

## **Blessed and Brown Sounds: Digital Shorts and Black Opera During the Pandemic**

Jane Forner

The radical alterations to music practices that came with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated an already fast-growing production of digital opera—contemporary pieces created for online consumption, including serialized forms, digital “shorts,” podcast operas, and feature-length films. “Digital opera” has been used to describe varied technologies, from AI, film, virtual reality, and motion capture in live performance, to the impact of HD broadcasting (e.g. Macpherson 2012; Novak 2016; Everett 2019, and Havelková 2021). While digital *and* live opera “shorts” predate the pandemic (see e.g. Kreuzer 2019), my aim here is to highlight the upsurge of creative output by historically underrepresented artists within this online operatic world. I focus on two digital shorts by Black artists, premiered in 2021, which each responded to the intersecting events of 2020: global lockdowns, and urgent calls for justice emerging from the Black Lives Matter Movement following the murder of George Floyd.

*Blessed*, commissioned by Opera Philadelphia, was conceived by composer and pianist Courtney Bryan “in response to the righteous uprisings and in anticipation of the November national elections” (Bryan 2021), with a libretto and score by Bryan, a film by Tiona Nekkia McClodden, singers Janinah Burnett and Damian Norfleet, and sound engineered by Rob Kaplowitz. At ca. 23 minutes, the opera filters reflections on persecution and hope through musical and textual improvisations on verses from the Gospel of Matthew.

Premiered by LA Opera, *Brown Sounds* (2021), ca. 5 minutes, was mezzo-soprano Raehann Bryce-Davis’s\* second foray into film producing. She features as soloist alongside dancer Lateef Williams. Directed by Jérémy Adonis, with a score by Ayanna Witter-Johnson realized by pianist Jeanne Minette-Cilliers, and costumes by Allan Virgo, *Brown Sounds* sets poetry by Henry Dumas (1934–68).<sup>1</sup>

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\* Bryce-Davis produced *To the Afflicted* in August 2020, a short video accompanying her recording of the aria “All’afflitto è dolce il pianto” (“To the afflicted, weeping is sweet”), from Donizetti’s opera *Roberto Devereux* (1838). Footage of Black Lives Matter protests is interspersed with headlines of theater closures. Bryce-Davis, co-founder of the Black Opera Alliance, created the piece as a “solemn remembrance, a celebration, a clenched fist around the reigns of destiny, an open hand raised in praise. I dedicate this to the afflicted, those in opera and those fighting on the front lines for justice and equity” (Bryce-Davis 2020).

1 For a good introduction, see the special issue of the *Black American Literature Forum* dedicated to Dumas (Redmond 1988).

First created as a live performance in 2013 by Bryce-Davis and Witter-Johnson while both were students at Manhattan School of Music in New York City, this film version marks a sustained development of their response to Dumas's surreal and richly sensuous poetry.<sup>2</sup>

As I have discussed elsewhere (Forner 2022), creative endeavors falling under the “digital opera” umbrella vary widely in aesthetic approach. *Blessed* and *Brown Sounds* are part of a significant corpus of digital shorts commissioned by opera companies in the past two years that center Black creative collaborations, with some common threads emerging amid very differing multimedia styles: a strong presence of Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement texts, as well as current struggles for racial justice; multi-faceted roles (e.g. composer-performers; singer-producers), genre flexibility and stylistic plurality; and use of documentary footage. From LA Opera, *The First Bluebird in the Morning* (2021, music, Carlos Simon; libretto, Sandra Seaton; film, Jamar Roberts) dramatizes the experience of a young man in prison and his glimpses of hope; a 2021 opera-film of Susan Kander and Roberta Gumbel's *dub (driving while black)* (2018) examines the killing of young Black men through a mother's experience. Two shorts focus on early twentieth-century Black poets Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay in *We Hold These Truths* (2021; music, Tamar-kali; film, dream hampton), and Dunbar's poem of the same name in Tyshawn Sorey's *Death* (2022; film, Nadia Hallgren).<sup>3</sup> Some are tied strongly to recent events, including Nashville Opera's *One Vote Won* (2020; music, Dave Ragland; libretto, Mary McCallum), addressing women's suffrage, Civil Rights, and Black Lives Matter ahead of the presidential elections (see Schmid 2022), and *They Still Want To Kill Us* (2021), an aria-film by Daniel Bernard Roumain with mezzo-soprano J'Nai Bridges, directed by Yoram Savion, marking both the centenary of the Tulsa Race Massacre and, premiered on May 25, the anniversary of George Floyd's murder.

By no means exhaustive, this summary exemplifies the breadth of recent online operatic activity by Black artists. My work here offers a contribution both to a growing discourse on opera and digital media, and to work on Black opera in the

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- 2 *Brown Sounds* is not the first time Dumas's poems have been realized in musical or music-theatrical forms, though there are not many precedents: Carter Mathes's analysis (2015) of the soundscapes of Dumas's fictional writings covers Joseph Jarman and Don Moye's “Black Paladins” from the 1979 album of the same name, featuring Jarman's spoken recitation and group improvisations (*Black Paladins*, Milan, Black Saint, 1979). More recently, rapper Scallops Hotel (also known as milo and R.A.P. Ferreira), used Dumas's poem “Emoyeni, Place of the Winds” for the track “Ticktock (Henry Dumas's Words)” on his 2015 album *Plain Speaking* (Ruby Yacht/The Order, 2015).
  - 3 Other related works by Sorey include the digital commission *Cycles of My Being*, with text by Terrance Hayes and Lawrence Brownlee, and a new film of his 2018 song cycle *Save the Boys*, a setting of the 1887 poem by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, both premiered on the Opera Philadelphia streaming platform in 2021.

United States more generally, a field that is already rich with critical perspectives from scholars of color in the academy. Here, I acknowledge my position as a white English person entering into a space where I believe my duty is to amplify contemporary operatic works by Afrodiasporic artists that, while rising in prominence in academic consciousness, sorely demand sustained scholarly attention.

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For Courtney Bryan, *Blessed* is a “document of that time” (Bryan 2022): a time of protest and pandemic, but also of isolation, of art created through screens, depicting shifting relationships with colleagues, family, friends, and nature. The work is not conceived as a dramatic narrative, but as a multimodal meditation on Matthew 5, a well-known Bible passage featuring the repeated line from which Bryan derived her title: “Blessèd are the...” (meek, poor, etc.).<sup>4</sup> Footage is from New Orleans, where we see Bryan in her home church, St Luke’s Episcopal; Morningside Park in New York City; Philadelphia; and Zoom meetings. Collaboration happened remotely and in person, with studio time allotted to record separately. Bryan used the digital audio workstation Logic to create a draft of the full recording, which was subsequently mixed by Kaplowitz in what Bryan describes as a “sonic quilting” process (2021). Fig. 1 shows the structure of the piece and the main parts of the text; remaining Bible verses are indicated by number. In the first third of the piece (up to the end of “Salutation”), the gospel text is set almost verbatim; in the remainder, Bryan elaborates philosophically on her own text, further elaborated by Norfleet’s textual improvisations.

Timing		Timing	Film	Audio/Text
0:00-01:34	<i>Introduction</i>	00:00-00:40	Interior; Black saint figurines; paintings	“He went up the mountain, He sat down, He began to speak.” [spoken] [DN] (5:1-2)
		00:40-01:34	Interior: Zoom meeting	“” [sung]
01:35-05:56	“Grounding”	01:35-03:15	New Orleans, lake	Humming, overtones, wordless vocalizing [DN]
		03:16-05:27	Zoom footage of DN in studio	“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” [DN/JB] (5:3-5)

4 I use “blessèd” and “blessed” to distinguish between the different accentuations used vocally, with the first stress pattern altering the word to two syllables.

Timing		Timing	Film	Audio/Text
	"Grounding"	05:28-05:56	JB, park; black clothes	"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." [DN/JB] (5:6)
05:57-07:59	"Salutation"	05:57-07:10	JB, park, white dress	"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" [etc.] (5:7-9)
		07:11-07:59	Split-screen Zoom footage, score image	"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." [etc.] [JB/DN] (5:10-12)
08:00-21:01	"Hope"	08:00-09:31	DN, park	"Blessed. Blessed. Who are those who are blessed? Who was blessed? Who is blessed? Those who hunger for righteousness are blessed. Those who thirst for righteousness are blessed. The peacema are blessed. The merciful are blessed. The meek are blessed. Are you blessed?" [DN]
		09:32-10:52	DN, park; Zoom footage	"Teach me, I'll listen to thee, for I can see your worth. Lead me, I'll follow thee, for I can see your worth. Help me, I'll lean on thee, for I can see your worth." [DN]
		10:53-12:48	St Luke's church, interior; focus on Frances Gaudet	"People revile you. People persecute you. People utter all kinds of evil against you. <i>You</i> are people! People revile people. People persecute people. People utter falsely all kinds of evil against people. People were persecuted before you. People persecuted people before you. People are people." [DN]
		12:49-18:25	Church interior; CB piano and organ	"The poor in spirit. Those who mourn. The meek. Those who hunger. Those who thirst. For righteousness." [DN] "Blessèd" [etc., words repeated, JB/DN]
		18:26-20:10	Church exterior, CB	"When people revile you and persecute you, rejoice and be glad. Blessèd are you." [DN]

Timing		Timing	Film	Audio/Text
		20:11-21:01	Score on black screen	"The peacemakers, the pure in heart, theirs is the kingdom of heaven." [DN]
	<i>End Credits</i>	21:02-22:04 [end]	Credits	[DN, playground rhyme] "You'll get the kingdom, you'll feel fine; you will inherit what is thine. Others will hate you don't get mad; have yourself a part and be glad." [cont.]

Fig. 1. Structure of *Blessed* with text excerpts.

Collaborative creation is central to *Blessed*: Bryan recorded hours of piano improvisations to fashion what she calls a "musical meditation on the text" (Bryan 2022). Recurring patterns include an emphasis on modal chord clusters and intervals; repeated flourishes in very high or very low registers; low, rumbling trills with heavy pedal use; glissandi; repeated turns around a few notes, and slower, spread chordal melodies. Segmented and named as one-word themes (Poor, Hope, Salutation, Love, Grounding, Dark, Meek, Expanding, Reaching, Night, Light, Shadow, Peace), Bryan layered recordings in various combinations using Logic. She then created written prompts to which the singers could respond, in addition to her piano improvisations; Norfleet engaged deeply with this process, in vocal improvisations and text variations. Bryan cited George Lewis's *Virtual Concerto* (2004), for improvising computer pianist and orchestra, as an important influence on her approach to creating these guidelines in *Blessed*, to encourage a shared approach to improvising (Bryan 2022); there is a larger intersection to probe here between technology and improvisation which is beyond the present scope. The theme names do not delineate a specific structure; as figure 1 shows, only three of these are "named" in the film (a single word on screen), and as such I use them as a practical shorthand, not to indicate structural boundaries.

I hear the musical arc of *Blessed* as three gradual crescendi, wave-like processes where shifts in texture, register, and melody mark new sections, then rising slowly to bloom and crest before relaxing. The first occurs through the second two passages in "Grounding": a new piano idea precedes "Blessed are the poor," a motif clustered around an F-A major third repeated, then doubled at octaves, texture thickening and chords spreading. Bryan's playing grows still more elaborate, with both voices overlapping in repeated half-spoken, urgent statements, reaching a peak on Norfleet's line "they will be filled." The second wave begins in the fourth passage of "Hope": Bryan initiates a new section built of a poignant rising major seventh motif, complemented by Norfleet, then Burnett, whose lines from "The poor in spirit" emphasize rising and falling melodic phrases. Again,



Fig. 2. Courtney Bryan in *Blessed*, St Luke's Episcopal Church, New Orleans. Stills from Opera Philadelphia film directed by Tiona Nekkia McClodden. Used with permission.

Bryan elaborates and spins out intervallic and chordal gestures, adding glissandi and ornamentation, while the voices bloom in many repetitions of “Blessèd”; I hear these passages as embodying the “comfort” offered in the text.

McClodden's film illustrates the named themes subtly, expressing a framing “relationship of lightness and darkness” which, Bryan stressed, is not a dichotomy (Bryan 2022). A shifting interchange between light and dark is palpable on multiple levels. For instance, McClodden's use of natural light in the church interior plays with shadows cast by stained glass, with the reflections of light on the black lid of a grand piano, never eliciting stark contrasts (fig. 2). Similarly, in outdoor scenes filmed in a wintry Morningside Park in Harlem, sharp distinctions are few; McClodden captures subtle interplays of shadow and brightness in the muted palette of bare trees, grey skies, dulled ground, and the distinctive slate-hued, steep-sided, rugged rocks that define many public parks in uptown Manhattan.

Repeated questions in Bryan's text, beginning at “Hope,” establish a framework for reflection that also suggests multiple potential listeners. “Are you blessed?” calls to the viewer: are you one of us who fights, who hungers for righteousness? Have you been reviled and persecuted? McClodden's interest in the ephemera in St Luke's also signifies the historical ongoing process of this fight, focusing on a painting of St Frances Joseph-Gaudet, a turn of the century prison reform worker and educator.<sup>5</sup> At moments like this we are informed and reminded

5 From 12:34-50, the text on screen reads: “St Frances Joseph-Gaudet (1861–Dec. 1934). Prison reform worker and educator. Beginning in 1894 she held prayer meetings, wrote letters, delivered messages, and secured clothing for Black prisoners, and was the first



Fig. 3. Damian Norfleet in *Blessed*, New York City. Stills from Opera Philadelphia film directed by Tiona Nekkia McClodden. Used with permission.

of the socio-political backdrop guiding *Blessed*'s creation, as well as the work's attention to current and past African American history. Turning to the spectator is underscored especially in the park scenes: standing still, the singers stare straight into the camera, not singing or speaking (fig. 3), only slightly adjusting their hoods; even as the voices grow more urgent, the visual environment remains calm and focused. In fact, we never "see" what we hear, even when we see Bryan playing the piano or the organ—her hand movements are deliberately mismatched with the piano audio.<sup>6</sup> Avoiding a music video style, audiovisual incongruence is intentional throughout *Blessed*, such that film and music each are free to suggest meaning together and independently, both created and improvised in tandem.

Together, Zoom footage and shots of the three musicians alone paradoxically signal both community and isolation. The visible silence of the singers mirrors the muting of public musical life in the pandemic, but an emphasis on the collective—in a "quilt" of improvisations, and in the prominence of communities of the blessed, persecuted, righteous, and meek in the text—suggests hope and kinship. The final moments of the film bring *Blessed*'s juxtaposition of stillness and righteous power to a musical and emotional apotheosis: Norfleet climbs to a powerful

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woman to support juvenile offenders in Louisiana. In 2007, Frances Joseph-Gaudet was officially canonized as a saint by the Episcopal church."

- 6 In fact, there is no organ heard at all: scenes of Bryan playing signify her personal connections to St Luke's and to her longstanding experience as a church musician. When we see her pull out a brass stop, an explanatory note on screen in this passage at 15:17 reads: "Courtney's father Trevor G. Bryan funded the feature of the organ called *Trumpet* and it was named *Trumpet Bryan* in honor of her Grandfather, Dr. Clifford Bryan."

climax on “When people revile you and persecute you” at the upper reaches of his range, singing a repeated appoggiatura-heavy motif. As he sings “Blessèd are you” while Bryan stands unmoving against the door of St Luke’s, looking directly at us, I experience this last frame as a blessing on us from the composer—a reassurance that light will follow darkness. Norfleet hopes that his work “restores the personhood that has been stripped from the victims of police brutality... I hope that my work continues to illuminate the darkest corners of our country and encourages my fellow citizens to make improvements” (2021). *Blessed* is spiritual solace and a balm to the soul for times of isolation and beyond, and a testament to those righteous passed who have fought for justice, and those who continue to hunger for righteousness.

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While *Blessed* situates its meditation on contemporary America on the ground, as it were, *Brown Sounds* invites us into a space of myth and imagination. Through the words of Henry Dumas, it engages an Afro-surrealist aesthetic that enjoins the speculative and the fantastic to scrutiny of historical and current narratives of Black life. For D. Scot Miller, “Afro-Surrealists strive for rococo: the beautiful, the sensuous, and the whimsical... Afro-Surrealists restore the cult of the past” (2013, 116). Similarly, Amiri Baraka (1988, 164) describes Dumas’s stories as “magical, resonating dream emotions and images... But they are also stories of real life, now or whenever, constructed in weirdness and poetry in which the contemporaneity of essential themes is clear.”

Echoing a lineage stretching back to the anticolonial *surréalisme* of the Black francophone writers in the 1940s and 1950s, *Brown Sounds* is a “love song to Black bodies, Black people, Black history, and a declaration of independence from colonial mindset” (Bryce-Davis 2021b), realizing Dumas’s streams of sense impressions and images while subtly pointing to the political demands of “real life.” Elusive geographical references in Dumas’s poem “Brown Sound” (“africa pulses,” “america pulses,” “grand canyon/red mother”) implicate historical and contemporary Afrodiasporas alive with memory—literally breathing, *pulsing*—recalling Redmond’s description that Dumas came to us to “sculpt slavery into song and churn commotion into poetry” (1989, i), while the repeated phrase “like the first time” suggests both sexual initiation and memories of origin stories:

brown sound chocolate  
 memories  
 like the first time  
 you saw grapes  
 and tasted them  
 and learned the color  
 blue



[...]  
 brown sound africa  
 pulses  
 like the first time  
 you exploded between legs  
 and heard drums  
 and learned the message  
 of rhythm love  
 [...]  
 brown sound  
 black outline  
 like the first time  
 like the first time  
 the first time  
 is the last time  
 like that  
 (Dumas in Redmond 1989, 144-5)



Fig. 4. Raehann Bryce-Davis in *Brown Sounds*. Photo: LA Opera. Used with permission.

Music is central to Dumas's poems and stories, which are full of singing fathers, mothers, ancestors, and spirits. Similarly, the world created in *Brown Sounds* comes alive *in* and *through* sound.<sup>7</sup> The film traces a path through each verse, from the interior of a surreal and cavernous tropical greenhouse,<sup>8</sup> filled with a lush forest of plants and trees (fig. 4), to the meeting of dancer and singer in abstract

7 Ahead of the online release of *Brown Sounds*, Bryce-Davis also published a video reciting Dumas's poem to her YouTube channel, an intimate illustration of the text offering visual juxtapositions of bodies and nature which are then developed in the later film.

8 Filmed in the Botanic Garden in Brussels.

blue space, and finally to a large stage flooded with dazzling warm lights. The first two stanzas brim with sensory synesthesia (colors that are tasted; milk that echoes, memories of chocolate), a becoming-alive to the world evoked in murmurs of the natural world (audio of birds chirping and leaves rustling) and the first utterance of “brown sound,” which Witter-Johnson sets to an unaccompanied, meandering melody.

Williams, curled at the base of a tree, comes to life at this sound in a lush pre-lapsarian world (fig. 5). With a distinctive breathiness, vowels elongated and swelling, Bryce-Davis’s voice mimics the breath that brought Adam to life, and the “breath of earth / all my people who are keys and chords...” in Dumas’s poem “Play Ebony, Play Ivory” (Redmond 1989, 4). The body unfurls at the call of the *brown sound* in a new Eden, in a “black outline,” enacting what Salim Washington (2008, 240) identifies in Dumas and Sun Ra, that “one fundamental purpose of African American music... is to function as a technology capable of transporting its participants to places that other technologies could not or would not visit.”<sup>9</sup> The program note establishes this alternative mythological formation:

Eden envelops us, all things are new, untouched, full of curiosity. Brown Sounds echo through the garden. Violence tears us from our dwelling place; the original sin of slavery uprooting bodies and trees. But the end is not yet. We dig our roots into the soil, we stretch our limbs to the sun, we find new truths, new loves, new power. Eden. *Selab*. (Bryce-Davis, 2021a)

*Selab*, a Hebrew word used in the Psalms which could indicate a musical interlude or pause (see Lyon 2021),<sup>10</sup> invites us here to reflect and listen, to surrender to “new power,” a form of imagining that both situates itself in relation to historical legacies of slavery and projects a “utopian Black existence” (Bryce-Davis 2021b). Realizing the speculations of Dumas’s poetry, *Brown Sounds* is a musical and visual version of what Kevin Quashie (2021, 2) describes as the “worldmaking aesthetics” of Black literature, wherein is established the “freeness of a black world... where blackness is ‘Life-as-is’” (2021, 10), is *simply being*. (see Fig. 5 [Abb. 5])

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9 Dumas’s connections to Sun Ra are notable in the story *The Metagenesis of Sun Ra*, and in Dumas’s liner notes for the 1967 album *Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy* by Sun Ra and his Mythical Science Arkestra. On Dumas and Sun Ra, particularly the relationship between Afrofuturism, politics, and the Black Arts Movement, see also Ragain 2012 and Mathes 2015. Dumas had even just attended a rehearsal of Sun Ra and his Arkestra in Harlem on the very morning of the day he was killed.

10 The word *selab* is disputed as to specific meaning; it is also found in other sources such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, and almost always appears at the end of a verse. It is also used as a punctuation or invocation in Rastafari hymns (see Chevannes 1994, 248), where it retains some of its Hebrew meaning but also a modern homonymic association with Emperor Haile Selassie, venerated by the Rastafari movement.



Fig. 5. Lateef Williams in *Brown Sounds*. Photo: LA Opera. Used with permission.

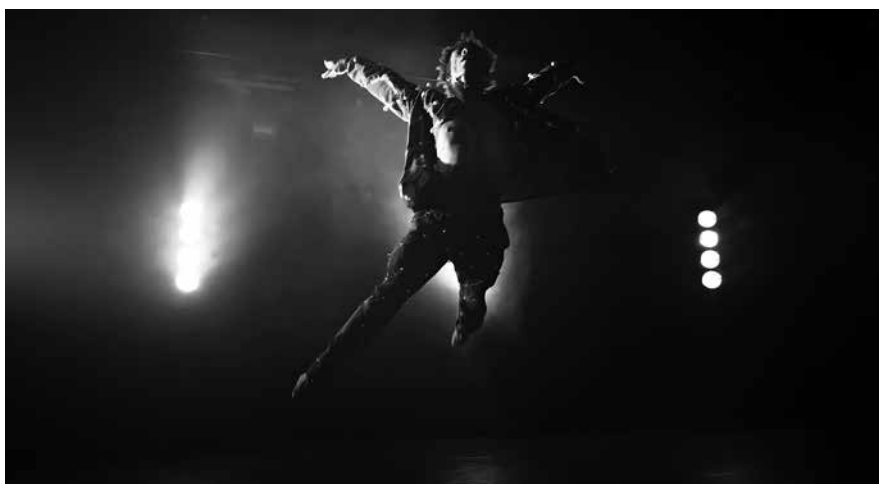


Fig. 6. Lateef Williams in *Brown Sounds*. Photo: LA Opera. Used with permission.

The awakening of the body continues throughout the second and third stanzas, Williams's dance increasingly expressive. The piano begins a slow, chordal accompaniment, before building to the first climax of the piece at "you exploded between legs," suggesting both literal orgasmic arrival and a metaphorical birth of consciousness. Shifting to an empty, deep-blue hued, mistily-lit space, the two bodies almost touch, drawn close but pulled away, depicting the rupture of the "original sin" of slavery that shatters their Eden. Yet this uprooting yields to speculations of freedom: as Williams' body opens up and his movements become energetic and lively, struggling against the emptiness of the dark space on screen, he then reaches an apotheosis as he leaps into the air against a brightly lit stage (Fig. 6. [Abb. 6]). Arms flung wide, chest out and open, he presents an embodiment of freedom, of the body that explodes between legs, of a body that has learned the "message of rhythm love."

In the final scenes, the music reaches its peak as Bryce-Davis, now dressed in white robes cut with African patterns in purple and gold, sings "grand canyon / red mother," now dressed in white robes cut with African patterns in purple and gold, swooping the length of her tessitura to its low resonances. All reddened and golden, while Williams dances vigorously, this moment of passionate arrival gently unwinds with the final repetitions of "like the first time / like the last time," piano fading to leave voice alone as at the beginning, suggesting cyclical histories and memories.

If not explicitly futurist, the audiovisual imagining of Dumas's *brown sound / black outline* here suggests what Jayna Brown (2021, 1) calls a "black speculative vision and practice" that is intimately connected to Afrofuturist aesthetics. Without fully leaving Earth for alternate worlds, the invocation of "africa" and "america" steep the stream of images in ancestral and current experiences. This is further expanded in the film, connecting the artists' response to current racial injustice and police brutality with Dumas's life, who was shot and killed by a New York City transit policeman on 23 May 1968.<sup>11</sup> As an opera in miniature, *Brown Sounds* distills an enormous scope of imagination and emotion. Dumas's Afrosurrealism, and its manifestation here presents the surreal as a form of heightened emotional, sensual, and spiritual expression that engages in speculative imagining as a strategy to illuminate the ongoing fight against systemic social injustices, setting free those energies which reverberate across the centuries.

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11 The precise events are not fully known, with accounts typically attributing it to either a case of mistaken identity or to the escalation of a conflict in which Dumas may have been involved. At only thirty-three years old, the impact of his writings was already strongly felt. Toni Morrison, championing and posthumously publishing collections of his works while senior editor at Random House, wrote in 1974 of a "very deserved" cult that had grown up around Dumas (1988, 739).

Opera Philadelphia's sixth *O Festival* in 2022 offered screenings of over thirty "cinematic operas," mostly contemporary pieces, including *Blessed*. As new contexts for digital opera emerge in the wake of pandemic restrictions, how can work aimed at forming a more equitable opera industry intersect with these innovations? As João Pedro Cachopo argues, these developments raise "questions that unsettle our perception not only of the social role of opera but also of its very mediality and its relation to other arts" (2022, 89). In broader work on the Black digital humanities and virtual artistic practices, digital spaces are conceived of as holding liberatory potential (see e.g. Risam and Josephs ed. 2021), but there is much to be done to probe the tension between the empowerment that digital creation offers, issues of access,<sup>12</sup> and online replication of existing social inequalities; national and transnational collaborations are not necessarily overcome via technology, even if superficially eased. As this series of revitalizing work by Afrodiasporic creators shows, addressing this tension can take us to examining how the "social role" of opera can work towards anti-racist goals. Both *Blessed* and *Brown Sounds* responded explicitly to the backdrop of protests and discourse surrounding the Black Lives Matter Movement without addressing these directly through narrative or plot. Instead, the two opera-films weave richly symbolic reference throughout visual and musical content, steeped in histories of Black aesthetics, literature, music, theology, politics, and Afrodiasporic cultural history. Further work on opera shorts, including those listed at the beginning of this chapter, would investigate these connecting threads and also situate such pieces in relation to wider digital artistic practices by Afrodiasporic creators, heeding George E. Lewis's call, especially in Afrofuturist contexts, for a "wider range of theorizing about the triad of blackness, sound, and technology" (2008, 142). My intention in exploring *Blessed* and *Brown Sounds* in depth is, at a minimum, to highlight the innovations in digital opera that accelerated during the pandemic, with the goal of yielding more commissions and visibility for historically underrepresented artists in the opera industry. In the longer term, my hope is that the inventive ways in which these pieces shift the goalposts of opera's material boundaries will contribute to systematic and large-scale investment in representation of diverse voices in all aspects of opera creation and collaboration.

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12 For example, the 2016 US Census noted that 19 percent of the country have no broadband internet subscription, amounting to approximately 61 million people; moreover, low-income, Black, and Hispanic households were more likely to be "smartphone only," i.e. with smartphones as the only means of accessing the internet (Ryan 2018).

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