to him when he started out. The conductor Willie Anthony Waters said to him that Marian Anderson opened the doors for black singers and Leontyne Price kicked them down so that Kenneth could walk through easier than they did; Waters then tasked him to keep that door open and knocked down. Kenneth is committed to protecting and respecting the legacy of the black artists who have inspired him and to pass on the history to the artists who are rising up. Part of his mission in addition to being a great singing actor is being an activist within the industry: “The day that I stop fighting for people of color is the day that I’m done. And I’m nowhere near done. I’m just getting started really.”

### **Julia Bullock: Unmasking Being**

*I have an authentic voice because this is who I am.*

Social consciousness is an integral part to Julia Bullock’s flourishing career. In addition to singing in opera houses around the world, Julia is in demand as an artistic curator at such venues as the Metropolitan Museum and the San Francisco Symphony. She is a vocalist whose practice is rooted in western classical training. She studied at the Eastman School of Music, Bard College, and the Juilliard School. European classical music offered a pathway of expression with material that was broad enough with which she could wrestle. However, classical music has never been her only means of

performance. In her concert work, she has included styles informed by jazz and blues. For her, anchoring her singing in operatic technique gives her the means by which she can sing a range of styles for personal expression:

Following any discipline through, I think, if you take it out whatever it is, whatever you choose very seriously, if the goal is just to get to more liberation within yourself, you can express yourself as you're wanting to.

She bases her singing around the balance, projection, and resonance associated with western lyric singing: "Then if I can start from there, and then bloom into it, bloom out of it, that's right. I know that I'm going the right way."

### **Freedom to risk**

When I meet her in the Preston Restaurant at the St. Louis Chase Park Plaza Hotel, I spot her distinctive crown of black curls that spiral toward the sky. I mention that I admire that she wears her natural hair in character-driven performances as well as in her concert work. She responds:

I was not on a crusade in any way of taking on black repertoire or the need to throw the shit in people's faces. It was really about how I was personally really struggling with this. I was really drawn to the music and I just, I needed to, in order to keep going, I needed to put it on stage and I needed to sing about it.

She acknowledges that she has gotten some jobs because of how she looks: "When they watch me, I think, can also feel like I look very much a chameleon. They don't quite know where to place me quickly." She identifies as being of mixed heritage – her mother is white and her father, who died when she was a child, was black: "I think because I have had to be so good at shape-shifting, as most of black people are. But I got very good at being a chameleon." She uses her position as an international opera star and her artistic vision to engage in conversation about "ideas of identity, objectification, and history" (Metropolitan Museum, n.d.).



She recounts for me a time that she was performing in a concert and was asked to sing a song with lyrics that she did not feel comfortable performing. A younger singer who was a person of color asked her how she navigates environments in which she is being asked to do something that she does not want to do or asked to use her voice in a certain way that she does not want. She says that her response was:

Well, some of it is because I know this person personally. We've worked together on several things. I'm also in a place in my career where I feel like I can be honest with him and realize that I also have a persona, I guess, or I have an aesthetic as Julia Bullock that I don't want to stray from. I feel like I'm beginning to define that better and better and I don't want to start doing things that are confusing for myself or for the audience.

When describing the story to her sister, her sister's response took her aback, "'Julia, did it ever occur to you that the reason why you know how to navigate these spaces and you're not so afraid to do it was because of your white adjacent privilege?'" Julia then realized that the younger singer was really asking, "How do you feel so empowered?" She responded to him later via email that because she was raised by a white mother in a white environment, she has been able not to shy away from white people in a place of power when she is uncomfortable. She does admit, however, to feeling uncomfortable being the only person of color in a white space. She tells me that she would like to figure out her way of navigating white spaces: "I don't know if there is a technique for it, but it would be cool even to start conversations about it."

Julia meets me in her hometown of St. Louis, MO where she is performing in *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* along with Karen Slack (see p. 70). She says that she began formal dance training at the age of five and began choreographing in high school: "That was a huge part of my life and I'm so glad I had that training. I wasn't expecting to be able to use it so much going into this field, but it's great." She considers the entire body as an

expressive tool in her performance. In *Fire*, Julia plays a dual role called Destiny and Loneliness, the personification of the leading character's actions and of his emotional state. Julia joins the dance ensemble in a dreamlike sequence that resembles the bending and swaying of trees and signifies the lead character's striving to break the pattern of violence that he experiences in the opera.

In finding new ways to break apart musical and theatrical experiences, Julia has found a freedom to risk. When she was in school and starting her career, she “was scared of being looked at in an animalistic way.” She says that St. Louis was a racist environment in which to grow up, a place where she would be “praised for not acting like a black person” and have her looks compared to a monkey. She thinks she had an identity crisis over the issue of being a woman of color when she was entering the classical music world.

That frightened the fuck out of me getting on stage in this proscenium where I was asking people to look at me in a caged environment. [...] Well, I was worried about looking dignified at all times – and this is something also to do, I think, with being a woman as well.

Instead of shying away from addressing the questions that plagued her, she chose to delve into her internal struggles with her musicking. Singing about it was her way of dealing with it, which, she says “is so cool looking back on that.”

When she was 20 years old, Julia had sought treatment for drug use. She indicates that rehabilitation helped her understand her underlying levels of depression and her ways of coping. When she had gone back to start her junior year of university, she was in a hyper-conscious state of self-examination about how she allowed life to impact her. She recalls in class, being guided through a Method acting exercise where she was using her imagination to create scenarios in her head. She says, “It was really revealing to me. I

was like, ‘Actually, if I can just be guided through thought or whatever, actually, if I’m allowing myself to just take things in.’ I am deeply impacted by the world.”

Julia tells me about an experience on tour with a production of the *Magic Flute* directed by theatre artist Peter Brook: “One thing he said to us in rehearsal was there’s only one bad word in theatre, and that was *theatrical*.” She goes on:

What I learned in the process is, it’s okay to actually just let yourself be observed. You don’t need to do anything. You can just be on stage and think. That’s plenty. You can, as long as those thoughts actually register on your face, register in your body and whatever feelings you’re having, you can choose to amplify them if you want, but you also don’t have to. It’s okay to just let yourself, as long as you are conscious of what you’re doing and you know what the piece is about, and you know where you want to say it.

Successful acting for her is when a performer allows themselves space just to think on stage and let themselves be observed.

### **Learning Through Listening**

Part of Julia’s musical preparation includes speaking through the text like how she would recite it on stage, “Regardless of the repertoire, it’s the same: I’m trying to make my peace with the lyrics.” In doing so, she can find her take on the material:

Because if I speak through that text in my own pacing, like Julia Bullock’s pacing of preparing a poem or whatever, and this is the moment where I have the emotional break, you practice in also the emotional rhythm, I guess I would call it, or the timing because you’re exercising this emotional muscle in time.

She explains that she memorizes and speaks the text independently from the score. Then she prepares just the music, often with octave displacement, to understand where the composer has put stress and importance “not taking anything for granted and not making any assumptions about anything.” As such, she is able to answer for herself any questions about ideas about which she may feel conflicted or to wade through opaque language:

“You can ask the questions of other people around you, but nobody is just going to provide [answers] for you necessarily.”

In addition to the score and libretto, Julia performs extensive research in order to ground herself in the work she is doing. She has worry that she cannot give as complete a performance if she does not have enough information or knowledge about the material. Part of her research practice includes listening to historical recordings. When preparing for *Fire*, she had listened to Blanchard’s film scores and had watched clips from his first opera. Through online platforms like Spotify and YouTube, she had discovered for herself singers like Alberta Hunter and Lovie Austin when preparing blues music. She finds merit in learning through mimicry. She says that she has found liberty in her performance style by trying to figure out how other people sing and trying to sound like them.

I listened to hundreds of recordings of the material at that time mostly just trying to listen to the voices because it’s more about styling. It’s not about having a black enough voice. It’s like, what is the styling of this rep, and then how do I feel that that styling is settled in my body? How can I bring all of my analytical self aboard into that material which then no longer, like the issue of a caricature, is no longer relevant?

Learning through the process of sounding like someone else offers an insight to the techniques that the other singer employs: “Then you eventually find your own style, your own aesthetic.” For her, “You cannot ever sound like that specific voice because they’re singing as only they can sing. And that’s how you know that’s an extraordinary artist. That’s an extraordinary vocalist.”

I ask her if she works on non-classical techniques with a voice teacher. She responds that she works with vocal coaches in which she has conversation about the material with them. Also, when on the road, she will have sessions with singers whose

singing she admires. She attests, “I’ve learned some just incredible tools that way.” She also had several lessons with teacher Patricia McCaffrey because multiple singers with whom she has been on the road and has admired their singing have studied with her:

One thing that she made very clear to me, it’s you have to root yourself in your chest. You need to have, she calls it, a thread of chest. [...] This idea of starting with your voice, whatever natural place it sits, wherever it is but actually grounding in your chest voice, and then almost yodeling up to having the same energy and opening and yodeling up into your head voice. It’s very exciting.

She says that she is no longer “precious” with her voice and that preparing black material has informed her classical work. Finding her voice in that repertoire helped unlock parts of her instrument in classical repertoires for other ways of expression. She feels an unleashing of the voice that must be reflected in her face, in her eyes, and with her body: “I don’t feel like I’m actually delivering what the material is unless I do that.”

### **Vocal Sound as Expression of the Self**

In defining the vocal quality that she employs in pieces exploring black themes, Julia uses the terms *complete*, *immediate*, *adventurous*, *risk-taking*, *vulnerable*, *electric*, *thrilling*, and *revealing*. She says:

I will say in the greatest voices of black singers, regardless of the genre, it does feel there’s just a full body resonance happening, and they might shift from using their full sound to just a stream of sound, tiny little stream of sound. That’s *complete* was the first word that I used because it does just feel complete.

The thing of *immediacy* and no hesitation, again, it’s not like it’s not thoughtful, because it is. It’s just the thought is racing so far ahead and the direction is so clear in front and you actually you see it in eyes and you feel it physically in the sound and how it resonates – like when you’re listening to another voice, how it resonates with your body.

She says that she would like to have more technical training in non-classical vocal styles, with breath beneath the singing and with a tone rooted in the chest voice without an obscured sound.

She believes that no uniformity exists within the black American experience. Relatedly, what one interprets in a black vocalist's sound is an expression of their life world. When discussing the idea of authentic black expression, Julia becomes animated: "The idea of authentic black expression or authentic black experience, this is so fucking stupid to me because if you identify as black in any capacity, that is an authentic experience." For her, authentic expression is that of a person in and of itself:

I don't believe in that language in that way of describing any performance by a human being who is offering themselves up. I can't because when I feel when I have given some of my best performances, I'm not thinking about being a black person and I'm not thinking about being a woman. I'm not thinking about those ways that I have to be identified because the amount of energy, and focus, and intent it's not about beyond being a human being, but it's like it is my optimal human self which does not need to-- I don't need descriptive words.

She experiences the moment-to-moment occurrences of performance which is about taking hold rather than as a direct expression of her ethnic or gender identity. However, the exploration of her black heritage and culture, she says, has allowed her to be simply a human being on stage:

When I started taking ownership of singing with all of my voice and all of my person, and all of my body on stage. I also didn't give a shit about how I came across, whether it was in that repertoire or in classical music. In fact, I was excited.

To her, performance is a kind of unmasking and exposing of herself by her own choice.

### **Perle Noire: Meditations for Joséphine**

In 2014, Julia embarked on a debut recital tour, a rite of passage for singers in the midst of launching international careers which gives audiences the opportunity to experience them in intimate settings. The second half of her program looked at the marginalization and objectification of black women, beginning with songs associated with the American-born entertainer, French Resistance agent, and Civil Rights activist

Josephine Baker. Julia received a call from director Peter Sellars interested in further exploring the subject matter through the lens of Baker. Poet Claudia Rankine and composer Tyshawn Sorey (both MacArthur Fellows) were brought onto the project. Julia says, “[Rankine] sent us the first poem intact. In the original form, I think it’s extraordinary and honestly, in some ways it was almost all that needed to be said.” In trying to create an evening-length piece, Julia had to edit and re-order the texts written by Rankine.

Julia and Sorey spent hours together in a café reading translations of lyrics from Baker’s discography and listening to recordings in order to pick the songs. Seven themes emerged and Sorey picked one song from each category. Julia wanted to give Baker the opportunity to sing blues, so she made sure the song, “C’est lui” (1934) was on the program. She also wanted to include a song titled, “Terre sèche: Negro spiritual” (1954) though the original song does not include an actual spiritual. She says:

I brought this book of slave songs that were released, this anthology that was released just after the Civil War. I said, “Do you mind if I sing this one song and this piece in the midst of one of these [singing].” He was like, “Yes, I think it’s a great idea. Can I have that?” He just took the book of 160 some songs. I had marked through the songs that I liked the most. I was like, “Please, if there’s more things you want to add in.” The next day he had composed two or three of the spirituals to be inserted into, “Terre sèche.”

Sorey arranged the music to be performed with the International Contemporary Ensemble with soundscapes that tap into primal emotions, spikey jazz rhythms, and ethereal lyricism.

The first presentation was a workshop presented at the Ojai Music Festival in 2016. Sorey had finished the score two days before they had to be in Ojai, California. Rankine gave out the final drafts of all the poems the day of the first run through of the

whole show. Julia was making edits despite opening the entire festival with a totally different one-woman show. She says, “It’s a real collaboration and a real process.” As such, she has been able to work alongside the even more established artists in their own methods and practices, “Just as I have a process and not all of it’s pretty and some of does not sound good all the time, you work up to the product you give out, right? I was seeing these ‘geniuses’ all in process.” They have subsequently performed the show at Oberon, the second stage of the American Repertory Theatre, the video of which Julia and I watch together, as well as on the Grand Staircase of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. At this writing, the next production will happen at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris.

A few days before our conversation, Julia had shared with me raw footage from a multicamera shoot that would be edited together later. Upon watching it, I am struck by the mood of the piece. She tells me that she offered this video for our discussion because, “This has other more complicated things I think associated with when thinking about identity and ‘blackness.’” But for me, it is more so a provocative investigation of the complexity of intersectionality. This is not a biography to celebrate the cultivated glamorous life of its subject. Instead, through the tonal world, rich language, and forceful movement, the performance is ignited by the friction between personal struggles and public façade. The audience is shown effects of racism and sexism on a woman of color in the caged environment of the entertainment industry. Furthermore, it is difficult to tell where Baker ends and Julia begins. She tells me, “I wanted somebody coming to the show to not have to know anything about Baker and just be like, ‘Is this Julia Bullock speaking or is it somebody else?’” Again, she is addressing lingering questions about blackness and woman-ness through the presence of her performance.



We talk about her rendition of Baker's song from 1932 "Si j'étais blanche" ("If I were white"). Baker's recording is in a quick swing rhythm with her clearly enunciated soprano floating over the rhythmic stride piano. Julia declares:

I was in shock the first time that I heard a recording on Spotify. I was like, "Wait, what did she say?" [laughs] I almost couldn't believe it wasn't censored. But because it was done with this joking fashion poking fun of herself. [sings] Whereas the words are so painful, And if you're a black person, they are particularly painful. Whether up-tempo or not, it would be painful.

For the modern audience to draw connections to the text and leave space for them to process it, Sorey maneuvers sounds which, to me, lives somewhere between free jazz and aleatoric Western art music. Julia explains that Sorey's compositional style is informed by a range of influences from 20th-century European composers to improvisatory jazz players. Julia's vocal is much more deliberate and unsettled than that of Baker's. Sorey has recomposed the melody to inflect the intention of the song within the context of this performance. The surging sonic texture signifies the pain and the tension around being a black entity in a white space.

The soundscape continues after the song itself has finished, leaving Julia to stand in the mood of the moment. I ask her about her process of holding space for periods of time in a piece like this. She claims that she does as much participating through listening as contributing with her voice or body. She uses the imagery of filling space with her energy from the inside extending outward, rather than trying to draw the audience in. She had surprised herself in the performance on the video that she had an emotional breakdown:

I feel a lot of energy underneath, but actually just crying in the middle of that song, which I don't mind doing in public at all, and then having to pull myself together, but as Julia Bullock – because it's not about being the only black person

in the world, and still, there's so many spaces now we walk into the entertainment business and I'm the only black person there.

She says that in performance she thinks quickly about where she wants to go, but she can hardly keep up with where her body wants to take her. The experience is a channel through which she can follow.

Later in the piece is a moment where out of the dissonant texture emerges a boogie woogie blues pattern in the left hand of the piano. This is the transition into "C'est lui." I tell Julia that I notice that her performance becomes more energized in that moment. She responds, "I'm excited to sing blues finally. [laughs] I love singing with that part of my voice, because it's not something I felt comfortable, or I actually was not given permission, to do."

In the video, her voice drops into a warm speaking, belting sound:

There was a time when I sang this early on where I would really sing full-throated through the whole thing. For this performance, for whatever reason, it was such a small space. I was just like, "I'm just going to talk." [...] It's like I'm just playing still, and just figuring out what is the most effective way to get the point across.

In this moment, she gets to explore "beautiful black sensuality." She states,

I just I feel like I'm just slicing through space with a knife and letting the most sensual parts of myself come out: the most awesome, just the most anger, and just raw sex. As a soprano also, it's so rare that you get to do that.

For her, the song also has another side:

This song is about – I feel like cursing like, "Yes, he's got all the shit, and I have shit too. But I'm willing to go through it with him because I've just got to have it. I also know he just has to have me." It's bitter and fabulous.

She says that in analyzing the lyrics, she can bring a depth to the repertoire. Additionally, she settles the musical styling in her body which dissipates any issue of caricature or playing a stereotype for a white audience.

The spoken text adjacent to “C’est lui” is as follows:

Who do you see?

I am no more primal than Princess Grace. But if representing her fantasy of a savage, if being a monkey, if wearing a banana skirt and grinning will give me access to all that she had then I will perform that.

Stereotype me as glamorous, stereotype me as greedy, stereotype me as unsatisfied, stereotype me as icon, and stereotype me as Josephine Baker.

Why is it that onto every racialized projection, it is my image that must be projected?

Who do you see? (Rankine, 2016).

Julia speaks these words without underscoring. Her declamation is assured as she engages with the audience in the eyes. She seems to be challenging their assumptions about glamour and savagery in relationship to blackness. She says that she had superintended the questions that she wanted to be asked by the audience or wanted the audience to think about. At the end of the poem, Sorey begins playing a complex polyrhythmic sequence on the drums which begins section of a solo dance. The questions that the poem asks lead into the movement sequence:

It was trying to ask before going into this dance that is going to give every stereotype that I have of myself, Julia Bullock was afraid of anyone ever viewing me as. I just asked, I just said like, “Is what is this what I need to do in order to be successful?”

She says in that sequence she is unclear where is the delineation between the character of Baker and herself, “I don’t know if it needs to be. I actually don’t think it should be.

Decidedly that’s what’s making the piece knock some people sideways.”

In the video, Julia paces like a lioness in a cage. She takes off her shoes, then takes off her jacket, only sheer fabric covering her upper body. As she strikes a dynamic pose with arms and legs splayed and bent, upper body extended from the waist to be parallel to the ground, the drumming stops. She begins to dance to the sound of her own voice making percussive vocables. She says, “The importance of doing it in silence for me is critical because it’s about agency, and to have a rhythm section of underneath you means that my body has to go with it.” This is a deconstructed Charleston, the familiar fast steps of kicking the feet forward and behind, interspersed with moments of self-reflection and flashes of outward rage. In an instant the sound of her grunting stops, and facing the audience with exposed breasts, she collapses her face and body into an aggressive monkey pose. She says that she gets excited at making distorted shapes with her body:

I’m taking ownership of a grotesque human being through talking about my blackness because that’s where it felt I was the most afraid to do it. How fucking great to finally be able to do it! As a person, as a woman also, I know how ugly it is.

Anger brims under the surface as she launches the dance into the audience. She says, “I know that it is terrifying to watch. I know it’s painful also to watch. It is painful to dance because I get exhilarated. But it is so empowering to be able to do that for myself now.”

### **Taylor Iman Jones: Voicing Her Experience**

*Life is short so the least I can do is sing and dance while I’m here.*

Like many young actors, Taylor Iman Jones moved to New York in 2017 to pursue theatre. After being there for two months, she made her Broadway debut in *Groundhog Day* in the ensemble and understudying a lead character. The next year she

originated the role of Mopsa in *Head Over Heels* (2018) on Broadway. At the time of our interview, she had just started previews at the Roundabout Theatre Company for *Scotland, PA* (2019), a musical based on the cult film of the same name which was in turn based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

I met with Taylor online: her from her apartment in New York, me from my apartment in San Francisco. On this day, we had a very specific window of time that we were both available to talk between my teaching jobs and after her gig at a workshop reading for a new play that she was doing on her off day from her production. She and I first worked together on a production of *Bob Marley's Three Little Birds* (2014) that I directed for the Bay Area Children's Theatre based in Berkeley, CA in 2015. Taylor grew up near Vallejo, CA, one of the country's most racially diverse areas (Eligon, 2017). She started her professional career in the Bay Area, performing a range of roles in which she was cast against traditional racial lines. She says:

I think I've definitely got very fortunate to grow up in the Bay, to grow up in the regional scene in the Bay. [...] I know that I've had privileges because the Bay is open to that. But if I grew up in probably any other city in the country, I wouldn't have been able to play a lot of the roles that I got to play.

### **Training and Preparation**

Taylor studied acting at the San Francisco Semester at the American Conservatory Theater. The curriculum focused on classical and modern acting styles, rather than specifically musical theatre training. She says that the education gave her a foundation for finding process over product.

I learned how to bring more depth and honesty to a lot of my roles through training on ACT. And how to go home and review my own work and come back to the room every day with more options and more depth, and just more thought put into whatever.

Working in regional theatre, she experienced a lack of time to delve deeply into the actor's process. Her acting training afforded her experience in tools such as creating a character breakdown to detail characteristics of the role that she is playing.

Vocal training has helped Taylor understand more about her instrument. She says, "My training here in New York, [...] [voice teachers are] not even training for sound, they're really training for health and instrument. I learned more about my literal vocal cords than I ever have about the way I sound." Cost prohibits her from taking more than two or three lessons a year. But with each lesson she does take, she is able to incorporate the feedback into her practice.

Another strategy that Taylor uses is to ask singers whose singing she admires about their voices, "I tell everyone I know like ask your friends, ask your most helpful friends everything about what you're curious about." She makes a point to ask many different people in order to get a range of opinions and information, "Someone might say something that is helpful to you specifically that you've never tried before." She thinks that a singer can sometimes learn faster by figuring out for themselves how to make certain sounds rather than by someone telling them from an outside perspective how to work.

Taylor finds that each performer has their own regimen for preparing. She herself executes some physical activity every day, be it yoga, a ballet class, or weight training: "If I can just get that in once, whether it's right before the show or hours and hours before, that's great for me." She views working out as an integral part of her job as a singer, "It's so much easier to warm your voice up, and for it to be ready, if you've had a full physical moment before." She notices the effect of warming up the entire body on the maintenance of vocal fitness.

For Taylor, training has helped her prepare to perform eight times a week in her professional theatre gigs.

Your acting training reminds you that how to get to point A to point B, even when your heart isn't necessarily feeling it that day. Your training lets you get through eight shows a week, even though six of them may not have been your best.

Your vocal training helps you get through eight shows a week period. Just making sure you can execute your music to the best of your ability, without blowing out your instrument.

I always say when you do theatre, I'm sure this is with any job, but when you do theater professionally, you rarely have A days, most of them are your B-plus days, and that's what your training is for. Because your talent and your charisma is for your A days and it will come out, but just not every day.

She attests that showing up to work when one likes what one does is easy, especially when the job is performing on stage; however, keeping one's performance level fresh and staying healthy while on a Broadway schedule is difficult. Training helps an actor accomplish those things.

### **Vocal Identity Formed Through Experience**

Taylor's roles have spanned the range of musical theatre vocalism, from the legit soprano of the title role of *Mary Poppins* (2004) to the conversational singing of Anita in *West Side Story* (1957) to the rock belt of Extraordinary Girl in *American Idiot* (2010).

She says that she has never let the way she presents limit the productions for which she auditions:

I felt I auditioned for a lot of shows where my friends are like, "Well, I can't go to that because I'm black," or, "I'm not going to that because they're not seeing people like me."

And I'm like, "Well, they're definitely not going to see you if you're not there. So what I'm going to do is show up."

She acknowledges that she can push against boundaries that her ancestors before her could not.

Yet Taylor admits to having struggled with the expectations of being a black singer. As a singer of mixed heritage (her father is black and her mother is Puerto Rican/Portuguese), she would find herself curious about what is a “black sound.”

I think it was an insecurity I had. It was very much like, “Well, am I not black enough for these types of rooms? Am I not black enough to do this career?” I always would say, “I’m most intimidated in a room full of other black girls, because I know they can all sing better than me.”

She describes the vocal quality associated with black singing as rooted in the church.

However, she did not grow up singing gospel music. She has concluded, though, that she has strengths that other singers do not:

Now I have found other qualities of my voice that I do love, and I’ve also come to the realization that my voice is a black voice. [...] And I do sound black no matter how I sound, because I am black.

She believes that much variation exists between black individuals, which points to the multifarious types of singers who identify as black. No one person can define what being black is, and the definition of blackness is different for each person. Therefore, an authentic black performance is rooted in the lived experience of the black performer: “Every black experience, if it’s a black person, is a black experience.”

When preparing pieces that explore black themes, Taylor says that she finds a “deeper, groovier, more soulful sound” in her singing. This sound might require techniques outside of classical or legit vocal training. As such, she taps into her acting training to find an emotional place centered around the pain of mini and maxi traumas experienced by black people on a daily basis. She explains that the actor’s job is to explore scary, emotional depths in order to help an audience member process the adjacent pain that they may have worked their whole life to ignore.



Training allows the actor to experience a dark place in order to find a sound that is appropriate:

And then you bring your technique to meet in the middle of those two places, so that you don't break every night yourself, and neither does your voice. And in a way that is repeatable many times a week for your own psyche and for your instrument.

Her experience as a black woman has garnered her individual perspective on how to create the vocalism for a character:

I think that's the strength of the world and being a part of an oppressed minority. But the privilege I've had of being in this generation culminates into one person or culminates into a spirit of whatever that character is.

The actor must find what they sound like in the role. Even when attempting to gain proficiency for an accent, she finds that she must find her individual rhythm in the accent rather than trying to sound like anyone else.

### **New Work Creation and Collaboration**

Much of her career has been in the production of new works. Taylor says that being part of the creation of a show engages her creativity: "So I'm learning to lean into things." She performed as Princess Pea in *The Tale of Despereaux* at the Old Globe, based on the fantasy book about a mouse who dreams of becoming a knight. The production featured puppetry, shadow puppetry, and actors playing multiple roles. "It took a lot of me breaking my proper musical theatre person, and like, 'No, just play and be a kid.' And that's the beauty in it." She says that by the time an actor is brought into a project, the writers and directors have likely been working on it for years. They are interested in the performer's perspective:

They hired you to create this new thing together so they're also looking to you to create something new. [...] That's why they have you. And usually you have the one thing about your one job while the writer's thinking about 15 people.

Taylor's resumé includes several shows known as *jukebox musicals*, theatrical presentations that use pre-existing popular songs as the basis for the score. For example, *Head Over Heels* was built around the songs of the 1980s new wave band the Go-Go's. She says that a challenge with the jukebox musical is that the singer must respect the original content as well as the process of the arrangers and orchestrators of the show. The singer can then bring their interpretation and vocalism, "But there's a bit more of a negotiation. There are more levels of negotiation to the finished product. And every music writer is different." They may be given more freedom with phrasing and the sound that they are creating for the piece.

Many of the shows on which Taylor has worked have shown *non-traditional casting* in which actors are cast as characters for a performed work without regard to race, gender, age, etc. In the creation of a new work, a character may be shaped with personality traits but without defined physical characteristics. She says that she first connects her experience and knowledge into the rehearsal process in order to ensure that she can empathize with what the character has gone through in order to be able to respond in a way that a real person would. Also, productions that are cast across color lines must negotiate the performative experience of these multicultural spaces. She questions:

Depending on what time period things are set in, it's like, not is it worth bringing it up but, is that a part of the story that we want to tell? Like, does it matter that we're an interracial couple, or does it not matter and is that the beauty of it, that we're not talking about it? Or should we mention it at some point?

The more we're making new theatre in this day and age, it's my responsibility especially as more often the only person, the only female, of color in the room, just to bring to attention to what is and isn't being said. Where it's like, do you want this person to do that to the only black woman on stage? And are you okay with that? And what storyline that's telling? Or what intentionally or

unintentionally you're saying, by allowing that to happen, because you think it's okay, or not? And even if it's just worth mentioning, I might be the only person of color, but you do have me in the servant role, just saying. Maybe think about that as you move forward.

She attests that she does not know if the questions are ever entirely figured out in any space. No specific set of criteria exists to approach examining the ambiguity of performativity.

Taylor believes doing research on the time period in which the production is set is an important step in the actor's process. She makes an effort to read books that were written during the time period: "I always encourage people read nonfiction, historical nonfiction, because the more you read about the history of our country, the more it all makes sense." When we talk, she is in the middle of reading *Black Bourgeoisie* (Frazier, 1958). Since *Scotland, PA* is set in the 1970s, the information is not directly related to the storyline of the musical, so she feels that it is not necessarily useful to bring into the rehearsal room; however, the information can help her contextualize the placement of her character in the time period, "I think it's something useful for me to know about my people in that moment, from their perspective. Because it's going to be different than what I grew up knowing and feeling."

Another challenge can be handling practical aspects of production. Taylor offers the example of matching headworn microphones to skin tone.

I've been backstage where, you know, we're dealing with mics, and they're like, "Can you move it? Can you push it? Because we can see it?" And all the white actors have their nude skin tones.

And I'm like, "Well, do you have any brown mics?"

They're like, "No, we have black mics."

And I'm like, "Well, you have brown actors so you may want to invest in some brown mics for your future shows because this is going to be a recurring problem you're going to have."

Sometimes speaking up means change happens in the moment; sometimes it means advocacy for those who the issue may affect in the future. Even if nothing changes during her time at the company, she hopes that she has planted a seed of an idea for change in the individuals on the production team. She proclaims that theatre is a collaborative process, requiring times for an actor to stand up for what they need. In the collaboration of creating a theatrical production, the actor must work with the people around them with the goal of getting to opening night. She believes that with experience the actor will learn to find their own processes, where their priorities lie, and when to let things go.

Taylor speaks with pride when discussing the multicultural aspects of the two Broadway productions that she has worked on, *Groundhog Day* and *Head Over Heels*.

It feels really special and progressive, and current to have been a part of both of those shows that didn't necessarily have like the longest life on Broadway, but, I think, had major impacts, especially for people who had never seen ensembles like that before.

A recurring theme that the *Head Over Heels* cast received was regarding the representation of minoritized identities on stage:

That was the number one thing we heard, [...] "I've never seen myself on stage, I've never seen two young lesbians, I've never seen a non-binary character, I've never seen a boy in drag who finds himself loving both his feminine and masculine side at the end." That was so special.

She says that she feels lucky to have been able to be a part of the original casts of shows that "were not really written through struggle for those [characters]." She describes the realizations that the characters have as *coming of worth* stories rather than *coming of age*: "Another thing people kept saying was just how nice it wasn't about them having to overcome these realizations, it was these are wonderful things that are happening to

everyone. To finally find yourself is beautiful.” She feels like the stories were written for persons who experience feeling like outliers.

### **My Own Morning**

Taylor had shared with me a video of her performing at 54 Below in a concert series titled *If It Only Even Runs a Minute*, which features songs and histories of musicals that were on Broadway for a short amount of time. She is singing the song “My Own Morning” from *Hallelujah, Baby!* (1967).



*Figure 12* “My Own Morning,” sung by Taylor Jones.

The plot of the concept musical chronicles 60 years in the life of Georgina, starting at the turn of the last century and culminating during the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. Though the time moves forward, the characters remain the same age throughout the play. Georgina, for whom the song that Taylor sings in the clip, is a talented woman “determined to build a singing career” is also torn between two suitors, her black boyfriend and a white admirer (Lane, 2015, p. 156). The show, written by the all-white team of Arthur Laurents, Jules Styne, Betty Comden, and Adolph Green, received mixed reviews and closed after nearly 300 performances. Laurents conceived it

to be an edgy show and wanted the frustrations of the time to be expressed through the black characters (Clum, 2014). However, the book and songs avoided dealing with the complexities of the racial tensions of 1968, the year it premiered on Broadway (Galella, 2015).

When I ask her why she picked this song for our discussion, Taylor explains that the meaning of the song speaks directly to the black experience:

It's from a black show. It's from a black perspective of wanting to own anything. And I think the historical context of actually people being newly free, and actually having the right to own things is important and interesting to think about in this day and age.

She also relates the theme of ambition to her own life as a young person in New York in a performing career:

I'm literally just happy to have an apartment that I can barely pay rent for, but one day to aspire to new things. And really just by working hard and, hopefully, taking it one day, one step at a time.

The idea hearkens to how she connects her experience to the roles she performs. She empathizes with what the character is feeling in order to find the depth of meaning in the moment.

In the original Broadway cast recording, Leslie Uggams, who originated the role of Georgina, is using a heightened AAVE accent, specifically from the United States South. I ask Taylor if she made a choice to use her own accent. She explains that since her performance might be the first time the audience are encountering the piece, she wanted them to hear the song rather than think about her acting choices. Also, because the audience would not have the context of the scope of the plot of the play knowing that the song is placed very soon after the end of slavery, she did not want to feel as if she were portraying minstrelsy:

As maybe the only black person in a concert or whatever, one of the few, I don't ever want to get up there and feel like I'm doing like a minstrel of any kind. [...] I don't want to look like I'm doing blackface, which doesn't make any sense.

She says that she approaches the song as if the show would be revived at the present time.

Rather than trying to give the audience what is expected, she had wanted to present the song the best way she could have in the venue in which she performed it.

I note to her that I notice that she creates an emotional trajectory through her vocalism by starting in a more legit soprano moving to a mix and going into the climax of the song in a full belt. She says her strategies rely first on what feels appropriate to the song. In order to assess her choices, she will record a rehearsal on her mobile phone to listen back to in order to help form her opinions of what she thinks sounds best: "I find that you're your harshest critic. And so, if you don't like it, change it into something you do like." Her focus was to produce sounds appropriate to the style of the show. She clarifies that the type of singing one does in a contemporary, pop musical requires technical specificity, but may be given more freedom in phrasing and improvisation. Classic musical theatre, like *Hallelujah, Baby!*, requires an artist to start *come scritto*: "I think classic might be more like more on the beat, more note for note on the page. I think it's more operatic in that way." However, she brings how she is processing the information, how she is interpreting the music, and how her instrument responds to the musical demands.

Her vocal strategies are closely aligned with her interpretation of the song. Taylor says that she must ask herself why text or music is repeating: "You say it because it's like the more you say it, the more real it is. Or when you say it once it feels this way, you say

it a different time it feels that way.” She describes the three moments that she is communicating in this particular performance:

I think first you’re just thinking about it as if it’s a dream. But then the second time you do it, it’s more real so therefore you have more power to say it because you’re taking more ownership of it. And if you wanted the acting behind why I’m belting now, I think that’s it: it’s just, yes a natural build, but to re-emphasize something that I said because I’m more sure of it now, or because I really want you to hear me when I say it now because I mean it.

She thinks that when an actor can find their own reasons, no right or wrong exists in relation to why something is happening in musical theatre. The interpreter must find a reason to repeat material again and again.

Taylor refers to her classical acting training regarding the way she approaches the text:

I think I, Taylor, am someone who uses my words to paint naturally in life. But I’m very gestural with my hands no matter what. When I was at ACT, they talked about when you do Shakespeare, gesturing is almost encouraged because his language is so you get what you are looking for, and when you can spell it out that clearly, it also helps the audience a little bit.

She has applied that training to all types of theatre in which she performs. Physicalizing the text helps clarify text for her by allowing her to visualize meaning while she is using the words. She finds that gestures are also helpful to an audience to be on the same page with the actor and can be involved in the act of storytelling as well.

In lieu of “My Own Morning,” the text is integral to singing about the black experience in a historical context. She attests, “I think if, once you understand how important that is, you can help the audience understand how important these words are, words that they use every day, but now are being used with a new weight.” The first lyric of the song is “I want a chair that belongs to me.” A black woman in Antebellum South saying these words carries a weight rooted in the identity of the character in the context



of the world in which she is articulating them. Once the actor understands the importance of the sentiment, they can help the audience understand the “words that they use every day, but now are being used with a new weight.” The actor interprets the story in order for the audience to understand the story.

### **Storytelling to Inspire**

Taylor declares that she loves storytelling and thinks everybody relates to the desire to hear other people’s stories and to have their own story being told. To her, theatre, an artform reliant on storytelling, is “important for society, for history, for healing.” She sees history as moving to an extreme one way and then pushing back and getting pushed back again. “I’ve been asking people,” she says, “I wonder if every generation feels like it’s the end of the world. Because the world can seem so dark, creating things that are kind of fanciful and wild feels better than ever. Because we can. And we need it.”

Taylor says that she does what she does because she has been inspired by others and hopes to inspire others. She uses the example of her role as a princess in *The Tale of Despereaux*: “I got to be a princess in the last show I did, and there aren’t enough black princesses around so I don’t want to forget how important that is.” She is confident that her presence on stage has inspired little black girls: “I just hope to inspire others to find love, in pockets of love, in pockets of space and worth and time.” She hopes that persons who are on similar identifying terms as she can know that:

They are in enough in the world, and they don’t have to prove anything to anyone, and they get to be themselves. And as long as they’re fighting every day to authentically be themselves, and that’s all that matters.

### Ken Page: Making Waves

*You can't use it if you don't know you have it.*

Ken Page is an African American actor/singer/director/writer/producer who started his training in what he calls, “classical musical theatre,” including getting to perform the role of Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) at his Catholic high school in St. Louis. He says, “There were a lot of layers.” His vocal teachers wanted him to sing opera, but the musical style did not move him, and he went on into the musical theatre idiom. He got his professional start at St. Louis Municipal Opera Theatre, commonly known as The Muny, in the ensemble at the age of 18. He has gone on to perform many roles on Broadway and in Hollywood, notably as the voice of Oogie Boogie in the animated film *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. At the premiere, filmmaker John Singleton said to him, “Wait a minute, were you the villain? [...] I knew that was a brother!” Ken explained to him that the songs and script were intended for the character to have the vibe of a scat singer along the lines of Cab Calloway: “A lot of times, let’s face it, it has to do with the subject of what the piece says.”

A notable stage role was that of Old Deuteronomy in the original Broadway cast of *Cats*. After a string of credits, coming to *Cats* in 1982 was the first time he stepped outside of the African American theatrical idiom on Broadway.

Because you’re in your box. You’re supposed to be doing those things. Again, as I said, I was always trained to do it all. It was never one thing, for me. It was just, you do what you do. You go do the work, you do what’s at hand, the task at hand, and you do it, because you’ve been trained to do it, and you have the ability.

The producing company was not advertising the ethnicities of the actors; it was marketing the show and the cats. He believes that the diverse cast was included based on their talent.

We were all there, but it was interesting to watch, as we did do, we watched the culture try to work that out. That there are people of different ethnicities in the show, but they're not in and about their ethnicities. They're in it because they're talented. On all sides, people had to grapple with that.

When he was performing the role with a regional company, after being introduced to a patron, she was surprised of his ethnicity.

“You are black?” Right out of the mouth. “You are black?”  
 I said, “Yes, I believe so.”  
 She said, “Well, I had no idea.”  
 I said, “Is that a problem?”  
 “Well, no, not really, but one wants to know, I guess.”  
 I thought, “Oh, get me out of here.”

Even in a show famous for its zoomorphic feline depictions, race plays a factor in how the audience members respond to the bodies and voices on stage in front of them.

The day I meet Ken is one of those Midwestern summer days that always is on the cusp of rain, but the clouds never quite break open. The tony lobby of his apartment building gives off a sense of St. Louis from the turn of the last century with its red and cream Persian rugs over white tile floors and dark, carved wood walls reaching up to gilded ceilings. I approach the concierge sitting at a desk by the glass doors who tells me that Ken has informed them of my arrival. I sign into a guest log on the desk and take the elevator to the top floor of the building. As I step into the corridor, I notice a three-panel folding screen and walk toward it. Ken occupies a suite of apartments at the end of the hall. I call out from behind them and after a few moments, he emerges. He welcomes me into the bright apartment on the right and offers me water. The room displays a taste for

the luxe, of international baubles which I gather are from his travels over a long career in the arts. On the table at which we converse, a Greco-Roman bust anchors the side of the table that looks over the city in wide windows.

Ken describes the black voice as one with flexible color, wide range, and a cultural approach: “There’s things where there’s a vocal quality sometimes where you can listen to something hasn’t been necessarily characterized or classified as being a black performer or black role, but you can hear it in the vocal performance.” He talks about seeing the Broadway revival of *Carousel* in 1994 which featured sopranos Audra McDonald and Shirley Verrett. He describes McDonald’s singing as “being all that an operatic voice should be but having the warmth and the ability to sing musical theatre and not lose either one, which was something you had not heard.” He attests that to him the male voice can be even more imbued with blackness through the richness of tone, especially through the higher range. With Verrett, he describes the way she performed “June is Bustin’ Out All Over” as steeped in a “cultural opera approach.” Her singing was specific to the piece, an operatic vocalism flavored with black musical aesthetics, giving both Western lyric and vernacular approaches at the same time.

Ken illustrates his own development as a black artist through the succession of four musicals in which he had performed early in his career: *Purlie*, *Guys and Dolls*, *The Wiz*, and *Ain’t Misbehavin’*: “I feel like I was very fortunate to come through a succession of shows that each one opened me up more and more and more to my own cultural musical voice.” Coming from his mostly white, traditional training and then getting cast in shows with black themes caused a life change, an evolution of his professional identity.

## Purlie

The first major show that Ken booked after he had moved to New York as a young actor was the national tour of *Purlie* (1970), the musical re-telling of Ossie Davis's play *Purlie Victorious* (1961). The first musical director was a white man who taught and shaped the music to the cast, mostly coming from musical theatre or classical music training. After the show opened at the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami, Florida, the producing company brought in the original conductor of the Broadway production Joyce Brown. Brown had made history as "Broadway's first African American female musical conductor of a show beginning its opening night" (Wilkerson, 2017). Ken recounts what happened after the ensemble sang for her for the first time:

"No, no, no. If we don't start with the soul, we'll never have it," she said. We were like, "Oh, uh, aah."  
She went to the piano and Mother sat there, she's like [singing like a piano]. We're all like, "Well." Started it right off in another direction.  
She went through the show little by little by little by little. She says, "Darlings" – this important what she was saying – "We must liberate ourselves." She says, "You're all very wonderful, you're trained and you're talented, but now we want to bring our blackness to this. We must liberate ourselves from whatever has been done here before." She's like, "We must liberate ourselves." This was speaking to us personally. It wasn't just the show.

One of Brown's strategies to liberate the sound was to have the cast sing a number how they would want if not under the confines of a Broadway-style show with a Broadway-style performance schedule.

She said, "Thank you. That's what we want. We'll clean it up." By the time we got through working with that woman before we continued the tour, it was a completely different show in terms of how you come to it from your training.

He states that many African American performers in New York at the time had come from the gospel church tradition, which he did not. Up until then, he was never required to perform the characteristic musical figures of black vocalism. He worked to create a

combination of bringing soul to his classical training: “I knew what music was, I knew how to go at it and how to reach it, and how to ‘bring it’ as we say now.” He credits Brown for giving him his vocal black identity, “And thanks to Joyce Brown, I knew how to liberate myself in it.”

### **Guys and Dolls**

At the time that Ken and I were having our meeting, he was performing at the Muny in a production of *Guys and Dolls* playing the role of Arvide Abernathy, grandfather of the leading lady. But in 1976, Ken made his Broadway debut in the all-black cast of *Guys and Dolls* playing the role of Nicely-Nicely Johnson. I tell him that I have memories of listening to the soundtrack when I was a kid at musical theatre camp. He is glad that the cast recording exists as an archive of that production.

To be frank, for a period of time, there was — I won’t say it was concerted — but there was no effort to preserve it, let’s put it that way. Having the album, which by the way, as you know, is on Motown, which is interesting even as an archival point of interest. It has kept it alive.

Since it was his Broadway debut, he has personal interest in making sure that production has a place in the legacy of the show.

Ken says that production signals the end of all-black casting of canonical musical theatre works.

We were doing Broadway’s “most beloved musical.” The waters were choppy. Even after we opened, there were people who thought it was great and wonderful. And people thought, “How dare they?” And all other things.

The show received new orchestrations that reflected black musical aesthetics, including adding a gospel tinge to “Sit Down You’re Rocking the Boat,” Ken’s character’s big number. He reasserts, “If I hadn’t done *Purlie* before, I would have been like, ‘Yikes,’

because I didn't come from that." His evolution at this point comes from the Civil Rights era fight for equality as surmised through *Purlie* to an attitude of "We can do anything you can do. Maybe better," as exemplified in that production of *Guys and Dolls*.

Ken describes the acting and musical choices that he makes in the Muny production, which I was able to see while in St. Louis. The actor portraying the role of Arvide's granddaughter, who is also African American, had read the source materials for the musical.

Her father was a gambler. Isn't that interesting? That's why – and the mother died, I think she said the mother died trying to make right with the father who was a gambler. Which is why she's so staunch in being a missionary because she's fighting not only against the idea of whatever's out there but also her own familial thing. Which helped me because if she's Sarah Brown that means my daughter was her mother. That means my daughter went to rack and to ruin. It gave us a whole other thing to play.

Also, in his big number "More I Cannot Wish You" which is written as a lullaby, he had added riffs that reflected black aesthetics.

It doesn't break anything, it just makes it real. Which I think makes the audience, [...] gives them access to them both in a different way. You know there's some reality to who [the characters] are supposed to be.

The directors of the production told him that they did not purposefully cast an African American actress as his granddaughter. He recalls that he told them that he had rather believed that they had:

Because it creates another story because everybody is coming to the show with their own mind. You can't help it. We were talking about it in some of the ways we were relating and things, but who we might be and how I end up raising her as a grandfather, and of course, the books [on which the musical is based].

Acknowledging the heritage of the actors enacts the performative force of the actors' bodies on stage and the meanings attached to their vocal and physical gestures.

“All the things that have contributed to what I call my instrument and all of those things are right there with me, and I think that’s the goal of most people I know.” He believes that African American performers often practice self-preservation, enacting empowerment through keeping a certain amount of cultural capital for themselves. They also enact empowerment by passing on cultural capital to younger generations for the integrity of African American heritage in the musical theatre. He says, “You may not rock the boat, but you can still make waves in the water. And it’s the waves in the water that rock the boat.”

### **The Wiz**

I always tell people I said, “I went into *The Wiz* and I got my courage.”  
They go, “That’s cute.”

I say, “No, I’m not kidding.” I was 22, I think, when I did *The Wiz* or something like that, and I went in there and, again, I came in pretty green even though I had done *Guys and Dolls*, I wasn’t where they were [...]. I had to say, “Well, if it’s in there, you better let it out now. This is the time.”

Ken was a replacement for the Lion in the original production of *The Wiz*. The director Geoffrey Holder asked to work with him one afternoon before Ken’s *put-in* rehearsal, in which the replacement actor performs the entire role in order, in costume, with all the cast members and all the technical elements. Ken says that the advice Holder gave him for the show was not only things for the show; they were things for life.

I remember him telling me-- He says, “When you come on the stage,” he said, “Own it. Own it, it’s your stage. Nobody is up there but you.”

I thought, “Well that’s not true but I get – I think I know what you mean.”

He said, “Own it.” He says, “And no apologies.”

I was like, “What does that mean.”

“Know whatever you do is for you. You do it. They like it. They don’t like it. That’s their problem.”

I thought, “Wow, this is a new way of thinking.”

He really told me, “It’s fine. Whatever you do, whatever you’re feeling to do, it’s fine. Do it.” Because I think he recognized that I was holding back because I



had been trained to hold back to meet the mark that was there for me in most cases.

Ken says that the original cast and creatives were activated about the show as an unapologetic expression of black culture. It was created by African Americans for African Americans.

It was like, “Look, if you don’t know what this means, go find out. We don’t have to explain it to you. If you don’t happen to know what *urban renewal* is, go look it up.” Therefore, it put *The Wiz* at a cutting edge for us as African Americans, or black people, at the time.

From *Purlie*’s call for equality to *Guys and Dolls*’s attitude of equity, *The Wiz* exemplified defiance through black excellence.

“The miracle,” Ken states, “was that it worked with the original story, that you didn’t have to change it basically. You just had to do the overlay. [...] But all that means something.” The role of Dorothy, originated by Stephanie Mills, was “just a regular little black girl [...] who melted your heart with her heart and talent.” Ken describes Mills thusly: “Was there ever a voice that came to Broadway with more absolute cultural identifiable passion?” The Wizard was played by André De Shields: “Nobody ever seen anything like that before. [...] They had not seen that kind of black male imagery on stage. ‘You all want some of this – men and women, come on.’ That’s the way it was presented.” All the characters signified representations of archetypes of their contemporary society.

Ken says that being part of that production influenced his life because it was the first time that he was around a cast of people motivated with a purpose of upholding a show as a cultural statement.

This was a case where you don't have to do anything. This is for us for us, by us for us. It did change my approach not only to the show, but it changed my approach performing. By the time I came out of *The Wiz*, I was ready. [laughter]  
I was ready.

### **Ain't Misbehavin'**

After two years of playing the Lion, Ken left the production of *The Wiz*. He was brought onto a project where the creators wanted to do a show about Thomas "Fats" Waller's music. Ken was one of five performers, all of whom had been working as supporting actors in roles generally from Broadway. As mentioned earlier, De Shields had been performing in *The Wiz* for years at this point since its opening. Nell Carter had been doing cabaret and had been in a few failed Broadway shows, though she was known for her immense talents as a singer and actor. Armelia McQueen had legit vocal training and the acting chops to have been had featured roles in film. Irene Cara, "who was put in the show for her Lena Horne-ness," was replaced by Charlayne Woodard, a high energy singer-dancer, when the production transferred from the Manhattan Supper Club to Broadway.

The show was created from sessions looking through stacks of music at the apartment of Murray Horwitz, one of the conceivers of the project, with the original cast members, the director Richard Maltby, Jr., and the choreographer Arthur Faria.

We were just looking at songs, and they would play it. Then we'd go, "I don't know. Anybody feel that one? No." You'd go through another one where it's like, "I think I could something with that." That's really how it happened. Of course, the director, Richard Maltby, Jr., was guiding and molding and so forth, but it really was honestly based on what we could create.

Ken credits Maltby for finding the people who would be an interesting mix, “Because we were very unique people, that’s all we could do. We didn’t know how to be like anybody. At that time, not being like anybody was considered a plus.”

The group of actors and creatives picked songs and wove them into narrative based on who the actors were, and who they could project themselves to be in the Harlem Renaissance. Ken states, “It was a very interesting difference of how to bring these people to life because these were people that were representing [Waller] and his world.” The production became a musical revue that served as a tribute to Waller. The “bookless format” (Cowser, p. 545) featured non-linear theatrical conceptions based in “gesture, movement, and staging” (Grant, 2003, p. 298). The revue was so well received that it was developed into a full production. It is also credited with adding to a revival of New York’s jazz scene (Price, 2012).

Ken believes that if he did not have an understanding of himself as a performer culturally from the string of shows of *Purlie* to *Guys and Dolls* to *The Wiz*, he could not have come to *Ain’t Misbehavin’* with a full skill set needed to create the show. In preparation, Ken educated himself about Waller. He says, “I really didn’t know a lot about Fats Waller; finding out that I was much like him was an interesting thing.” Waller was a classically trained musician who did not come from the gospel church tradition. His air was sophisticated albeit with a wicked sense of humor. As such, Ken’s acting approach could be similar to that on other shows: “To look at, as I said, who the people are and what they want, what their time and place is.”

Ken states that some unfavorable response occurred, saying that the show was not black enough.

There were people who felt that because we were doing Fats Waller in Harlem Renaissance that we were pandering. It was just crazy. I thought to myself this is really fascinating because we're representing an African American composer who was very famous, who we've forgotten about at that point.

He argues that the intention of the show was to bring forward Waller's and the world he inhabited. He maintains that many cherished parts of American culture emerged from the artistic, intellectual, and social movement of the Harlem Renaissance, "What that meant to people and what it meant to us as African Americans where there was that time when we had our own place." The aesthetic of the production exuded nostalgia for the New York supper clubs of the 1930s and 1940s:

To bring us to the fore as African Americans at that time at our best, [...] we were being presented in the best possible way. Everybody was glamorous and gorgeous and beautiful.

### **Fat and Greasy**

Waller "was a virtuoso in the 'stride' school of jazz piano and a prolific composer" (Bailey, 2007, p. 498). By the time of his death in 1943 at the age of 39, he had written over 400 songs (Songwriters Hall of Fame, n.d.). His performances were considered "clever and captivating" and many of the songs are lighthearted in nature (Machlin, 1985, p. 8). These compositions bypass romantic sentimentality through spiky vocal writing, wickedly comic lyrics, and playful attitudes. In "Fat and Greasy" grotesque bodily descriptions "echo the often affectionate carnival trope of 'abusive praise and praiseful abuse'" (Bailey, 2007, p. 500). Adams and Park (1958) write that Waller could "destroy an innocuous enough lyric and then build anew, raiding it to hilarity by injecting it with comic lust. He is diabolically honest about all the implications of the words" (p. 16). The exuberance of the song Signifies a critique of traditional ideals of abundance through encoded vernacular language, verbal and musical.



Figure 13 “Fat and Greasy” performed by Ken Page and Andre De Shields.

The video that Ken and I watch is of a performance of “Fat and Greasy” that he did with De Shields on September 9, 2018 at the cabaret venue 54 Below. It was a concert celebrating the 40th anniversary of the original Broadway production of *Ain’t Misbehavin’*.

“This is amazing,” I said to De Shields, “We’re all the way around full circle.”

“Yes, we are,” he said.

“Oh well. That’s it. Let’s do it. Here we go. But put a stamp on it. This is where we leave this.”

He describes the show as living in his DNA: “We created this along with the creatives. It’s very different. We are there and own it as much as anyone else.” The relationships that played out in the show were the relationships between the performers as people, not just as theatrical characters: “There’s the truth, because nothing we could do with each other was never not right because it was the truth of who we were being and who we’re supposed to be.” About performing the piece, he says, “It was a lovely experience. Very moving.” He remembers them putting the number together, experimenting with how far they were willing to go as characters and as people. The last time they had performed the song together, he estimates, was around 1988 in Paris. In recounting the anniversary concert, he says, “When I hugged him, I just remember thinking, ‘I remember the first time that we did this and this is probably the last time,’ and that’s a 40-year span.”

I say to him that performing the song as a duet feels like a lopsided game of the “dirty dozens,” a game of spoken words between participants who insult each other until one gives up (Gates, 1988/2014, p. 74). Ken relates that De Shields and he would pick people in the audience to whom to relate. The original production was created with the intention of having audience participation. Those in attendance at the 2018 concert clearly knew the expectations, engaging with the performers on stage and singing along with the chorus. Ken gives the example of the video recording of the original cast telecast in 1982 for NBC. During another comedy song “Feets Too Big,” an elderly couple was sitting just to his right:

Watching them watching me being in the number, to me, it’s better than what I’m doing because they were there then and that time. They’re that age. [...] And they were really doing it because that’s their expression, and the guy was having the best time.

The interaction with the theatregoers had created a performative story, bringing meaning to that momentary engagement.

One of the lyrics is written in the score as “Big, fat what’s his name”; however, in the 54 Below performance Ken chooses his diction to sound like “Big fat twat’s his name.” He is adding a new level of insult, signifying that the unseen target is obnoxiously stupid. Though De Shields and he used the latter pronunciation in the original production and on the cast recording, they used the former for the television production.

I said, “Why do it? Because it’s just going to take it out. They’re not going to let us say ‘twat’ on NBC. And for the show, of course, everything goes. Standards and practices are not going to let that fly, and I don’t want to be bothered to come back in and do this shit again.”

Since the performers had acknowledged that the 54 Below performance might have been the last one that they do together, they made certain to make the most of every joke.

I make note that although the two performers are seated, they have a deep connection to their body movement. Ken describes the precision with which choreographer Arthur Faria worked to create the physical language of the show, including inverted elbows and precise hand gestures: “He was as a Balinese dance person, [...] but he found a way to do it from his dance vocabulary.” The movement style reifies the hybrid nature of black aesthetics. The creatives and cast members entered into dialogue between disparate styles in order to offer a nostalgic portrayal of African American culture through the exploration of a then near forgotten artist.

### **Legacy and Truth**

Since the original run of *Ain't Misbehavin'*, Ken, like many others of the original creators, has been involved with multiple productions. For him, directing the show means passing it on to other people. He finds that some actors may come into a rehearsal process with a standardized presentation based on the original performers. To the cast of a recent production that he directed, he said:

“Know that I want you to bring yourself. I don't want you to imitate exactly what we did, because that's not you.” I said, “I'm the one that's here to tell you, you ain't us. You're you, and you're wonderful, but you got to do your own version.”

He will then go through preliminary information in relationship to Fats Waller, to the Harlem Renaissance, and to the original production: “We have to honor all of that and therefore educate ourselves and elevate to what we are known to have been at that time.” If *The Wiz* represented the contemporary black culture, *Ain't Misbehavin'* represented another look at the wide variety that black expression could take.

I ask Ken, “Can you name some qualities that make a performance authentically black?” His answer is pillowed on silence, “Truth. Period.” He goes on:

I think that's everything. There's nothing else you can say about truth. Truth is truth. As far as things that would be considered, I can't think of anything I could say, that wouldn't already be encompassed in truth because you are doing [...]. Again, there's an assumption in there that you are doing a role that is African American in its nature. That's why I say, "Truth." Because if you're doing a role, if you're playing Sarah Brown, if you're playing Nicely-Nicely, if you're playing *Into the Woods* and you're Phylicia Rashad, you know what I mean? You play the truth and then that can't be wrong.

For him, authenticity comes out of a representation of the self, personally and culturally placed.

### Summary

The narratives in this chapter present the thoughts and experiences of five elite singers regarding the use of the voice by black performers and the authenticity of what they think of as a "black" sound. Each participant discusses the role of ownership and representation of cultural capital through types of ornamentation, the use of expressive tools, and manipulated timbre. Also, the relationship between the performer and the dominant culture as shown through the entertainment industry is explored. The intent of this chapter was to record the perceptions of black-identified performers related to race, representation, and the theatrical voice. Due to the small sample size, the data might be transferable, but are not generalizable.

The subsequent chapter provides a cross-case analysis of three major themes that emerged from the interviews: authenticity is rooted in the singer's experience of cultural traditions and expression; technique is a means of personal and cultural expression and provides the opportunity for personal liberation; and a singer positions themselves at the nexus of their cultural legacy as a learner, exemplar, advocate, and transmitter of culture.



In the final chapter, I discuss implications for pre-professional training and for higher education.

## Chapter V

### CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine the experiences of singers who identify as black or African American in representing their respective singing voice on stage. Three research questions were created to explore the use of the voice by performers in theatrical works representing black themes:

1. How does a black performer employ vocal and acting techniques when performing a musical or theatrical idiom that includes racialized themes?
2. How does a performer navigate performativity and vocality?
3. What can the answers to the above question reveal about what happens at the intersection of performance and the performer's identity?

The findings in relation to the research questions revealed each participant's experiences and perceptions of representation in their respective entertainment industries. The previous chapter presented narratives of five singers: three whose practices are based in Western classical music, two who work primarily in musical theatre. Each narrative was created from the methodological choices of interviewing, audio/visual analysis, and stimulated recall.

The intention of this chapter is to provide commonalities and distinctions between the participants' responses through cross-case analysis. Cross-case analysis draws attention to individualistic and common themes. Based on the research questions, three

prominent themes emerged. The first research question seeks to understand what vocal, acting, and musical choices the participant makes when performing music rooted in a diasporic tradition. An idea that surfaces is that a voice is black not from a sound quality but from the circumstance that the singer positions themselves as a black person.

Authenticity is rooted in the singer's experience of cultural traditions and expression. The second research question seeks the participant's deliberate representation of self as well as their negotiation of effects outside of their intentions. Each participant reflects on their positioning as black within white dominated industries. The third question, which looks at the participant's identity in relation to performance practices and representation, provides the theme of vocal technique not as end in or of itself. Technique is a means of personal and cultural expression and provides the opportunity for personal liberation. The analysis below offers these three emergent themes supported by evidence from the interviews and from the related literature.

### **An Authentically Black Voice from an Authentically Black Person**

The participants in the current study each had descriptions of the black sound in terms of timbre and practice. Eidsheim (2019) writes that the idea of a *black voice* emerges from "an encultured notion of sound" that conforms to dominant notions of vocal sound and practices (p. 51). Julia and Taylor assert that self-identification as a black person authenticates the singer's sound as being black. Yet voice quality and power are determined by physiological aspects of a singer's vocal instrument (Bottalico, Marunick, Nudelman, Webster, & Jackson-Menaldi, 2019). Karen, Kenneth, and Ken believe that there is a physical manifestation that influences the black sound. Karen states that she can name the qualities of black singing more so in a male voice; Kenneth states

that he can tell more easily with women than men; Ken points to male voices as well as mezzo-sopranos.

Kenneth describes “the limitless black throat” as having range and versatility. In relation to black baritones, he states, “These men had these low notes, high notes, big notes, small notes. They could sing Lieder and opera and Broadway. It’s without limitations. They can call on certain colors in the voice that I think are unique to us.” Kenneth and Ken both point to Audra McDonald as a singer whose grain of the voice is suitable to Western lyric and popular styles. Kenneth and Ken both mention Shirley Verrett as an example “of having an amazing career as a soprano and an amazing career as a mezzo soprano” (Kenneth) and taking a “cultural opera approach” (Ken). Karen states the primacy of the wide register of black singers over a particular vocal color. Ken attests that in his own singing he has been called to sing through a breadth of tessituras: “I just had been called on at different times to sing in different places.”

All participants depict the sound used with words such as *full* and *rich*. Karen believes “the flavor is in the core” of the grain of the black voice. Julia states, “In the greatest voices of black singers, regardless of the genre, it does feel there’s just a full body resonance happening.” Ken uses an analogy of wine: “It’s fuller. It’s a burgundy as compared to a shiraz. It just has more body to it.” Taylor calls the vocal color she employs for black music as “a deeper, groovier sound.” According to Wilson (1992), singing traditions throughout the African diaspora require singers to develop distinctive timbres sensitive to vocal nuances of the performed musical material. A sense arises regarding a black vocal sound that encompasses a wide spectrum of sonic colors.

Singers use idiomatic musical signifiers to manipulate racial vocal styles. Black singing traditions engage the listener's perception of effortlessness, roughness, extension of chest register, and "informal pedagogy" (Eidsheim, 2019, p. 30). The participants all point to gospel music of the African American church as a foundation of codified musical behaviors. The cadence and rhythm of gospel music come to define racial aesthetics of secular musical styles (Sorret, 2016). Karen says that the black church produces educated musicians, facile in the styles of black music. Julia attests that "the greatest gospel singers" have been guided by family or music ministry members through how they learn style and vocal technique. Taylor indicates that her understanding of black history shows that the church has been a place to find safety within a black community; as such, she thinks that is why many black shows have a gospel music undertone. In Western classical music, Karen, Kenneth, and Ken name Leontyne Price as a singer who infused Western lyric singing with inflections from the gospel tradition. Hyper-vocalized emotions of gospel singing surface from vocal nuances such as scooping and bending notes. Karen states, "What I love with Leontyne, she just unapologetically got out there and was all her beautiful, black, soulful, expressive, expansive self." Musical aural components infuse the sound of perceived black vocality with meaning.

Kenneth says that he catches himself using black vocal signifiers in non-black repertoire, "but it's always in relationship to the text and how I interpret it." Clarity of text is a feature of black aesthetics (Steinhaus-Jordan, 2005). Julia finds herself trying to make peace with the lyrics. Words inflect the emotions portrayed in the music. According to Juslin and Laukka (2003), music evokes vocal expression as being "a form of heightened speech that transforms feelings into, 'audible landscape'" (p. 807). Kenneth

attests, “Singing is the highest form of expression because it is just elongated emotional speech.” An artist’s interpretation of text is filtered through vernacular traditions (Gates, 1988/2014). When discussing the solo art song spiritual, Karen talks about the expectation for the singer to sing in dialect. African American Vernacular English (AAVE), which is used by black slave descendants, can be identified by the sound structures of language (Pollock & Meredith, 2001). A person is more likely to use vernacular construction for expressions of group identification (McWhorter, 2017). Taylor states that an artist needs to know the history of the black experience to understand the importance of the meaning behind the text: “You can help the audience understand how important these words are, words that they use every day, but now are being used with a new weight.” Text and music are transformed and point to the history of cultural patterns.

Taylor states, “I think I use my words to paint naturally in life, but I’m very gestural with my hands no matter what.” Audiences use the interaction of audio and visual modes in the perception of a performance. Embodied behavior such as body movement conveys expressivity (Woody, 2000). Julia describes making distorted shapes with her body in order to express herself as thrilling: “That’s part of why I get so physical in my preparation, even backstage, before I go out.” Taylor also uses physical warm-ups as part of her preparation for self-expression. Karen says, “So the mind goes, the body goes, right? The body and everything is just one thing.” Rhythmic perception involves both innate and enculturated responses to music (London, 2012). Musicians use a range of skills to merge sound and music into an artistic whole (Rodger, Craig, & O’Modhrain, 2012). The entire body is an expressive tool. Movement in addition to singing and

playing instruments is integral to diasporic aesthetics (Wilson, 1992). Karen believes that a connection with rhythm through acts like dance and hand clapping makes performances authentically black.

“There are a lot of white singers who may emulate [a black performance],” Taylor declares, “but it doesn’t mean they have the same experience of the voices that they’re emulating.” An individual’s identity defined by their communication of self within the context of cultural influences (Erikson, 1956) conveys their distinguishing personality and influences how other people experience them. An audience ascribes authenticity to the perceived expression through an individual’s acts and gestures. Authenticity also lies in an artist expressing the truth of their own situation and of their own culture (Moore, 2002). As stated above, Taylor and Julia assert that each of them has a black voice because of their self-identification as a person with black ancestry. Julia maintains, “There is no one way to sound black.” Taylor states, “In a black American experience period, there is no uniformity. I think that’s what’s coming through a person’s sound or interpretively in her sound.” A singer’s performed and performative communication of their identity authenticates their sound as being *black*. As such, an authentically black voice emerges from a black person rooted in a meta-reflexive demonstration of their cultural heritage.

### **Technique as a Means of Cultural and Personal Expression**

For singers for opera and musical theatre, training may require a long process of studying skills necessary for the associated art form. Duke and Simmons (2006) write that technique “is described in terms of the effect that physical motion has on the sound produced” (p. 14). A singer’s body responds to the conditions of singing in order to be

able to perform the sum of all aspects of expression, including physical movement, imagination, and sensory perception. Vocal technique is training the physical body to respond efficiently to what is being asked of it and preparing the mind to accomplish those tasks. Langer (1997) writes, “The rules we are given to practice are based on generally accepted truths about how to perform the task and not on our individual abilities” (p. 14). The black singer trained in Western lyric vocal technique who integrates traditional classical principles with stylistic elements of black cultural aesthetics navigates the representation of their otherness through the context of both performance traditions (Weiss, 2008). Vocal technique as a way to use the voice proficiently becomes a means of cultural and personal expression. Since an authentically black vocal performance results from a singer who places their identity within their own black culture, personal and cultural expression develops into a means of liberation for the singer.

### **Technique as a Means of Personal Expression**

Karen, Julia, and Kenneth are trained primarily in singing classical music; Taylor and Ken are trained in singing musical theatre. A difficulty in describing the characteristics of the styles of singing typical of different musical genres is that the same term does not always mean the same to practitioners (Sundberg, 2014). In classical Western technique, musical forms are generally complex, and singers’ vocalism must support the emphasis on musical composition. The need for audibility surpasses voice characteristics typical of normal speech, such as diction and elocution. In styles where the emphasis is on the words such as musical theatre and jazz, text intelligibility is a major goal; the text is often telling a story, and the musical framework supports the words-first



approach. Julia expresses that classical music is the discipline that opens up a pathway to wrestle with the material that interests her. Ken discusses that his early voice teachers had wanted him to sing opera, but he did not respond positively to the repertoire. He believes, however, that his classical training has served him in the wide range of styles he sings in musical theatre idioms: “You go do the work, you do what’s at hand, the task at hand. And you do it because you’ve been trained to do it, and you have the ability.”

Vocal pedagogy takes into consideration the singer’s vocal health as well as “acquiring and building on [their] skills” in order to create a compelling performance (Edwards, 2005). Awareness of the physical responsiveness and thought processes needed to execute the tasks associated with the field of specialty allows the singer to find their individual voice as a means for their expression. Taylor experiences that her vocal training focuses on the health of her instrument rather than putting a pre-determined sound on her voice. Kenneth feels that age has helped him become more grounded in this technique. Vocal tract size, vocal folds, and laryngeal cartilage reach their adult proportions up to age 20 in natal females and age 27 in natal males (Brunssen, 2018). He muses whether his focus should now be on trying to sing at the Metropolitan Opera or on developing his craft: “Do I continue to work on my technique, become a great artist, and take that artistry to wherever people call me?” For Karen, expanding horizons can give the singer “the possibility to know that you’re more than just the thing that you are pursuing.”

In music and theatre, a work holds an identity and a continuity open towards its future; it is explicitly left open to re-creation and re-interpretation (Gadamer, 1975/2013). The singer being proficient in the musical and verbal language of the piece transforms

meaning into performance through analysis and interpretation. (Crouch, 2010). Numerous differences between Western lyric and popular idioms exist, including written versus oral tradition, historical/cultural context, the use of voice, and learning cultures (Fisher, Kayes, & Pompeil, 2014). In discussing the vocal color associated with black singing styles, Taylor mentions that the actor's job is to explore painful emotions that go along with the piece: "[You] allow yourself to experience a place that might be scary or dark to go to, to find a sound that is appropriate. And then you bring your technique to meet in the middle of those two places." Expressive skills reflect a combination of innate and learned abilities (Lindström, Juslin, Bresin, & Williamon, 2003). In discussing Blanchard's music, Karen relates her experiences as a black woman to those of the character she plays in *Fire Shut Up In My Bones* and to the vocal choices she employs in her portrayal: "Now I want to, and I can, add my thing on it." Julia, in exploring her voice within the context of black music, describes singing music from black writers and composers as her way of looking at her identity. Julia believes that the singer can ask questions of other people around them, but nobody can provide answers for them necessarily. Agency comes about when a singer takes the time and space to make decisions about their vocalism.

### **Technique as a Means of Cultural Expression**

According to Lindström, Juslin, Bresin, and Williamon (2003), instruction of emotional musical expression can be part of pedagogical goals. Instructional approaches include attention to the emotions of the performer, acoustic properties of performance, and aural modeling/ imitation (Woody, 2000). A singer can learn to perform expressively by focusing on emotion and meaning in the music, and from influences from role models

and music teachers. As such, singers denote the interpretive elements of phrasing, note and word articulation, the use of dynamics, vibrato, and degree of improvisation. Taylor states, “I just want you to hear the song more so than think about my acting choices and everything.”

Black cultural aesthetics such as percussive vocal style, contrasting vocal sounds, dialect usage, and melodic embellishment (Steinhaus-Jordan, 2005) disrupt notions of traditional Western tonality and rhythm (Baham, 2015). Kenneth says that using musical indicators does not affect the physical function of his singing voice:

It’s just another layer to the artistry. The technique doesn’t change. But a shirt that you put on the technique changes, which then allows me to go back and forth between genres and composers very easily.

Karen states that engaging with these practices makes the singer demand “more than just pretty tones” from themselves. She uses the analogy of baking to describe the application of these performance practices onto the vocal line:

You can’t ice a cake that’s not baked. Some people do. Some people make a whole career off the icing right out of the can. Hey, if you can do it, godspeed. But no, I always come from “bake the cake first.” Let it be moist and add butter, then we can start to do the other.

The performance of expressive gestures begins with the implementation of vocal technique, or how the physical body responds to what is being asked of it. Musical signifiers emerge from the singer’s implementation of expressive gestures.

### **Personal and Cultural Expression as Means of Liberation**

The concept of *liberation* has both philosophical and political significance in the complex historical context of the existence of slavery in the United States, which defines itself by its dedication to freedom (Gilroy, 1991; Sorret, 2016). Antonio (1983) writes that emancipation is achievable through stimulating social change through democratic

participation and free communication. The presence of black cultural forms is counter-hegemonic to traditional Western forms, challenging familiar contexts of both sets of performance traditions (Baham, 2015). Newland (2014) writes that blackness “ontologically operates as ((re)productions of) instances of resistance most profoundly enacted in sound, particularly vocal sounds” (p. 10). Black artistic forms invoke cultural practices while conceptualizing modernity (Gilroy, 1991). A black singer whose identity is situated within their own culture executes an authentically black performance. In black theatrical forms, the concept of freedom is explored within a historical context of social exclusion and emphasizes the individual’s experience (Barton, 2012). The performer, therefore, is simultaneously aware of their cultural heritage and acts in a way that is aspirational toward personal objectives. Authentic black representation is self-verified positioning in a public sphere in relation to cultural identification.

Julia says, “Following any discipline through, I think, if you take it out whatever it is, whatever you choose very seriously, if the goal is just to get to more liberation within yourself, you can express yourself as you’re wanting to.” Fromm (1962) defines *artists* as “individuals who are – or have been – spontaneous, whose thinking, feeling, and acting were the expression of their selves and not of an automaton” (p. 223). He defines *freedom* as “non-submission to any higher power” (p. 230). In relation to Julia’s statement, the singer who uses an objective medium to express themselves spontaneously must not feel constrained to limitations put upon them from their industry or their society.

Locke (1925/1997) positions the black artist as not merely a purveyor of traditional black aesthetics but creator for self-expressive objectives “for fuller, truer self-expression, the realization of the unwisdom of allowing social discrimination to segregate

him mentally, and a counter-attitude to cramp and fetter his own living” (p. 9). Karen states that her cultural heritage is the polestar of her artistry: “That’s in the forefront of who I am and everything else falls into line. I don’t run away from that.” Ken recounts that he found his “cultural musical voice” through working with the conductor Joyce Brown who told him and the rest of his *Purlie* cast to bring their “blackness” to the music in order to liberate themselves. He says, “She was speaking to us personally. It wasn’t just the show.” Shared cultural practices of vocalization can promote self-worth (Newland, 2014) and a commitment to self-liberation.

### **Position Within One’s Own Legacy**

In the meta-reflection of their heritage, the participants in this study consider their respective positions on the continuum of their cultural legacy. They each reflect on historical figures and personal mentors who have come before them. They also connect their cultural heritage to their peers and to younger generations of performers. In this way, each performer acts as learner, exemplar, advocate, and transmitter of culture, positioning themselves at the nexus of their cultural legacy.

### **Performer as Learner**

Each participant reveals that they perform research before going into a new project. Ken believes that artists must honor their culture by educating themselves about what is known to have been happening at the time that the work was written or is set. In preparing for a role that has a black theme attached, Julia states, “I think it starts the same as with anything else that I prepare. That’s really just in research.” Karen, Kenneth, Julia, and Taylor talk about looking at source materials from the time period of the pieces that

they are performing. Reading historical non-fiction is also a strategy to contextualize the drama. Taylor states, “The more you read about the history of our country, the more it all makes sense.” Since many black shows deal with themes of marginalization and objectification, the performer should know historical context of the perspectives of persons from the respective time periods. André (2018) states that choral singing and minstrelsy provides two arenas to contextualize black participation in opera (and I would add all stage works featuring black bodies). The popularity of the Fisk Jubilee Singers in the nineteenth century solidifies the performance of slave songs as mass entertainment. Choral arrangements of spirituals bring “dignity to a form previously sung by black people to black people in less formal settings” (André, p. 31). These arrangements are in stark contrast to the racial parody of minstrelsy. Schroeder (2010) writes that the music that emerged from blackface minstrelsy is “indispensable to our understanding of a American popular music, the larger cultural forces that produce it, and the sophisticated racial commentary of the talented artists who crafted and performed the songs” (p. 140). Kenneth says that the performer must feel the significance of the circumstances portrayed in the music. When the performer synthesizes the information for themselves, they have agency to answer questions about who the character is and how the character would respond under the given circumstances of the drama.

Looking at popular musical forms as crafts, Julia examines the stylistic conventions of jazz and blues music. Listening to historical audio recordings becomes integral to her and to the other participants of this study. Brittingham Furlonge (2018) attests to the dynamic relationship between listening and sounding: “Learning is listening. Listening is an education” (p. 118). Complex relationships between sounds, contexts, and

meanings are uncovered when the singer adopts an intentional listening practice. Kenneth states that he listens to singers who instinctively inspire him. He describes hearing classical singers performing spirituals with the ingredients of an authentic cultural approach to their singing: “Florence Quivar [...] That spirituals CD is the best spirituals CD ever made by any human being in the world. In the first note, I visualized plantations.” Julia listens for the stylistic elements used by the recorded singers: “It’s not about having a black enough voice. It’s like, ‘What is the styling of this rep, and then how do I feel that that styling is settled in my body?’” She indicates that she has found more liberation in her instrument by trying to figure out how other people sing. Through purposeful listening, the singer identifies motifs from cultural aesthetics and then can alter them to create their own meanings.

As a young artist, Ken was able to meet and watch performers from the generation before his, including Lena Horne, Diahann Carroll, Josephine Premice, Avon Long, and Joseph Attles. He was also able to work with luminaries Cab Calloway and Geoffrey Holder. He says, “I feel so blessed to come through at a time when those people were still alive and living and performing and doing what they did and generous in letting you take from them what would be useful to you.” Kenneth talks about the training and the grooming that he received as a young singer from more experienced artists such as Arthur Woodley, Alvy Powell, Gordon Hawkins, Mark Rucker, and Marquita Lister. Mentorship becomes an integral mechanism to support marginalized individuals within an industry (Roland, 2008). Kenneth affirms the power of seeing black performers thriving in his industry, “Seeing all that at 22, 23 years old, I’m like, ‘Wow. You all look like me, and you all are doing it like this? I can do this.’”

Another way of learning that the participants talk about is through working with peers. Taylor asks her colleagues whose singing she admires about their voices and then tries to copy their sound. Julia has sessions with singers with whom she is in a show to coach her on an aspect of their singing that she likes: “I’ve learned some just incredible tools that way.” With performance being a collaborative experience, knowledge creation happens between colleagues within social contexts. Intentional acquisition of skills includes comprehension of peers’ styles and perspectives.

### **Performer as Exemplar**

A singer uses a set of tools to bring a desired expressive effect of their intent of the text and music (Schechner, 2001). They decide their vocal style according to acoustic environment, the musical accompaniment, and the level of musical emphasis of the composition (Sundberg, 2014). Awareness of physical responsiveness and thought processes needed to execute their musical tasks enables the singer to find their individual voice to transform text and music into an experience with performative force. Technique, therefore, is a means, not an end, for them to find their individual voice for expression. When discussing black singing aesthetics that fall outside of Western lyric ideals in “My Own Morning,” Taylor states, “I just got to sing a song however I want so I get that freedom.” Her interpretation is based on her individual set of skills and her ideas on how the song moves her in the moment. In her discussion of playing the title role of *Tosca*, Karen discusses the abandon she felt getting to contemporize the character as a modern black woman in the US. The singer constructs meaning in art through their life experiences and the performed environment.



The performing arts require the interplay between the practices of stage performance and the behavior of all participants, performers and audience members (Worthen, 1998). The performer's behavior represents modes of communication that point to hidden meanings of cultural influences (Snyder-Young, 2010). Audiences understand performances within the context of their current sociocultural climate.

Kenneth discusses that white audience members adulate him when he sings the song "Old Man River" from the musical *Show Boat*:

White people coming to me crying, "Oh, the 'Old Man River' was so beautiful. Oh my God. Oh my God. You sound like Paul Robeson." I'm so sick of that comparison. I don't sound like Paul Robeson. I love Paul Robeson. But I don't sound like Paul Robeson. Just because that is your only connection to this piece, don't put that on me.

Listeners make connections when sound stimuli contain formulations from their auditory culture (Mohn, Argstatter, & Wilker, 2010). In lieu of performativity as the meta-meaning of text and gesture reiterating sociocultural norms, audiences perceive performances in the context based on learned behavior reifying social institutions. Text and music are transformed by the performative environment (Worthen, 1998).

Ken states that singers from earlier generations had to be "a bit of a hybrid" to mix black aesthetics with dominant cultural practices. These artists brought meaning to their otherness by performing their own performance traditions within the context of Eurocentric conceptions of aesthetics (Weiss, 2008). Ken's string of shows from the early part of his career have him performing a scope of styles of black musical theatre, all intending to represent aspects of black culture: *Ain't Misbehavin'* was aimed at presenting the Harlem Renaissance "in the best possible way"; *The Wiz* was "our own expression about ourselves to the world at large." Julia, in describing the reason to

perform “Si j’étais blanche” in a way far removed from the original version, wants modern audiences to be able to understand the pain and tension around being a black entity in a white space. Karen relates to Blanchard’s operatic music “because it’s so connected in the culture. It’s rooted in the jazz and the blues and the gospel.” Cultural elements are demonstrated in the representation of musical and dramatic tools that a singer employs.

The singer communicates through the implementation of musical indicators. When they execute authentic aspects of black culture, they become a representative of cultural capital. The audience assumes that the singer conveys the truth of their own culture, thereby representing others (Moore, 2002). Representation affords a viewer the opportunity to see like persons on stage or to have some sort of connection with whom they see on that stage. Taylor states, “I think I do what I do because I’ve been inspired by others to do it, and I hope to inspire others to do it.” She understands the significance of being a black woman on stage and the inspiration that she inspires in younger audience members: “I got to be a princess in the last show I did, and there aren’t enough black princesses around. So I don’t want to forget how important that is. [...] I know it’s inspired little black girls after me.”

### **Performer as Advocate**

Each of the participants mention limitations put upon them because of industry standards. Persons in control of casting choices engage in reiterating ideological and behavioral regimes that operate in contemporary social life (Moore, 2002). Typecasting, or assigning the same type of role to a performer as a result of their appearance or prior success in a similar role, reifies systems of stereotypes which “may be the core of our

personal tradition, the defenses of our position in society” (Lippmann, 1921). Karen and Kenneth point to the matter that few black singers have professional management which is a necessary requirement in order to audition for top opera companies. Karen explains that a certain expectation ensues after a black singer walks into an audition, “Before you even open your mouth.” Julia’s assessment coincides with Karen’s in that everyone, including the singer, is acknowledging the presence of the person of color within the white dominated space of the audition room. As a performer of mixed heritage, Taylor discloses that she previously had an insecurity that she was not “black enough” for a career in theatre due to the expectations based on her appearance. The industry signifies to both performers and viewers a fidelity to or a nonconformity with social reality.

Ironically, the versatility of the “limitless black throat” as well as the plurality of expression of black identities force a black singer into a box. For example, Kenneth points to the idea that singing in *Porgy and Bess* will pigeonhole a black singer into performing only those types of roles: “I know so many singers who sang [at the Metropolitan Opera] in the last production in the 80s that have never been back. And I told my agents I didn’t want to be a statistic. That statistic.” Karen states that American Western lyric singers are trained to perform a wide range of musical idioms, but then are expected to stay within a limited number of roles. She also thinks that the range and facility that black singers gain from black cultural aesthetics confuses those in positions of power. Kenneth believes, for example, that voice teachers confuse a full or rich color with voice type: “They either want to push it down in Fach or push it out and try to make it bigger. Or make you something that you’re not because they don’t understand the ingredients in the voice.” The effect of the voice upsets enlightened reason of the

“distanced spectator” (Duncan, 2004, p. 287). Vocality through the combination of typecasting and sound perception can limit a black singer’s opportunities in both the opera and musical theatre industries.

Once hired, a black singer may find that they are the only person with their identity on the job. Kenneth states, “It’s an undeniable weight on your shoulders. [...] People are watching you. People are listening to you with ears that are way more critical than everyone else.” Taylor attests that in this situation, she does not want to feel as if she is portraying a stereotype: “As maybe the only black person in a concert or whatever, one of the few, I don’t ever want to get up there and feel like I’m doing like a minstrel of any kind.” Because a performer is placed in their box, they are supposed to do certain kinds of actions and perform a limited set of skills. Julia says that she has had to develop the ability of being “good at shape-shifting as most of black people.” When Ken joined the cast of *Cats*, it was the first time in his Broadway career to that point in which he stepped outside of a racialized production. He says, “Some of my friends [...] thought I’d sold out in some certain way. And I thought, ‘But it’s a role. I don’t think of it as being not black. [...] You’re a cat.’” In systems like opera and theatre with longstanding traditions, viewers control and define stereotypes (Dyer, 1999).

Taylor says, “Theatre is a very collaborative process, and there are times that you need to stand up for what you need to say.” Each of the participants note times where need to advocate for themselves in rehearsals and performances. Taylor feels the responsibility as often the only female of color in the room to bring attention to the performed and performative aspects of the production. One circumstance where self-advocacy occurs is in portrayal of black skin through technical elements. For example,

both Karen and Ken describe issues with wigs and makeup in productions. Karen says, “Your fingers and toes and everything is crossed when, your first day, you go in for your makeup because you already know that it’s a 95 percent chance that it’s going to be problematic.” Kenneth also declares that self-advocacy can be met unfavorably: “I have to be the one to speak up to say, ‘Those colors don’t work on my skin and I’m not going to look right on stage.’ And then I’m the bitch.” The condition of representing oneself can start the process of making situations better for other black performers who might work under the same circumstances later.

The participants each talk about being in positions to advocate for other singers. Status as established performers gives them agency. Julia’s anecdote about her “white adjacent privilege” indicates her commitment to a type of public service, especially along the issues of marginalization and objectification. Kenneth states, “It’s one thing to do my thing and to be successful. But it’s the reaching back part, too.” The idea emerges of positioning oneself as an *upstander* who recognizes equal situations and take “conscientious, deliberate, and immediate steps” to aid others in need of help (Grantham and Biddle, 2014, p. 177). The upstander feels the responsibility of pointing out injustices to industry persons in positions of power. Kenneth states, “You can’t fix it until you can face it.” This means pressing people to think outside of the box and to take active steps toward practices that foster diversity and inclusivity. Kenneth goes on, “I’m trying to ensure that the kids coming up behind me have a safe, healthy industry to come into.”

Karen and Kenneth believe that the artistic and administrative teams of performing arts organizations should look like the communities that they serve. Julia points to problems with the educational pathway that lead black people to arts leadership

positions related to racial inequality in K-12 education: “If they are not also taught, then, how to analyze what they’re reading and know how to talk about it, know how to bring themselves to it, how can you fucking expect anybody to be interested in classical music?” Kenneth feels that the industry at large must learn how to address nuanced discussions to address the different interests of persons of a variety of marginalized characteristics. He asserts that the opera industry would need to be fixed from the inside out: “It’s going to take almost a complete overhaul.” This would require administrators who are open to inclusive practices. Karen inquires, “Why when they mount black productions the whole production table is white?” Currently few black persons hold positions in which they are part of the decision-making process. The participants opine that persons with oppressed identities must be encouraged to imagine themselves in leadership roles. Artistic teams that include black directors, conductors, and designers could transform the opera industry by affording them opportunities to exercise their agency and creativity.

### **Performer as Transmitter**

In discussing the original Broadway production of *The Wiz*, Ken says, “That was 1975. We were being clear and distinct about what we were saying. Why is it muddy now? This is 2019. We should be more distinct.” He connects the beginnings of his career and the need to share the traditions of black aesthetics. Knowledge that is consciously inherited creates a sense of collective identity and group position (Bourdieu, 1986). Demonstration of expressive elements is embedded in the representation of musical and dramatic tools that increases the circulation of cultural capital. Karen worries that younger generations are not aware of the practices of black culture: “They’re not

knowing the traditions before. They're just in the moment. [...] Culture is an important thing." Near the end of our interview, she says, "I'm now going to think more clearly about why I make certain choices [...] and [be] a little bit more thoughtful about why I make choices, not just for me, but then I can also relate it back to other people." When Ken directs productions of *Ain't Misbehavin'*, he hopes that members of the casts will pass on the information in the future, "I say, 'Please when you get to the point when you're passing it on, please pass it on. Otherwise, it will disappear.'" The onus is on the artist to become skilled at and execute authentic representations, to be accessible to learners who are interested, and to encourage them to keep sharing aspects of black culture.

### Summary

The purpose of this chapter is to provide cross-case analysis of collected data to investigate individualistic and common themes in the participants' experiences in the representation of the black singing voice on stage. Three emergent themes are explored:

1. Authenticity is rooted in the singer's experience of cultural traditions and expression.
2. Technique is a means of personal and cultural expression and provides the opportunity for personal liberation.
3. A singer positions themselves at the nexus of their cultural legacy as a learner, exemplar, advocate, and transmitter of culture.

The related literature and data retrieved from interviews, audio/visual analysis, and stimulated recall provides answers to the three research questions.

## Chapter VI

### CONCLUSION

#### **Introduction**

In this dissertation, the participants reveal that a black performer employs vocal and acting strategies when performing musical idioms including racialized themes. The use of the voice by performers in theatrical works representing black themes was explored with the follow guiding research questions:

1. How does a black performer employ vocal and acting techniques when performing a musical or theatrical idiom that includes racialized themes?
2. How does a performer navigate performativity and vocality?
3. What can the answers to the above question reveal about what happens at the intersection of performance and the performer's identity?

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the experiences of singers who identify as black or African American in representing their respective singing voice on stage. The narratives of five singers present the experiences and perceptions of representation in their respective entertainment industries. The findings in relation to the research questions revealed the following themes: authenticity is rooted in the singer's experience of cultural traditions and expression, technique is a means of personal and cultural expression and provides the opportunity for personal liberation, and a singer positions themselves at the nexus of their cultural legacy as a learner, exemplar, advocate, and transmitter of culture.



An authentically black voice emerges from a black person rooted in a meta-reflexive demonstration of their cultural heritage. A voice does not exist without performing an action (Lavan, Burton, Scott, & McGettigan, 2019). The ensuing information becomes encoded over time. In the paradigm of black vocal aesthetics, refiguration emphasizes the chain of signifiers itself. The dialogue between performer and audience Signifies (Gates, 1988/2014), that is, uses black cultural references as means of self-expression. Received meanings are in synchrony with other musical tropes and in diachrony from how concepts change over time.

Musical signifiers emerge from a singer's implementation of expressive gestures. The performance of expressive gestures begins with the implementation of vocal technique, or how the physical body responds to what is being asked of it. The "limitless black throat," as Kenneth calls it, displays versatility in range and color. Vocal flexibility through changes in the acoustic properties of expressive vocal signals has powerful effects on identity perception for both performer and listener (Lavan et al., 2018). Technique, the means by which the singer uses the voice efficiently and healthfully, is a way for personal and cultural expression. The singer who uses an art form for self-expression must exercise their freedom within the circumscription of their industry. As described by the participants, music and theatre have the capacity to liberate. The concept of *liberation* or *freedom* has unique meaning across the African diaspora. Social and theoretical movements such as Black Power Movement, the South African Black Consciousness Movement, Black Liberation Theology, Womanist Theology, Intersectionality, and Critical Race Theory point to the fight against the historical context of societal exclusion of black people. In black music and theatrical forms, the individual

experience highlights the performer's cultural identification and agency to act without outside hindrance.

The participants communicate that a black performer navigates performativity and vocality through the lens of self-identification as a black person. The singer's expression is generated in part through the implementation of musical gestures. Julia says, "It's not about having a black enough voice. It's like, what is the styling of this rep[ertoire], and then how do I feel that that styling is settled in my body?" In black music, implementing expressive tools reflects black cultural aesthetics. A singer, rooted in their experience of cultural traditions and expression, is afforded agency when they take the time and space to make decisions about their vocalism. Authentic black representation is positioning oneself in a public sphere in relation to one's cultural identification. Therefore, representation extends beyond only black theatrical and musical forms. It is the way the artist portrays themselves from their own set of values or ideologies.

Blackness, performed or heard, is bound to a community identity. The participants communicate that a black performer is positioned at the center of their cultural legacy through self-identification as a black person and through the liberation to explore black cultural aesthetics. Karen describes "the root" that connects the African diaspora:

They talk about slavery and talk about the fabric of America; it's in the root. Racism and all these things in the soil. Same thing for all your cells and all your everything. It's just a part of you.

Identity expresses the mutual relation between the sameness within oneself and the similitude of essential characteristics with others (Erikson, 1956). The singularity of the self is seen within and through its relation to all other singularities including itself. Dialectics emerge between the self and the community, including an ontological

understanding of the present and the past. Identity is constructed in and because of the presence of others.

As a learner, the artist is responsible for researching their history. They also must take opportunities to interface with older generations of performers and with their peers. As an exemplar of cultural styles, they demonstrate cultural elements in their use of musical and dramatic tools, which are based on acoustic environment, musical collaboration, and musical idiom. As an advocate, they must use their agency to stand up for themselves and insist on making situations better for those who may come after them. And as transmitter of their culture, they must share the traditions of black culture. Ken states, "It is the integrity of what our African American heritage is." The artist must become skilled at executing black aesthetics and encouraging other artists to learn about and spread black culture.

Although commonalities exist regarding what constitutes a black sound, the current study offers that no uniformity is existent in how to sound black. No empirical data can confirm what an authentic representation of black culture can look like. Each participant found both a sense of uniqueness because of their culture and a sense uniqueness within their own manifestation of their culture. Taylor states:

"You don't sound black," or "You do sound black," and you're like, "What does that even mean?" Because that's going to mean different things to different people. And I do sound black no matter how I sound, because I am black.

African American Vernacular English as well as black musical signifiers is used in expressions of group identification. In sung music, a singer's natural speech rhythm and intonation adapt to the musical rhythm and melody (Lavan et al., 2019). A voice may present itself in an individual way, allowing for unique patterns or representations. The

navigation of each participant's vocality comes from the expression of the experience of their blackness.

The grain of the voice, or the body of the voice showing the relationship between language and music mediated through vocal production, signifies meaning to the listener. The perception of vocal signals depends on the individual listener and their experience with similar acoustic stimuli. Timbral blackness, in the case of the present study, comes from the sound that emerges from a black body and from the construction of meaning created by the listener. Ken describes adding black musical signifiers on stage offers the audience a sense of reality for who the character played by a black performer is: "It doesn't break anything; it just makes it real." Meaning is constructed from life experiences and environment. A musical signifier cannot escape its received meanings. It is understood within the context of current understanding. A listener responds to sonic variability to achieve a stable comprehension of identity. Meaning emerges from a plurality of implications in relation to the signifier to what is being signified, pointing to group and individual identity performance. For Gates (1988/2014), musical Signification extends musical forms in a kind of double-voiced formal revision, that is, an artist's heightened awareness of and adjustment to the listener. Discourse develops between what the artist performs and what the listener hears.

### **From the Literal Voice to the Figurative Voice: Implications**

When I began this research project, I had been initially curious about the use of vocal technique and performance practice of black singers when performing theatrical music based on themes from the African diaspora. My decision to interview high-level performers was inspired by a quote by Langer (1997/ 2016) who argues, "Most of us are

not taught our skills, whether academic, athletic, or artistic, by the real experts” (p. 14).

*Doing* and *teaching* are distinct lines of business. Learning directly from people who are currently working in the highest echelons of any profession is not always possible. As such, knowledge acquisition from researching what elite performers do was the central way to retrieve and share information from high-level players. The goal of the interview process was to gather information on self-identification and processes in preparation and performance. The methodological choices had been selected to look for the standards of vocal quality in order to define characteristics of modern vocal production and expression in empirical terms.

However, during the first interview that I did, I realized that vocalization might not be the primacy of what the participants would discuss. Much of the time when I would ask about usage of the voice or about vocal technique, the answer would be given in terms of personal expression or cultural representation. Below is an example from my discussion with Karen, who was my first interviewee:

Michael: We talked about this a little bit, but what are some non-classical techniques that you use? You had talked about the bending of notes in your own singing and [Leontyne Price’s]. But in your own singing, what are some things that you use, especially in these roles that we’ve been talking about?

Karen: Non-classical things? I never thought about it like that before.

Michael: I guess because in classical, we think about bel canto, we think clean line, clean [vocalism].

Karen: I think the thing is – That’s the thing. I think that wherever you are, whatever characters you’re portraying, whatever part of the world you’re in, you have to color it. People have to know where we are, right? We have to know if you are – But I was told that’s the composer’s job is to color the space of where you’re supposed to be. We are to interpret the characters for who they are. How do you make *Madame Butterfly* Asian vocally, written by Puccini? There’s just no real way to do that. But I think that [there is a way to make a character black] when you are singing jazz operas or blues operas.

I found myself listening deeply to understand how each participant has developed their skill set which includes vocal technique, acting technique, and movement experience. The conversations moved quickly away from the literal voice to the figurative voice. Discussions began with the sounds that the participants made. Then they shifted to the way the participants expressed themselves; the singers talked about finding their voice in relationship to their respective identities and styles. The voice emerged as a means of agency for expression and communication.

The remainder of this chapter provides implications for pre-professional training and for higher education. Alignment of technique, personal expression, and identity infuses a singer's sound with meaning; fostering the black singer's use of their cultural capital helps them transform their life experiences into artistic interpretation. Representation, the use of signs that link a person to their cultural circles, is an act of re-humanization, combating dehumanization caused by systematic and societal exclusion by placing positive images at the center of their cultural legacy. In higher education, pre-professional training becomes humanizing when expression is viewed as a means of critical understanding of a student's lived experience. Also, inspiring persons with marginalized identities requires re-centralizing power toward those who can imagine themselves transforming the entertainment industry into a more inclusive artistic practice.

### **Syzygy of Technique, Personal Expression, and Identity**

The participants of the current study describe aspects of their artistic execution in terms of putting themselves into their stage craft, or their skillset as performers. Great singers inhabit fully realized, three-dimensional characters, which emerge from the straight-line configuration, or *syzygy*, of technique, personal expression, and identity.

Embodying music and a character means finding the intersection of the performer's imaginative and technical skills and the vocal style the performer must employ in regard to acoustic environment, musical collaboration, and musical idiom. A truly great performance transforms technical skills into a unique, context-sensitive experience (Langer, 1997/2016). Singers must align technique study, personal expression, and idiomatic representation at the center of the work so that their performing can emerge from the way that they synthesize outside information and their own construction of understanding.

The voice has properties that are both material (sounding) and cultural (Signifyin'). Eisheim (2019) defines these as *measurable* ("the universality of vocal function" demonstrated through physical construct) and *symbolic* ("the thick event of the voice" heard through social meaning and cultural construct) (pp. 14 – 15). Conscious use of the measurable voice actualizes the symbolic voice according one's identity. For the black artist, this is using the Signified voice. Individual expression is based in highly distinctive timbres, musical sensitivity, and timbral changes emerging from a history of cultural patterns from pan-African and European heritages. They infuse their sound with meaning by employing musically idiomatic signifiers and maneuvering through their individual timbre. Each participant of the current study discussed that their artistic expression was tied up in the expression of their identity.

If technique provides the opportunity for personal and cultural expression, then vocal pedagogy should train the singer's physical body and their habits of thought which bring meaning to cultural signifiers. Fisher, Kayes, and Pompeil (2014) suggest that voice teachers should be educated in understanding the vocal function, performance practice,

and pedagogical goals of multiple genres. Pedagogy can focus on helping singers infuse musical components in traditional black musical forms. Learning becomes a reflection on the world from connecting lessons from educational settings to lived experiences (hooks, 2014). Students transform life experiences into artistic interpretation, navigating the complexities of navigating their multiple sources of cultural capital. Karen states:

There is something about the experience of African Americans, black Americans, that is very specific – I mean, it’s amazing. It’s penetrated every other culture in the world. That one culture, our culture, has penetrated everything and changed the whole scope and dynamic of music, art, culture, food, everything. So there is a lot of pride in being a black American.

Fostering the Signified voice empowers the singer of color to use assets already abundant in their community for instrumental and communicative learning and for transforming perspectives.

### **Re-humanizing through Representation**

According to Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, and Jackson (2008), stereotypes of black Americans are “so strong and well-rehearsed” that they influence perception and behavior by others, even when people are motivated to be racially egalitarian (p. 294). The effects of systematic and societal racism can have a dehumanizing effect on its targets, causing feelings of being less than human. Montero (2019) writes, “Dehumanization can be combated by calling it out by name, identifying its players, squashing its power, forgiving, and then acting with empathy and compassion for oneself and others” (p. 119). The participants, by placing themselves within the context of their cultural legacy, resist acts of dehumanization by functioning as learners, exemplars, advocates, and transmitters of black culture.



Representation becomes an act of re-humanization. For the onlooker, seeing a performer playing a character who shares phenotypical features and cultural identity with them can have a positive effect if the character behaves in ways that reflect the breadth of their life experience. Dopierała, Jankowiak-Siuda, and Boski (2017) write that culture is “a key factor affecting a sense of similarity and kinship” (p. 113). People understand those who belong to their own cultural circle. Widening the lens of examples of performers from previous generations as well as those of current performers might be particularly useful to show pre-elite singers a range of professional possibilities, especially given the emphasis on the versatility of the black voice.

I believe that mentorship as firsthand representation is a means to help under-represented students better understand the transition from the student realm to a professional career. Roland (2008) attests that mentoring is a mechanism that can support marginalized individuals within organizations (p. 56). The development of relationships can actualize inclusive practices, offering a means by which the voice of the “other” may be heard at a structural level within the educational institution (p. 59). Additionally, institutions should facilitate what Duntley-Matos (2014) calls “culturally responsive, proactive, and strategically reactive mentorship” from within the industry (p. 464). Educators do not always have the most up-to-date information about the current trends in the business. As such, a connection which gives access to broader networks may increase the mentee’s social capital for future employment (p. 452). Mentorship would be especially effective if the mentor shares cultural traits with the student. Kenneth and Ken both mention the illustrious black artists who gave them counsel in the earlier parts of their careers. Guidance by someone who shares identity can help the student root

themselves as learners of their cultural legacy. Effective mentorship would include critical awareness, strategic reactivity, and practical competence needed to navigate the paradigms of transformative complicity, cultural humility, and empowerment (p. 444).

### **Musical Meaning Making in Higher Education**

Music in its most general sense is primarily a mode of self-expression. As an art form, it makes the student reflect and transform life experiences into artistic interpretation. According to Frith (1996), music making is best understood as an experience of the “self-in-process” (p. 109), as the relationship between one’s identity and the social, physical, and material context in which the music is being performed. For Karen, a singer’s artistry can be elevated by the exploration of music from the singer’s cultural heritage. Expression connects not only to the individual’s emotions, but also more importantly as a critical understanding of the reasons behind the experience. Pre-professional training should therefore focus on praxis, the cyclical process of learning and reflection that is discursive and humanizing. Pedagogical choices must be anchored in the principle of training the singer to be able to engage with their own personal and cultural expression. This type of education opens doors to empowerment for bodies and voices of students with marginalized identities. Students must combine personal expression and technique study at the center of their work so that performing reflects the way that they synthesize outside information and their own construction of understanding.

The participants offer that the entertainment industry needs to change from the inside in order to increase inclusivity. If the entertainment industry requires a complete overhaul in order to deepen its commitment to inclusivity, so too must the institutions of

higher learning which send professionals into the industry. If the profession demands a specific way of operating, higher education institutions must respond by producing performers to fit that specific way of operating. I believe more should be discussed in the stages *before* entering into the professional arena, specifically in university-level and young artist training programs. The process to change the way musicking is viewed in the academy requires nuanced thinking and active embodiment. The extended period engaged with the respective art form while in formalized study allows for the space for a student to create dialogic experiences with the repertoire. For example, Julia chose to examine herself and her identity through her singing while in institutions of higher education. Students must respond to the cultural context of the time and space of the music and the story. They must also take into consideration current performance situations in which they occur and the meanings they send. They explore artistry from firsthand perspectives by executing tasks necessary in the creation of music and theatre.

Currently, selective music programs struggle with ethnic diversity and equity (Landes, 2008). Ineffective recruitment of minorities is perpetuated by the effects of cultural and socioeconomic factors which hinder identifying potential music students (Clements, 2009). Training programs, whether they are degree-granting institutions or young artist training opportunities, need to ask: *What are we looking for in a student who has what it takes to “learn to sing?”* Answering the question would mean revising definitions for greater inclusion. Koza (2008) writes that university audition committees currently look for qualities defined by Western lyric, high art music presented according to accepted performance practices. Koza goes on to state that these standards are reflections of “affirmations of whiteness” because they indicate access to early musical

training, pointing to a widening affluence gap which has racial implications (p. 149). Music educators must recognize the presence of racially discriminatory practices in the audition process and work toward dismantling them. They must talk about race and pull apart racist systems that foster exclusion. They must create spaces to question hegemonic ideas of quality and to generate multiple ways to think about music. Borrowing from Freeman (2014), an audition panel for a tertiary music institution could consider making decisions based on both audition and formalized interview. The prospective student could present their ability to relate to colleagues as well as show other traits that might be desirable to the institution. Engaging prospective students who have innovative and entrepreneurial ideas about a broad range of music might be what is needed to transform the makeup of music departments.

Learning environments of questioning and generating make space for thoughtful and purposeful expression of ideas and emotions. Educators in the classrooms, rehearsal rooms, and university stages can create environments in which students encounter and investigate music and drama on their own terms. Aroa and Clemens (2013) propose shifting beyond classrooms being “safe spaces,” where safety and comfort might become conflated, to spaces emphasizing bravery (p. 135). Authentic engagement with new ways of seeing things requires risk. In dramatic creation, students must reframe their epistemological frameworks away from larger societal binary discrimination or judgment with which they might be most comfortable. They are asked to reject prior ways of thinking to discover deep meanings within the context of their lives. Generating artistic work connects them to their own emotional expression and a critical perception of their experience, placing them within the center of authentic manifestation of their

community's cultural capital. Ken states that he liberated himself through the manifestation of his black vocal identity. The need to generate art puts it in the center of the artist's attention and in the paradoxical place where profound truth emerges next to profound truth. A person's intersectional identity, with the overlapping of social and political group associations, is a source of multidimensional decision-making processes and outcomes. When students with marginalized identities are encouraged to create brave work, they begin the process in which personal skills transform into art, and art transforms into personal meaning making. A portal is created through which the artist enters with a mindful approach to their expression.

Educational institutions must afford students opportunities to understand not only industry standards but also their individual artistic expression through firsthand experience. The two goals of content should be to develop a knowledge base and to develop learning skills (Weimer, 2013, p. 117). Vocal training addresses the physical body through features that include human anatomy and physiology, posture for singing, vocal resonance, vocal registration, and voice classification. The training of burgeoning professional performers must also address the habits of thought and cultural signifiers in order to ensure that students understand the deep meanings of social contexts. *Learning skills* describes the tasks involved in learning; in the performing arts, these include time management, study skills, and rehearsal decorum. Skill development can be achieved by walking through critical aspects of the discipline. Students must be made aware of the content itself as well as how to learn and use the content for their individual artistry.

Educators hold the responsibility that comes with having access to new worlds of understanding. Ruitenberg (2015) attests that the teacher must demonstrate hospitality to

assist newcomers through portals of new knowledges. This is particularly valuable for the “other’s” ability to enter the worlds inhabited by the educator (p. 16). A singer with marginalized identities “who brings memories and fears and desires that educational spaces have not always received well” (Ruitenbergh, 2018, p. 262), must be welcomed into the brave spaces of imaginative creation that explores self-expression. Ruitenbergh writes, “An ethic of hospitality is an expression of the educator’s responsibility and not a project to shape students into particular kinds of moral subjects” (2015, p. 138). Shirazi (2017) names a “pedagogy of belonging” as one that connects learning “with broader structural conditions that enable marginalization and limit the recognition of non-normative bodies as meaningful political bodies” (p. 14). By making space where individuals are engaged to think critically and are entrusted with the responsibility of what happens in the classroom, educators de-center power, re-orienting the inherent authority of the teacher to the margins in order to be able to look toward those who need the most support.

Educational institutions must create structures that produce systemic support for all students who enter the doors of the conservatory. For students for whom otherness is a source of creativity, knowledge building emerges from a firsthand contextualized place from where ideas are stimulated in their own words. For a singer with marginalized identities, the beginning stages of training requires navigation of the processes necessary to create a performance that is authentic to the genre in which they are working. Stanton (2018) writes that “oppressed musickers [are] capable of the sign reading and deconstruction that occurs in the academy, albeit from different epistemic frameworks” (p. 15). The feedback loop of exploring self-expression, receiving feedback, and trying

again that is created in the classroom and the rehearsal room then is carried by the student into the world as part of the day-to-day negotiations of knowledge and power.

Students must be allowed to encounter the music and the characters with frameworks that they already understand. Producing creative work is a means for meaning making. Students' self-expression helps them make meaning of their life experiences. Institutions can thus foster their abilities to make informed musical choices as well as their critical consciousness. Embodiment in this way creates the most intimate connection to what is being performed, associating feelings from experiences, integrating doing and thinking. Students should be encouraged to think critically through their art to make sense of the music as well as their own life events. Training becomes an exercise of understanding through doing. Artistic creation occurs in the cultural context of contemporary time and space. Artists should be aware, taking note of the messages they are sending. Creativity stemming from sense of otherness can liberate students to explore their self-expression through a practice of their own within the parameters of a tradition. Holding art (the ideal) with life (the real) invites learners and facilitators into implicit awareness of multiple perspectives, openness to diverse sources of information, and endless innovation.

Arts education should allow the student to disrupt their commonplace experience in order to explore mad, subjective acts of artistic expression. Students view music as something to be constantly questioned and transformed through building critical consciousness which enables them to be their own effective agents. Those who develop critical knowledge have an enhanced range of informed musical choices that can be used to interpret works classic and contemporary. Music creation transforms technical skills

into a unique, context-sensitive experience. Singers must put a combination of technique study, personal expression, and representation of their identity at the center of the work so that their performing can emerge from the way that they synthesize outside information and their own construction of understanding.

The imaginative, creative exercise of performance becomes an endeavor in meaning making. Having the opportunity to put the music, text, and character work in front of an audience helps to clarify one's inner life and life of feelings. By seeing that artistic training is a process of understanding through doing, preparing a presentation in front of an audience, whether for paying patrons or for peers, strengthens the music-making process in a positive social context. Inclusive practices can lead to a transformation of how audiences and industry insiders view the place of minoritized bodies on stage. Meaning is made through connection, deduced, and explicitly shared through lived experience. In performance, a singer is empathetically wired and conducts a current to an audience member who transmits it to another audience member so that everyone in the shared space experiences that moment together. There is tremendous freedom and generosity when the collective acts truthfully to the given present moment.

### **Empowered Progress through Diverse Voices**

Being an elite performer is multifaceted. Performance in music demands a range of aspects including extreme commitment, early specialization, psychological pressure, expertise, deliberate practice, motivation, and flow (Pecen, Collins, & MacNamara, 2016). Challenges emerge from cultural beliefs and conventions existing in musical learning and performance. A singer's career requires a navigation of personal artistry, vocal health, and how to fit inside an industry that relies on a specific range of repertoire.



As the participants of this study note, tension exists between industry standards and finding one's individual voice. To bring a character to life leaves the performer vulnerable to the consequences of what is being evoked through personal associations of external sources and internal interpretation. Singers who do not conform to societal standards of appearance and identity struggle with the prospect of the effects of exclusion. The participants also ask about how to bring about change in the grand scheme of their respective industries. No one answer materializes; however, fostering a singer's individualized talent to help them embrace what they do very well can help them advocate for themselves.

The participants offer that the entertainment industry needs to change from the inside in order to increase inclusivity. Currently, the dominant voice is primarily white and male. When speaking power comes singularly from a place of privilege, opportunities for others to exercise their power, agency, and voice are threatened. Marcuse (1964) theorizes that the source of a cultural revolution will be in reaction to consumer society and will be led by marginalized groups. A way to revamp the system is by inspiring persons with marginalized identities to imagine themselves transforming the business of opera into a more inclusive artistic practice. As Friere (1970) argues, "Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both [the oppressor and oppressed]" (p. 44). For marginalized persons in a conservative institution (in the sense of one that aims to preserve a tradition), they must be given the opportunity to see themselves as initiators of their own choices and facilitators for others to perform their own activities. Leadership is not about the position that one holds. Rather, it is action to create opportunities for others and oneself to exercise the agency of

the voice. As the composition of the art forms' singers and audiences becomes more multicultural, persons with marginalized identities must be encouraged to imagine themselves transforming the business into a more inclusive artistic practice.

### **Recommendations**

The end of the writing of this dissertation occurs amid the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I found myself revisiting James Baldwin's (1963) essay "A Talk to Teachers" which invokes, "Let's begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time." In the year that Baldwin was writing, the United States was facing the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement including the murder of Medgar Evers, the escalation of the Vietnam War, and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. In 2020 within a matter of weeks, COVID-19 has caused governments, paralyzed by a plummeting global economy, to impose rigorous guidelines to adjust behavior radically for the sake of public health. Accordingly, educational institutions have quickly moved to online platforms to abide by rules for self-isolating and social distancing. Both are times of uncertainty; both are times of the repudiation of progressive educational principles.

My own teaching changed very quickly within a matter of days. I was in the middle of directing a production of *Into the Woods* (Sondheim, 1987) that was not able to be presented in front of a live audience. With the directive to shelter-in-place, online learning was the best option for continuing as a learning community. The students expressed their grief and loss for their performance opportunity. None of us had faced this type of vulnerability in our lifetimes so none of us could have known how to navigate the challenges brought on by this extraordinary moment. Throughout the field of education, teachers have been searching for the best synchronous and asynchronous

options. Preconceived principles of teaching needed to change. Assignments, expectations, and objectives from the beginning of the semester were no longer possible within the new paradigm defined by the invisible aggressor of disease, *inter arma enim silent leges*. Whatever merits previous ideas of teaching held, teachers of all levels had to think, create, and dream about new questions and solutions for intellectual growth and social connection in an uncertain climate.

The question I, amongst other educators, have been asking is: *Is it time to disrupt?* The answer is yes. We cannot and should not expect to return to an old sense of normalcy. We will be emerging from a crisis and will need to respond in turn. We must place the most vulnerable students, who are most impacted by societal inequalities, at the center of our pedagogical choices. The way we teach must prioritize intellectual nourishment and social connection over product creation and adherence to standardized thresholds of student achievement. Music and arts education specifically must become more responsive to grief and trauma since this type of training relies on the student's self-exposure of their personal associations of external sources and internal interpretation of the world.

On behalf of the student-singer with minoritized identities, educators need to assess the quality of their pedagogy and the implementation of it within the context of a newly changing diverse and inclusive industry. Voice teachers must face their own biases toward social categorizations such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status. A recommendation is that studio teachers undergo anti-bias and anti-racist education. Parkes and Wexler (2012) find that effective studio instruction fits the need of the student, responding to "the need for instructional specificity, structure, and technical

guidance as well as emotional support” (p. 59). An educator must increase their capacity to create anti-biased educational spaces and must integrate anti-bias goals into their pedagogical practices. A white teacher with knowledge of the negative impact of socialization into a system of oppression can therefore begin to be responsive to the emotional health and development of their black student. Dissinger (2019) calls on the cyclical process of “learn, try, reflect, learn more” in the journey to understanding privilege and empathy (p. 113). Learning is a personal act based on personal involvement.

Understanding how the history of the United States is fundamentally shaped by and inseparable from white supremacy and patriarchy provides the foundation for understanding its structures. Racism manifests itself in the culture of educational institutions and arts organizations. Future work might include task forces, either from within or from consultancy, to analyze institutional and cultural bias and the demonstrations of power inequality. The intention of the application of the analysis should be to impart knowledge as well as to stimulate critical thinking. Daily activities of the institution provide information regarding informal learning through unintentional experiences in the reinforcement of discriminatory practices. Change could then be implemented through structured, behavior-oriented models or developmental clinical approaches. Leaders need not only to be responsive to but also affirmative of students to bring themselves to their work (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016).

An additional recommendation is that other researchers should consider replicating this study’s line of query with elite professionals with minoritized identities in a range of fields. Counter-narratives of people with marginalized identities create

counter-stories to hegemony, providing widened representation. In the case of black singers, audiences love to hear black voices, but the entertainment industry is less inclined to push against the fact that they are not being hired. Black singers are not being represented in the occupational sense. The time is now to disrupt, within both research and practice. By encountering more stories of black performers, the onlooker comes into contact with a range of professional possibilities. Detailed descriptions of human behavior and opinions illuminate the signifiers and processes of those involved in the stories. Revealing accounts of a range of experts could point to humane practices that support students as multifaceted humans and that prioritize just solutions.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Marcuse (1977) writes, “Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world” (p. 32). Deep investigation of aesthetic values initiates the awareness of people toward the experiences that cope with the realities of multiple inequalities as multidimensional aspects of life. Personal expression is a means of critical understanding of a performer’s lived experience. For a singer, the alignment of technique, personal expression, and identity saturates their sound with meaning which transforms their life experiences into artistic interpretation. The singer does not limit themselves by industrial or societal standards. They are liberated to express their self-defined identity through the prism of cultural influences. Armed with the tools for personal and cultural expression, they can enter into the entertainment industry with skills that allow them to act with clarity of purpose, manifest in cognitive processing of musical experience shared through language. Having marginalized singers be part of the dialectical, creative experience of

artistic creation may be the culminating act of conceptual knowledge. In this way, inspiring diverse sets of voices magnifies the performing arts' cultural significance.

Emboldened, embodied, collective progress is needed to open the doors for a diverse and inclusive set of voices that represent the dynamic quality of our continuously de- and re-constructed society. Re-centralizing power to bring those persons on the margins to the center means re-orienting the current center to the margins. As such, those living with privilege look toward those who need the most help. Power resides in the hands of the person who decides what is true. When the person with marginalized identities identify and remove conditions that cause powerlessness and increase feelings of self-efficacy (Khandekar & Sharma, 2005), they are empowered to transform their artistic practice. Ownership and of cultural capital through types of ornamentation, the use of expressive tools, and manipulated timbre allows the singer to exercise their power by exhibiting positive representations of their cultural legacy. When they are given space to exercise their agency, they can find motivation to take control of the situations in which they find themselves. Encouraging personal transformation through the exploration of the Signified voice relies on critical reflection within the framework of artistic, imaginative development, moving from the center of expectations to the margins of personal artistry. The Signified voice, through the use of vocal and acting strategies, emerges as the ultimate ontological representation of re-humanization through sound. Through discovering their own identity through the methodical practices of diverse disciplines and the corresponding cultural capital, the singer with black heritage can serve the greater good of humanity by telling their full truth. Ken states, "You play the truth

and then that can't be wrong." Representing the self, personally and culturally, sounds  
and Signifies the truth. And that can only be right.

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## Appendix A

## Interview Protocol

	Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thank you for meeting with me today. I am Michael Mohammed. The purpose of this project is to look at how a performer employs vocal and acting techniques when performing pieces on Black themes. Today, I will be asking about your professional work as well as a little bit about your personal background.</li> <li>• Do you have any questions before we begin?</li> </ul>
	Demographics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you please state your name?</li> <li>• What are you currently working on?</li> <li>• Can you tell me about upcoming work? Your future goals?</li> <li>• I would like to ask you about your personal background. What is your ethnic identity?</li> <li>• How do you identify yourself professionally? Opera singer? Musical Theatre singer? Actor? Something else?</li> </ul>
<i>Semiotic-hermeneutic:</i> tracing musical meaning directly from the score	General Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me a little bit about your process in preparing for a new role that have black themes.</li> <li>• How do you prepare from the script and score?</li> <li>• Do you listen to listen to recordings from the time period either the show was written in or is placed? Watch videos?</li> <li>• Do you study other things about the composer and librettists? Compositional style? Style of theatre from time-period? Historical stage deportment?</li> <li>• How does your vocal and acting training inform your preparation and artistry?</li> </ul>

<p><i>Cognitive-embodied:</i> emphasizing the listening subject and the importance of the subject in meaning making</p>	<p>In Rehearsal &amp; Performance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you use techniques that are attributed to non-classical techniques? (e.g. belting, scatting, use of effortful and rough sounds, clear register shifts, deliberate breathy tone, etc.)</li> <li>• Have you used a regional American or English accent? Can you elaborate?</li> <li>• Have you ever used non-western techniques? Tell me about those experiences (e.g. Chinese opera vocalism, classical Indian dance, African drumming).</li> <li>• What are your strategies for rehearsing these methods?</li> <li>• Putting them into performance?</li> <li>• How do you define the vocal quality that you employ in pieces that explore black themes? How do you do that technically?</li> <li>• What vocal techniques do you use to achieve the desired effect? What acting techniques? Anything else?</li> </ul>
<p><i>Social-political:</i> centering on the role of music in relation to power to influence society, politics, and economy.</p>	<p>Authenticity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Name some qualities that make a performance authentically ‘black’?</li> <li>• Do you know a ‘black’ performance when you hear it or see it? What does that look like?</li> </ul>
	<p>Conclusion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I’d like for you to consider for a moment, what we have talked about today. How do you think any of the information that you shared today drives your passion for what you do?</li> <li>• What was the information (if any) that surprised you?</li> <li>• Anything else that you would like to add?</li> </ul>

## Appendix B

## Stimulated Recall Protocol

Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In this portion, we will walk through the video excerpt that you provided to discuss the decision-making process about your vocal and acting choices.</li><li>• Do you have any questions before we begin?</li><li>• Can you give me an overview of the project that this clip is from?</li><li>• Why did you choose this piece to talk about?</li></ul>
During stimulated recall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What do you see happening here?</li><li>• Tell me a little bit about your process in this moment.</li><li>• What was your strategy for this moment?</li><li>• What were you communicating in this part?</li></ul>
Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What features of the presentation led you to your top two (or three) choices?</li><li>• How do you think any of information that you shared today drives your passion for what you do?</li><li>• Anything else that you would like to add?</li></ul>

## Appendix C

## Informed Consent Form

**Protocol Title:** Sounding & Signifyin': Representation and the Theatrical Black Voice

Interview Consent

**Principal Investigator:** Michael Mohammed, Doctoral student, Teachers College  
mjm69@tc.columbia.edu

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### **INTRODUCTION**

You are being invited to participate in this research study called “Sounding & Signifyin’: Representation and the Theatrical Black Voice.” You may qualify to take part in this research study because you are a performing artist identifying as black or African American who uses your voice in professional musical theatre or opera. Five to six people will participate in this study and it will take approximately fifty to ninety minutes of your time to complete.

### **WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?**

This study is being done as part of doctoral dissertation research. The focus on the interview will be the vocal and theatrical techniques that you employ when preparing music based on a theme from the African diaspora.

### **WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?**

If you decide to participate, you will be interviewed by the principal investigator. During the interview, you will be asked to discuss your professional experience. This interview will be audio-recorded, which will then be transcribed. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, you will not be able to participate.

You will also be asked to provide a recorded example of your own performance of traditionally black vocal styles. You and the principal investigator will watch the video recording together and discuss elements of the performance. This part of the interview will be recorded as well. The interview will take approximately fifty to ninety minutes.

### **WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

This is a minimal risk study, which means the harms or discomforts that you may experience are not greater than you would ordinarily encounter in daily life. However, there are some risks to consider. You might feel embarrassed to discuss problems that you experienced. **However, you do not have to answer any questions or divulge anything you don’t want to talk about. You can stop participating in the study at**

**any time without penalty.** The principal investigator is taking precautions to keep your information confidential, keeping all information on a password protected computer.

**WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. Participation may benefit the field of teacher education to better understand the best way to train performing artists.

**WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY?**

You will not be paid to participate. There are no costs to you for taking part in this study.

**WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN I LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS?**

The study is over when you have completed the interview. However, you can leave the study at any time even if you haven't finished.

**PROTECTION OF YOUR CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any electronic or digital information (including audio recordings) will be stored on a computer that is password protected. There will be no record matching your real name with your pseudonym, if you choose to use one. Regulations require that research data be kept for at least three years.

**HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED?**

The results of this study will be published in journals and presented at academic conferences. Your name or any identifying information about you will not be published. This study may be used part of the dissertation of the principal investigator.

**CONSENT FOR AUDIO AND OR VIDEO RECORDING**

Audio recording and/or video recording is part of this research study. You can choose whether to give permission to be recorded. If you decide that you don't wish to be recorded, (choose the correct sentence) you will not be able to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give my consent to be recorded

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I **do not** consent to be recorded

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

### **WHO MAY VIEW MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY**

\_\_\_ I consent to allow written, video and/or audio taped materials viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ I **do not** consent to allow written, video and/or audio taped materials viewed outside of Teachers College Columbia University

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

### **OPTIONAL CONSENT FOR FUTURE CONTACT**

The investigator may wish to contact you in the future. Please initial the appropriate statements to indicate whether or not you give permission for future contact. This may include giving you the opportunity to review and make edit suggestions to the initial interview.

I give permission to be contacted in the future for research purposes:

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
Initial Initial

I give permission to be contacted in the future for information relating to this study:

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
Initial Initial

### **WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?**

**If you have any questions about taking part in this research study, you should contact the principal investigator, Michael Mohammed, at (650) 219-5785 or at [mjm69@tc.columbia.edu](mailto:mjm69@tc.columbia.edu).**

**If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you should contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (the human research ethics committee) at 212-678-4105 or email [IRB@tc.edu](mailto:IRB@tc.edu). Or you can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY 1002. The IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection for Teachers College, Columbia University.**

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**PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS**

- I have read and discussed the informed consent with the researcher. I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty to future medical care; employment; student status or grades; services that I would otherwise receive.
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research at his or her professional discretion.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue my participation, the investigator will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent document.

**My signature means that I agree to participate in this study****Print name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix D

## Musical, Theatrical, and Cinematic Works Cited

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