

At University of Michigan

# Yale professor of African American studies attacks Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* as “white supremacist” and “misogynist”

Barry Grey  
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On April 5, Daphne Brooks, professor of African American studies, American Studies, Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies and Music at Yale University, delivered a lecture to the Musicology Department of the School of Music, Theatre and Dance at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Given the title of Professor Brooks' lecture, “Rhapsody & Ruin: *Porgy and Bess* and the Story of America,” it was a safe assumption that the 40 or so music students, professors and administrators in attendance would be on the receiving end of yet another racist take-down of the great American opera. The professor did not disappoint.

In academia in the US, attacks on the musically exquisite and dramatically moving portrayal of the struggles and sufferings of the impoverished African American inhabitants of “Catfish Row” in early 20th-century Charleston, South Carolina have become something of a cottage industry. Exposing the alleged racism of the opera and its creators—George and Ira Gershwin and Dubose Heyward—has become a preoccupation of the postmodernist proponents of “critical race theory” and related obsessions with gender, sexual preference and other aspects of personal identity.

The University of Michigan has long been a bastion of racist ideology, no doubt linked to its close ties to the Democratic Party, which increasingly since the 1960s has made black nationalism a centerpiece of its politics. Another factor is U-M's geographical location in the center of the US auto industry, whose corporate interests are bound up with sowing divisions within one of the most militant sections, historically, of the American working class.

Harold Cruse, the author of 1967 book *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, became the initial head at the University of Michigan of what was then among the first African American studies departments in the country. Cruse advocated a boycott of *Porgy and Bess* on the grounds of its supposed racist portrayal of blacks in the Jim Crow South.

Six years ago, the U-M School of Music, Theatre and Dance's “Gershwin Initiative” sponsored a concert performance of the authoritative critical edition of the score of Gershwin's opera. This landmark performance was, however, accompanied by a symposium that featured denunciations of *Porgy's* white creators for their “cultural appropriation” of “black” music.

As deplorable as those attacks were—essentially advocating the balkanization of music and culture on the basis of nationality, skin color and ethnicity, a project closer to the Nazis' Aryan art than to genuine art—they seem in retrospect timid in comparison to Professor Brooks' broadside.

Brooks is the author of several books, the most recent being *Liner Notes*

*for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, published in 2021 by Harvard University Press. She considers herself, and is considered within academic circles, to be an expert on black women singers and performers, having written articles and CD liner notes about Aretha Franklin, Motown's Tammi Terrell, and Nina Simone, among others.

## Beyoncé as the apotheosis of black female liberation

She currently champions Beyoncé, the mass-marketed, billionaire pop star who is the darling of music critics and academics immersed in racist and feminist politics. They hail her as an apotheosis of black female liberation and expression. Brooks' 445-page *Liner Notes* concludes with this ecstatic tribute:

Watch her then, as she rides this revolution out of the basement, out of that shadowy New Orleans garage, and into the center of our consciousness. Her *Lemonade* [an album released by Beyoncé in 2016] kicks down the door between Black past and Black futures, pulling us toward the light and willing us to come up for air. Take a deep breath.

At the University of Michigan, Brooks began her attack on *Porgy and Bess* with a power-point slide of Beyoncé's new album, *Cowboy Carter*, and audio from the CD. This was presumably meant to counterpose the “real thing” to the allegedly racist and demeaning depiction of black women in *Porgy*.

Brooks' approach to the opera, as is typical among the purveyors of “critical race theory,” proceeds entirely from the premise that all history, art, culture and politics in America is determined by categories of personal identity—first and foremost race, and secondly gender—and that the source of racism is the ingrained and ineradicable hatred of white people for black people. According to this subjective idealist and irrationalist ideology, there are no objective laws of historical or social development, and socio-economic class is, at most, just another form of personal identity (“classism”) rather than the fundamental driving force of society and history.

From this it follows that, notwithstanding the radical-sounding jargon of

postmodernist “discourse,” including the occasional use of Marxist phraseology, the conclusions are entirely compatible with the capitalist market, class exploitation, social inequality and the imperialist interests of the ruling class. Hence the glorification of backward and musically impoverished corporate-made and -marketed kitsch à la Beyoncé.

## Critical race theory

Brooks’ “excavation” of the opera and its creators adheres to the basic methodology outlined by Tom Carter in his essay *The Ideological Foundations of Critical Race Theory*:

Accordingly, for the adherents of critical race theory, it is not a question of *whether* racism is expressed in any given social phenomenon, but a question of *how* racism is expressing itself in that phenomenon, given that generalized racism on the part of all white people is supposedly the organizing principle of the whole society.

Brook’s specific focus is on the supposedly “white supremacist,” “misogynist” and “violent” treatment of black women in the figure of Bess, and in the overall work of both Gershwin and Heyward. She argues, with virtually no substantiation, that the black female artists who have sung the role of Bess have rebelled against the supposedly white chauvinist and exploitative nature of the opera, and thereby to some extent redeemed it.

Her exposition begins with a clip from a 2012 television interview with Audra McDonald, who sang the role of Bess in a 2012 Broadway production of *Porgy and Bess*. In the interview, McDonald speaks of the vocal challenges of the part. Citing the high note with which Bess concludes the duet with Crown, Bess’ former lover (“What you want wid Bess?”), McDonald notes that some have called the technical demands of the score a “voice killer.”

Brooks seizes on this statement to inject a meaning that is nowhere implied in the interview with McDonald: That Gershwin and Heyward authored an opera which perpetuated the violence of “white” society on black women, including treating them as nothing more than sex objects. This is presented as damning evidence in the professor’s indictment of the work and its creators.

The following excerpt from the lecture provides a sense of the tendentious, one-sided and false arguments marshaled against the opera, as well as the bombastic postmodernist jargon in which they are packaged:

It is a story of what cultural domination sounds like if we will just listen out for it. It is the exemplification of white supremacy and misogyny as form and aesthetic as it traveled across repertoires and genres of influence and ended up in mouths of black actors. To listen in this way to the history of Porgy and Bess is to tell the story of white artistic rhapsodic effusion in relation to ideas about black life, is to tell the story of white interest in dramatization of black suffering as extravagant and rapturous... it means telling a story of colonial wonder and anti-black repulsion... it means telling the story of disaster and destruction...

For Brooks, taking a racist hatchet to the opera itself is not sufficient.

She feels the need to attribute to Gershwin and Heyward personally the most sordid and mercenary motives. She accuses the two of conspiring to “capitalize on blackness as the wished-for realization of their own avant-gardism.” At another point she speaks of “their investment in the creation and capital expenditure in Bess,” and describes them as “pursuing their own self-aggrandizing innovation...”

In her attempt to denigrate George Gershwin, Brooks reveals her own ignorance about the great composer’s biography and career. Speaking of Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, which premiered in 1924 when Gershwin was 25, she states:

Gershwin imagined that the production of classical masterworks might elevate him from his humble song plugger-turned vaudeville hustling roots to become America’s foremost composer.

In fact, Gershwin had little connection to the vaudeville circuit, and by the time of the *Rhapsody*’s premiere he had already written the music to several Broadway shows, including *La La Lucille* (1919) and the 1920-1923 annual editions of the popular Broadway review *George White’s Scandals*.

At another point Brooks refers to Gershwin as the son of “rich Russian Jewish immigrant parents.” Gershwin’s parents, Rose and Morris, were not the poorest of the poor residents of Jewish ghettos, moving the household frequently from Brooklyn to the Lower East Side of Manhattan to the Upper West Side bordering Harlem. But the household was anything but rich. Morris was a lower-middle-class owner of a succession of businesses, most of which failed.

## *Porgy and Bess*: Racist falsification vs. reality

More importantly, Brooks’ presentation of the opera, its characters and plot line are so distorted as to belie the very universal and democratic spirit of the work. And, one might add, despite its tragedies, the humane and optimistic ethos it projects.

Thus, she chooses to focus on a lesser musical number, the duet between Crown and Bess on Kitiwah Island, while downplaying the opera’s better known pieces, such as the beautiful lullaby *Summertime*, Porgy’s banjo song *I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin*, the drug dealer Sportin’ Life’s irreligious *It Ain’t Necessarily So*, and the love songs between Porgy and Bess, *Bess, You Is My Woman Now* and *I Loves You, Porgy*.

The latter two arias, sung during the opera’s second act, signify the redemption of both the crippled beggar Porgy and the drug addicted outcast Bess through their love for one another.

At the beginning of Act Three, Bess cradles the orphaned infant of Clara, who has drowned in the hurricane that also killed her husband, the fisherman Jake. Bess reprises Clara’s haunting lullaby *Summertime*, revealing the full depth of her humanity.

It is only the intervention of the state, in the form of the local authorities, who come and take Porgy to jail as a material witness in the deaths of Robbins and Crown, that leaves Bess feeling abandoned and thus prey to Sportin’ Life’s “happy dust.” But in the end, when Porgy returns from jail, he affirms his unbroken love for Bess and determination to find her in New York in the concluding aria, “Oh Lawd, I’m On My Way.”

In his 1990 book *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic*, the late film critic and author Hollis Alpert recounts an episode that bespeaks the opera’s universal appeal and democratic spirit. He writes that the opera made its first appearance “across the ocean” in

1943 in Copenhagen, when Denmark was under Nazi occupation:

In spite of white actors playing black roles, the opera was an extraordinary success, so much so that the Nazi occupiers suggested strongly to the opera managers that an American work of any kind was not to its liking and that this one be withdrawn from the repertory.

Nevertheless, the opera was given and sold out twenty-one more times, with the theatre surrounded on each occasion by a cordon of Danish police. Finally, the Gestapo lost patience and said if *Porgy and Bess* were given one more time the opera house would be bombed. The opera's managers decided to end the run.

But the banning of *Porgy and Bess* had the unlooked-for-effect of stimulating the Danish spirit of resistance to its occupiers and soon became a symbol of this spirit. When the Nazis broadcast communiqués over Danish radio citing their victories, the Danish underground would cut in with a recording of "It Ain't Necessarily So." When the war ended, *Porgy and Bess* was quickly reinstated in the repertory.

In the question and answer period following Brooks' lecture, I asked the following:

If, as you contend, *Porgy and Bess* is a white supremacist, brutal, violent, misogynist attack on black people, how do you explain the fact that it is a beloved opera all over the world? It has lasted since its premiere in 1935, it has been recorded and sung by Miles Davis, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday. It was championed by Anne Brown, the original Bess, who explicitly rejected attacks on *Porgy and Bess* as a white man's cultural appropriation.

It has touched millions of people, many races, many ethnicities, who see in it a very universal and human story of struggle against oppression. By the way, the opera concludes with Porgy singing 'Oh Lord, I'm On My Way,' because despite his horrific conditions and oppression, the human soul is capable of immense dignity and achievement.

Six years ago, the University of Michigan did a performance of a critical edition of *Porgy and Bess*, which was an immense achievement. Unfortunately, there was a symposium at which this type of racist attack was very prevalent. I wrote an article about that for my publication, the *World Socialist Web Site*, which believes that human culture and humanity are capable of overcoming things like race through the unification of the oppressed and working people all over the world.

I would also warn that the type of racism you and much of academia are promoting—you can see the end logic of that in what Netanyahu and Israel are doing in the name of defending the Jewish people against the masses of Gaza, which is genocide. The logic is the same. This is very dangerous and very false.

There ensued an exchange that included the following:

**Daphne Brooks:** The excavation of the documentary record of racial domination in this country, you're comparing it to Netanyahu's settler colonialism?

**Barry Grey:** I don't agree with what you claim to be an excavation of racial domination. Of course there is racial prejudice. It is used to oppose

the unification of working and oppressed people against the system that does it. It's not done by "white people." It's done by capitalism.

**Brooks:** It requires a little more nuanced way of thinking about history...

**Grey:** Your presentation is nuanced?

**Brooks:** I think it is. There is a whole study of thought, of trying to think about many complex ideas together that's called intersectionality. So rather than arguing for class struggle in lieu of thinking about race and gender, we should be thinking about all of these things at once. You aren't well versed in that.

**Grey:** I'm very well versed, thank you.

**Brooks:** You're well versed in intersectionality? Would you like to tell me something about intersectionality?

**Grey:** This is one of the postmodernist catchwords that's been developed to raise the question of race or gender to the level of the fundamental division in society, which, in fact, is class. That's what intersectionality is.

**Brooks:** The very fact that you think there is a hierarchy...

**Grey:** Yes, there is a hierarchy. Beyoncé is not the same as a woman, white or black, working for \$15 an hour in an auto plant.

### **World renowned black operatic tenor George Shirley on *Porgy and Bess*: "A great work"**

The last person to speak in the discussion was George Shirley, who called *Porgy and Bess* "a great work" and stressed its universal appeal. Shirley, now 90, is a major figure in the world of opera in the US and internationally. He is the first African American tenor and the second black male to sing leading roles at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. He sang there for 11 seasons.

He performed for opera companies across the US, throughout Europe and in Latin America. He has sung more than 80 roles, including Rodolfo in Puccini's *La bohème*, Ferrando in Mozart's *Così fan tutte* (for which he won a Grammy Award), and Tamino in Mozart's *The Magic Flute* [*Die Zauberflöte*]. For many years he was the director of vocal arts at the U-M School of Music, Theatre and Dance, where he continues to serve as a professor of music.

He said:

I refused to do Sportin' Life in the '60s because I knew that even though I was singing at the Met, I would probably be shunted—OK, that's the only thing I can do. I did it later and I had one of the best times of my life.

One of the things that's powerful about *Porgy* is that it's true. I grew up in Detroit. I've seen it...

I will say I don't accept the opera being done by non-blacks until we have the right to do any opera that we can sing and perform. Till that happens, that should stay in place. But I can see this opera being done by any ethnicity, because it's human. I can see it being done in an Irish town, back in the day. In Italy, Germany, you name it. Wherever human beings exist, this kind of violence and disrespect exists...

So *Porgy* is a great work. And why did Gershwin choose the black community? Because of what is there in the music and the fact that this was happening in the black community, it was happening in the Italian community in the United States, the Irish community. Under the conditions poor people are made to live in, these things happen...

In conclusion, I would like to quote a very perceptive and relevant section of the Foreword written by David North to *The New York Times' 1619 Project and the Racialist Falsification of History*, coedited by North and Thomas Mackaman and published by Mehring Books in 2021:

History is not the only discipline assaulted by the race specialists. In an essay titled "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame," Professor Philip A. Ewell of Hunter College in New York declares, "I posit that there exists a 'white racial frame' in music theory that is structural and institutionalized, and that only through a reframing of this white racial frame will we begin to see positive racial changes in music theory."

This degradation of music theory divests the discipline of its scientific and historically developed character. The complex principles and elements of composition, counterpoint, tonality, consonance, dissonance, timbre, rhythm, notation, etc. are derived, Ewell claims, from racial characteristics. Professor Ewell is loitering in the ideological territory of the Third Reich.

There is more than a passing resemblance between his call for the liberation of music from "whiteness" and the efforts of Nazi academics in the Germany of the 1930s and 1940s to liberate music from "Jewishness." The Nazis denounced Mendelssohn as a mediocrity whose popularity was the insidious manifestation of Jewish efforts to dominate Aryan culture.

In similar fashion, Ewell proclaims that Beethoven was merely "above average as a composer," and that he "occupies the place he does because he has been propped up by whiteness and maleness for two hundred years."



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