

Today and Now: Black Opera as a Decolonial Methodology

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“Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.”¹

Franz Fanon, a central figure in post-colonial studies wrote these words in his foundational book, *Wretched of the Earth*. His words have also been important to many more recently in decolonial studies. Fanon argues that when there is a revolutionary struggle embedded in the lived experiences of the people of today, then the art will come. The genocidal project of settler colonialism, on which the United States was founded and has been maintained, is a project not only invested in the elimination of a people alive today but in the total and complete erasure of that people’s future by a perverse rewriting of a past in which they never existed.² One of the most pernicious targets of this colonial oppression goes beyond bodily violence and focuses on eliminating the cultural centers where the people store our collective past and our hopes for the future – our archives, museums, universities, and theaters. Toni Morrison, in her 1995 Charter Day celebration speech at Howard University, stated that one of the goals of fascism (which can be seen as a political method of colonialism) is to **“Palisade all art forms; monitor, discredit or expel those that challenge or destabilize processes of demonization and deification.”³** How we tell history matters and, as Morrison notes, the arts are a vital part. Black Opera is more than a genre, but a radical methodology in which composers, librettists, directors, performers, and audiences are speaking against political and cultural manipulation.

In the United States, artists are finding ways to confront the limitations recently levied by the current administration of President Donald Trump. This regime is accelerating the American colonial project that has always been at the nation’s foundation. In a similar way to other totalitarian regimes, the people involved understand the necessity of controlling artistic and scholarly institutions so they may both create a national mythology in which indigenous and Black people never existed and produce artistic and scholarly work that naturalizes violence against those people.

The colonial goals of this regime are evidenced by the focus on the distortion, disfigurement, and destruction of American, Black, and indigenous history. In practice, artistic institutions, universities, and museums representing the nation are purged of voices that critique the accepted norms and re-named. For example, on July 24, 2025, NPR reported that the House Appropriations Committee had approved the \$32 million budget for the Kennedy Center with the stipulation that the Opera House be renamed for first lady, Melania Trump.⁴ This proposal followed the March 25, 2025 firing of noted Black librettist and poet, Marc Bamuthi Joseph, from his position as Vice President and Artistic Director of Impact at the Kennedy Center.⁵ This was one of several positions

1 Fanon, Frantz, and Richard Philcox. *The Wretched of the Earth: Frantz Fanon; Translated from the French by Richard Philcox; Introductions by Jean-Paul Sartre and Homi K. Bhabha*. Grove Press, 2004, 210.

2 Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne. *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*. ReVisioning American History. Beacon Press, 2014, 8.

3 Morrison, Toni. “Racism and Fascism.” *The Journal of Negro Education* 64, no. 3 (1995): 384. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2967217>.

within the Social Impact department to be completely eliminated. Since Joseph took this position in 2018, he had helped develop several outreach programs, including the Culture Caucus, a two-year residency program through local organizations that worked with queer, trans, disabled, and/or formerly incarcerated populations. Under his direction, the Social Impact team had increased the Kennedy Center's visitors from 10,000 in 2021 to 65,000 in 2023.⁶ Changing the name of the nation's opera house from Kennedy to Trump in tandem with Joseph's firing indicates a colonial intention to expel those who have been the safe keepers of our histories, the innovators of our futures, and the leaders of decolonial political theory.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph and composer Daniel Bernard Roumain exemplify in their opera, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, how Black opera can function as a radical, Black, communal methodology that challenges colonial binaries (e.g., between audience/performer, past/present, man/woman) to speak directly to the colonial violence of today and now. Premiering at Philadelphia Opera in 2017, the opera follows the story of five, Black, Philadelphia teenagers. After one of the teens, John Blue, accidentally kills his peer who was attacking him because he is transgender, the found family of teens seek refuge in an abandoned building. It is in this decaying home where the teens are guided and protected by the ghosts of the 1985 MOVE bombing, in which police bombed the home of the Afrocentric environmental organization, MOVE, led by John Africa. The bombing and consequential fire took the lives of eleven people, including five children, led to the destruction of sixty-one homes, and displaced over 250 residents.⁷ The opera was developed from Philadelphia Opera's Hip-H'opera program that directly worked to provide high quality artist education to Philadelphia students. Like the found family of teenagers in the opera, the real Philadelphia students were facing the closing of twenty-four Philadelphia schools at the time, which affected thousands of students. Roumain and Joseph's opera exemplifies both the best of what Black opera can be and why colonial administrations would aim to neutralize its message.

I build upon the work of these aforementioned decolonial theorists (Fanon, Morrison, Joseph) to define Black opera as a liberatory methodology. Such energies provide storytelling that values a wholistic understanding of the past that informs the present, comes from and speaks directly to the challenges of today's communities, and imagines a future beyond the structural, social, cultural, economic, and physical violence of colonialism. The best of Black opera literally challenges colonial violence, and thus its creators are a real danger to the current Trump administration's goals. I believe it is imperative as Black opera scholars that we also understand our *everyday* work must challenge colonial logics wherever they may be found in political administrations, our own professional departments, and even internally within ourselves. In dangerous times, Black opera offers decolonial possibility.

4 Blair, Elizabeth. "Republicans Want to Rename the Kennedy Center's Opera House after Melania Trump." Culture. NPR, July 24, 2025. <https://www.npr.org/2025/07/24/nx-s1-5477484/republicans-want-to-rename-the-kennedy-centers-opera-house-after-melania-trump>.

5 Democracy Now!, dir. "Taking Down Everything Black": Fired Kennedy Center VP Marc Bamuthi Joseph on Trump's Takeover. 2025. 18:28. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXQOTjtH5xg>.

6 Irshad, Zara. "Exclusive: Ex-Kennedy Center Employee Speaks on Institution's 'Toxicity' after Getting Fired under Trump." San Francisco Chronicle, March 28, 2025. <https://www.sfchronicle.com/entertainment/article/marc-bamuthi-joseph-kennedy-center-20242695.php>.

7 Stein, Melissa N. "'The Blood of Innocent Children': Race, Respectability, and 'True' Victimhood in the 1985 MOVE Police Bombing." *Souls* 22, nos. 2–4 (2020): 160–84, 161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2021.2003630>.

About the author

Allison Michele Lewis is the Civic Engagement and Audience Development Manager at Minnesota Opera. She earned a PhD in American Studies, an MA in African and African American Studies, a certificate in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and a BM in vocal performance with a focus in operatic studies as a mezzo soprano from the University of Kansas. Allison is a Black feminist, transdisciplinary, queer, artist-scholar who is dedicated to producing research and music that is in service of Black liberation. Her dissertation is an ethnography of operas written by Black composers at the top American opera houses in the 2023 season titled, “Children with Peculiar Grace: Black Opera in the DEI Era”.