

Reverberations of Empire? Opera in the Contexts of (De)Colonial and Postcolonial Thought

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Since the Black Lives Matter movement began, the term “decolonisation” has spread widely beyond the former colonies, and universities, cultural institutions and artists are grappling with the legacies of empire worldwide.¹ Yet a further shift in these debates is already resonating through political, artistic, and academic discourses. For example, in a recent call for contributions titled “On Decolonisation”, the editors of the journal *Performance Research* addressed the misuse, co-opting and overuse of the term “decolonisation”. We agree with their argument that, due to “the widespread belief that ‘decolonisation’ as a scholarly framework has reached an impasse”,² it is a constructive time for us now to discuss (de)colonial and postcolonial thought in the context of opera. This discussion remains pertinent even though talk of the term “decolonisation” may seem exhausted and risks reaffirming the institutional limits it laments. Opera and music theatre occupy a particularly charged position within these debates as they have long been entwined with colonial politics of representation and the acoustics of imperial theatres: voice and visibility on stage, the architecture of grand opera houses, the circuits of touring companies, and the economies of taste were all shaped by imperial histories.³

Aided by greater awareness and new cultural policy guidelines in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, an exciting and growing body of new opera and music theatre productions has emerged to engage decolonial and postcolonial thought in recent years. The topics of these productions frame opera as a means of repair and explore transcultural memory politics, as well as feminist and Afrofuturist reimaginings and diaspora narratives. Operas exemplifying these trends include *Justice* at the Grand Théâtre de Genève (2024), the Namibian-German collaboration *Chief Hijuangua*, which was performed in Windhoek (2022) and Berlin (2023), *The Women*

- 1 Among others: William Fourie, “Musicology and Decolonial Analysis in the Age of Brexit,” *Twentieth-Century Music*, 17 no. 2 (2020): 197–211, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572220000031>; Royal Opera House, “Anti-Racism Pledge,” 2021, accessed August 30, 2025, <https://www.roh.org.uk/about/our-commitments/anti-racism-pledge>; Opéra National de Paris, Diop, Guillaume, Letizia Galloni, Jack Gasztowtt, Binkady-Emmanuel Hié, Awa Joannais, Saki Kuwabara, Chun Wing Lam et al., “Manifeste. De la question raciale à l’Opéra national de Paris: Opéra National de Paris,” 2020, accessed August 30, 2025, [https://res.cloudinary.com/opera-national-de-paris/image/upload/v1/pdf/iuhdxzldlklxixclzs9p?_a=E](https://res.cloudinary.com/opera-national-de-paris/image/upload/v1/pdf/iuhdxzldlklxixclzs9p?_a=E;); Harriet Swain, “Students want their curriculums decolonised. Are universities listening?,” *The Guardian*, January 30, 2019, accessed August 30, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jan/30/students-want-their-curriculums-decolonised-are-universities-listening>; Berlin University Alliance website, “Decolonizing the Curriculum,” 2024, accessed November 10, 2025, <https://www.berlin-university-alliance.de/en/commitments/diversity/digenet/Decolonizing-the-Curriculum/index.html>; Edward Burnett, “Oxford University to spend £3.3m decolonising curriculum,” *Oxford Mail*, November 13, 2024, accessed November 10, 2025, <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/24720767.oxford-university-spend-3-3m-decolonising-curriculum/>; Monique Ligtenberg, Harald Fischer-Tiné and Philipp Krauer, “Decolonizing Curricula, Pluralizing Research and Teaching. Postcolonial Perspectives on Universities in the 21st Century,” Conference Programme, January 26, 2023, accessed November 10, 2025, https://ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/ifg/geschichte-der-modernen-welt/documents/Veranstaltungen/Fr%C3%BChere%20Veranstaltungen/2023/new%20Decolonizing%20Curricula%20-Programm_26-01-2023.pdf.
- 2 Call for Proposals: *Performance Research* vol. 30, no. 5 – On Decolonization,” edited by Rashna Darius Nicholson and Lisa Skwirblies. *Performance Research*, July/August 2024, accessed October 15, 2024, <https://performance-research.org>.
- 3 Among others: Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993); Melissa Gerber, “Programming Britishness: The Royal Carl Rosa Opera Company’s 1937 Tour of South Africa,” *Cambridge Journal*, 36 (2024): 243–266; Christopher Balme and Nic Leonhardt, “Introduction: Theatrical Trade Routes,” *Journal of Global Theatre History* 1, no. 1 (2016): 1–9.

of *Windrush* at the Buxton International Festival (2023), and *Sycorax* at the Bühnen Bern (2022). Some of these operas confront audiences with their own national legacies. For instance, the opera *Justice*, created by Swiss director Milo Rau, Catalan composer Hèctor Parra and Congolese librettist Fiston Mwanza Mujila, confront audiences with what Patricia Purtschert calls “Postcolonial Switzerland”, by making audible how the nineteenth century continues to reverberate through the twenty-first.⁴ This opera focuses on a 2019 sulphuric acid disaster in Kabwe, Katanga (DR Congo) that was caused by a truck belonging to the Swiss mining giant Glencore, and frames it as part of the long tail of colonial exploitation. In interviews, Milo Rau explicitly links the wealth of Geneva to the poverty of the Congo, demonstrating how the nineteenth century persists into the twenty-first century of global capitalism.⁵ Such creative interventions exemplify the decolonial potential that South African composer and musicologist Neo Muyanga attributes to opera and music theatre, which he sees “as viable platforms for exploring, rather than avoiding, the persistent asymmetries of power between the global North and South, as well as the hidden contingencies these asymmetries portend”.⁶

However, these examples also highlight a central paradox. In line with Walter D. Mignolo’s notion of delinking, one might worry that even radical gestures risk losing their transformative power when absorbed into the very institutions and funding systems still shaped by colonial aesthetics and value systems. Is it enough to tell new stories in opera and music theatre? Or must decolonial efforts also transform how opera is produced? Should critical institutional practices also incorporate new production processes from programming and casting to rehearsal processes and power relations behind the scenes? These questions have been raised in discussions of curatorial practice, “deep listening” approaches, and collaborative creation.⁷ Can postcolonial and decolonial productions unsettle institutions? Can opera and music theatre become not only sites of critical storytelling but also spheres for knowledge-making and spaces for actively *doing* repair, resistance and reimagined belonging, rather than merely staging these themes?⁸

To approach these questions, this issue draws on several key thinkers in decolonial and postcolonial theory whose insights help frame our inquiry. Aníbal Quijano’s notion of the coloniality of power reveals how modernity organises knowledge, existence, and perception along racial and civilisational lines.⁹ Mignolo’s call for epistemic delinking redefines decolonisation as an ongoing negotiation with this matrix of power, rather than a departure from it.¹⁰ On the other hand Achille Mbembe reminds us that colonial reason is not a distant memory, but an active infrastructure of thought and governance.¹¹ These ideas suggest that dismantling colonial-

4 Patricia Purtschert, ed., *Postkoloniale Schweiz: Formen und Folgen eines Kolonialismus ohne Kolonien*, *Postcolonial Studies* no. 10, 2nd ed. (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2013).

5 Clara Pons, “Entretien croisé avec Milo Rau, scénariste et metteur en scène de *Hustice* et Fiston Mwanza Mujila, librettiste de l’opéra,” opera program booklet *Justice*, *Opéra de Hèctor Parra, Grand Théâtre de Genève: 22–29.*, “Un opéra pour rendre justice,” *RTS Radio Télévision Suisse*, January 25, 2024, Video, 26:00, accessed September 1, 2025, <https://www.rts.ch/play/tv/ramdam/video/un-opera-pour-rendre-justice?urn=urn:rt:video:14651792>.

6 Neo Muyanga, “A Revolt in (more than just) Four Parts,” in *Opera & Music Theatre*, eds. Christine Matzke, Lena van der Hoven, Christopher Odhiambo, and Hilde Roos, *African Theatre* 19 (Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2020), 17–28.

7 On critical institutional practices, see the workshop, which will be held at the University of Bern in 2026 entitled *Critical Institutional Practices: Global Perspectives across the Visual Arts and Music Theatre*, which has a key focus on methods and production processes that open up new configurations of knowledge: experimentation in artistic form and curatorial practice, collective authorship, self-organized structures that bypass traditional institutional gatekeeping and the creation of transnational networks of solidarity.

8 The first paragraphs stem from Lena van der Hoven’s book project on South African opera after 1994 and her current SNF project application on opera production, migration and (de)coloniality in Europe.

9 Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–580.

10 Walter D. Mignolo, “DELINKING: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality,”; Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. *On decoloniality* (Durham NC and London: Duke University Press, 2018).

ity involves continuous critique and re-negotiation, rather than a simple overturning of past narratives.

Current opera scholarship is beginning to bridge the gap between critical theory and artistic practice. Juliana Pistorius's recent book, *Postcolonial Opera*, is a prime example of this movement between critique and sensibility. By reading opera as a practice of "remembering otherwise", Pistorius shows how postcolonial analysis can lead to decolonial transformation.¹² Similarly, the *Decolonial AestheSis* project proposes delinking not only epistemologies but also sensibilities, with the aim of recovering modes of feeling and perceiving that were suppressed by colonial modernity.¹³ Although this project was not originally conceived with opera in mind, its call to decolonise the senses is highly relevant to the embodied and sonic practices presented in this inaugural edition of the *Journal of Black Opera and Music Theatre* (JBOM). Thereby, both scholarship and art are converging on the idea that changing how we sense, listen and remember opera is as important as changing what stories are told and how.

These artistic, political and scholarly currents inspired the [Black Opera Research Network](#) (BORN) to select this subject for its first publication. They are particularly important to us, as BORN was established to address the urgent need within opera and music theatre scholarship for a platform that centres Blackness, decolonial thought and global perspectives as integral, rather than peripheral, dimensions of the field.¹⁴ Although existing journals have long advanced the study of opera and related performance practices, the historical dominance of Eurocentric canons and methodologies has limited the space available for work that considers how race, diaspora and colonial histories influence the creation, reception and theorisation of music theatre worldwide. The *Journal of Black Opera and Music Theatre* positions itself as a platform for critical engagement that aspires to amplify the necessary epistemic, aesthetic, and institutional shifts. By foregrounding transnational and interdisciplinary approaches, the *Journal of Black Opera and Music Theatre* seeks to expand the scholarly conversation around terms such as "opera" and "music theatre" and reshape the contours of the field itself. This involves linking academic enquiry to broader conversations about practices and forms of knowledge that exist beyond the Eurocentric canon and its institutional logic, as well as conversations about representation, identity, power, and belonging in today's performing arts.

The title of this inaugural issue was directly inspired by the range of submissions we received. Our contributors, whose pieces range from traditional scholarly articles to reflective essays by practitioners, revealed that opera's colonial entanglements and (de)colonial reverberations cannot be confined to a single conceptual framework. The initial call for submissions foregrounded "de/coloniality", but the breadth of perspectives led us to adopt the broader title "Reverberations of Empire? Opera in the Context of (De)Colonial and Postcolonial Thought". This revised title acknowledges the diversity of approaches in the issue and emphasises the produc-

11 Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive," Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, June 9, 2015, accessed November 1, 2025, <https://wiser.wits.ac.za/system/files/Achille%20Mbembe%20-%20Decolonizing%20Knowledge%20and%20the%20Question%20of%20the%20Archive.pdf>.

12 Juliana M. Pistorius, *Postcolonial Opera: William Kentridge and the Unbounded Work of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025).

13 Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez, *Decolonial AestheSis: "Colonial Wounds/ Decolonial Healings,"* Periscope Decolonial AestheSis, Social Text Online, July 15, 2013, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aestheSis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/, accessed September 1, 2025.

14 The Black Opera Research Network (BORN) was established in 2020 is a platform for conversations on the history, experiences, politics and practices of Black Opera. We hope to contribute to the expanding discourse on alternative operatic cultures. Advocate for an inclusive, socially responsive and responsible critical scholarship. Facilitate dialogue between scholars, and between scholars and practitioners among others through yearly online events and develop and curate resources for the performance of, teaching, and research on Black opera around the world. For more information visit the Black Opera Research Network website: <http://blackoperaresearch.net/>.

tive tensions between critique, practice, and historical legacy that define this field. Accordingly, the issue is conceived as a forum for reflection, collaboration, and critique. It provides a platform for voices that unsettle, reimagine, and recompose what opera and music theatre can mean in the wake of empire, moving between postcolonial reflection and decolonial re-imagining. The project builds on recent critical studies of Eurocentric music theatre and foundational works on Black opera, race, and cultural identity, while pushing those conversations into newer territory.¹⁵

The contributions in this first issue can be understood as performing postcolonial or decolonial gestures in dialogue with one another – often resonating in productive friction rather than in unanimity. Together, they occupy in-between spaces: between what Diana Taylor would call “the archive and the repertoire”, between listening and voicing, between institutionalised structures and fluid formats, between myth and memory.¹⁶ It is precisely in the contexts of opera and music theatre as spaces of knowledge, representation, and memory that colonial and decolonial narratives are performed, heard, negotiated, and overwritten.

These considerations guided the structure of this issue. The *Journal of Black Opera and Music Theatre* enters this conversation not by offering definitive answers, but by opening a space for plurality, dialogue, and creative tension. To foster a space for multiplicity, it was important to us to include voices from different academic career stages as well as practitioners, and to welcome different forms of contributions. Accordingly, the journal is organised in three sections: invited opening statements, double-blind peer-reviewed articles, and non-peer-reviewed topical interviews and statements.

Taking up a guiding question from our call for submission, we invited a constellation of voices from different continents and generations to reflect on what decoloniality means in their own work and worlds for our opening section. Crucially, rather than attempting to set out a definition of decoloniality, their statements seek to locate it in practice by thinking through, and sometimes against, the term itself. They approach the issue from varied angles, demonstrating a rich plurality of perspectives that range across analytical, historical, aesthetic, and political dimensions.

The opening statement by David Castillo and Johanna Hilari provides an epistemic horizon for this discussion, emphasising de/coloniality as a spatial and relational matrix and introducing Mignolo’s concept of the “decolonial gesture” as embodied.¹⁷ Subsequent statements engage decolonial gestures in distinct ways. Isidora Miranda hesitates to work through the lens of decoloniality, asking, “does colonialism explain everything?”¹⁸ She concludes that “we continue to wres-

15 Among others: Naomi Adele André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018); Mary I. Ingraham, Joseph K. So and Roy Moodley, eds., *Opera in a Multicultural World: Culture, Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Pamela Karantonis and Dylan Robinson, eds., *Opera Indigene: Re/presenting First Nations and Indigenous Cultures* (London, New York: Routledge, 2011); Kira Thurman, *Singing like Germans: Black Musicians in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501759864>; Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822374695>; Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, vol. 17 (New York: NYU Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1bj4s55>; Ronald Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan, eds., *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, eds., *Stuart Hall: Selected Writings on Race and Difference* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. Culture, Media, and Identities* (London, Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997); Carina Venter, „Composition And/as Postcolonial Shame: Philip Miller’s *REwind: A Cantata for Voice, Tape, and Testimony*,“ *Social Dynamics* 47, no. 2 (2021): 312–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952>; Christine Matzke, Lena van der Hoven, Christopher Odhiambo, and Hilde Roos, eds., *Opera & Music Theatre, African Theatre 19* (Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2020).

16 Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), doi:10.1515/9780822385318.

17 David Castillo and Johanna Hilari, “Locating Decoloniality. A Statement on Decolonial Gestures in Live Arts and Academia,” *Journal of Black Opera & Music Theatre* 1, no.1 (November 2025): 13–17.

18 Isidora Miranda, “The Question of Decoloniality in Philippine Music History,” *Journal of Black Opera & Music Theatre* 1, no.1 (November 2025): 18.

tle with the question of how decoloniality might look like in practice”.¹⁹ Patricia Caicedo, on the other hand, interrogates the persistent existence of “colonial narratives that have shaped our sonic world”.²⁰ She argues for a transformation of our consciousness of existing repertoires. While Caicedo calls for a sonic rewriting of power, Allison Lewis suggests Black opera as a methodology that entwines art and politics. Lewis reminds us of the contemporary urgency and political responsibility of the present moment. Read together, these statements reiterate that decoloniality is not a fixed endpoint but an ongoing process of renegotiation.

The articles that follow explore the complex relationship between postcolonial analysis and decolonial praxis, thereby demonstrating a productive and necessary tension. While some articles advocate “epistemic disobedience” by radically repositioning opera’s foundations, others use postcolonial critique to highlight the structural issues that make decoloniality both pressing and challenging.²¹ Our spectrum reflects the lived realities of composers, performers and scholars who work within and against institutions in which the colonial histories remain very much present. These contributions can be understood as operating across three interconnected axes: institutional critique, listening as epistemic intervention, and aesthetic strategies of resistance and reimagination.

In any discussion of decolonial opera, the material conditions of its production must be considered. In the first article, “*Ziyankomo and the Forbidden Fruit* (2012): Black Opera’s Complex Relation with Colonial Modernity”, Innocentia Mhlambi demonstrates the relationship between Black art and white financing in post-apartheid South Africa, revealing what she terms “racial capitalism” within operatic institutions. Drawing on the concepts of coloniality proposed by Walter D. Mignolo and the analysis of power structures offered by Aníbal Quijano, Mhlambi argues that, despite its all-Black cast and indigenous Zulu narrative, *Ziyankomo* remains “firmly located in cultural productions meant for exotic entertainment, while simultaneously obfuscating contingent historical realities affecting Africans”.²² She asserts that the opera’s reliance on white patronage influences not only the stories that can be told, but also how they are staged, for whom, and for what purpose.

This structural reality is reflected in the panel discussion “We embody contradictions”, in which South African composer Neo Muyanga and Nigerian composers Bode Omojola and Charles Uzor discussed the contradictions they navigate daily in production conditions in the African diaspora. Muyanga describes his compositional practice as hybrid, being “part Western-trained, part street-trained”, and insists that “the contradiction is part of my language”.²³ Rather than viewing it as a compromise, he refers to his work as a diplomat for translation, describing it as a deliberate navigation between epistemic systems that refuses the colonial binary of authenticity versus assimilation.

In the conversation with Thomas Gartmann entitled “*Black Tell Revisited*”, Uzor reflects on the production process of *Black Tell*, a collaborative “Swiss soap opera” created for the 2002 Swiss National Exhibition (Schweizer Landesausstellung). Both Gartmann and Uzor were involved in the production: Gartmann as the head of the music department at Pro Helvetia, the funding

19 Isidora Miranda, “The Question of Decoloniality in Philippine Music History”, 18.

20 Patricia Caicedo, “(De)Coloniality and the Sonic Rewriting of Power,” *Journal of Black Opera & Music Theatre* 1, no.1 (November 2025): 20.

21 Walter D. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26 (2009):1–23. doi: 10.1177/0263276409349275

22 Innocentia Mhlambi, “*Ziyankomo and the Forbidden Fruit* (2012): Black Opera’s Complex Relation with Colonial Modernity,” *Journal of Black Opera & Music Theatre* 1, no.1 (November 2025): 25.

23 Lena van der Hoven, “We embody contradictions”. Panel Discussion with Composers Neo Muyanga, Bode Omojola and Charles Uzor on Production Conditions of Operas in the African Diaspora,” *Journal of Black Opera & Music Theatre* 1, no.1 (November 2025): 203.

institution, and Uzor as the composer. In the article they reflect about appropriation, nation and exploitation. The production co-opted Switzerland's founding myth of Wilhelm Tell, inserting a Black composer and performer as a gesture towards multiculturalism. Through the lenses of both the past (when the work was first performed), and the present, Gartmann and Uzor discuss how social and political changes affect the reception of the same work, producing multiple meanings. The production process constrained Uzor's artistic agency, and the production's execution did not seem to live up to its aim of critiquing "Swissness" or welcoming the Other. In the panel discussion Uzor further acknowledges that when he now tries to be radical "the doors suddenly close", thereby exposing the gatekeeping mechanisms that determine which Black voices and productions are given a platform.²⁴ In this respect his moving observation seems important: "I have turned white"²⁵ – and he reflects that "Africans are still trying to find their identity".²⁶

In his article "Opera is African: Oriki, Narrativity, and the Politics of Power in Yorùbá Opera", Omojola articulates a key dilemma for African opera composers: "Should the anticolonial or decolonial effectiveness of new African operas be assessed by an incremental, pragmatic approach within an intercultural musical language, or should African operas instigate a more radical Afro-centric departure from colonial musical heritage?"²⁷ He provides one answer by demonstrating that opera was never solely European. By tracing the indigenous Yorùbá roots of opera back to pre-colonial ceremonial forms, particularly òrìkì (praise poetry), Omojola demonstrates that the form Europeans codified as "opera" in the 17th century had long existed in West African performance traditions integrating music, drama, poetry and dance. His analyses of Hubert Ogunde's *Yorùbá Rónú* (1964), Akin Euba's *Chaka* (1999) and his own *Funmilayo* (2019) reveal how these works employ òrìkì not merely as musical material but also as a narrative structure. For Omojola, this is an important form of African operatic dramaturgy as it recalls, re-enacts, and re-signifies historical events and figures. Omojola's historical reclamation reveals, similarly to Caicedo's statement, the colonial arrogance inherent in European opera historiography, which presented itself as universal while disregarding other traditions. However, his article also acknowledges the pragmatic reality that even self-consciously decolonial operas must engage with Western-trained performers, notation systems derived from Europe, and audiences accustomed to Eurocentric aesthetic standards. Therefore, the question might not be whether to engage with these systems, but rather how to do so.

Although institutional and economic constraints limit what can be produced, other contributors demonstrate how artistic practice itself can serve as a means of decolonising thought, particularly through transformed modes of listening.

If coloniality operates in part through what and how we hear, then transforming our listening practices becomes a decolonial imperative. In her provocative essay, "Where Can We Find Opera? A Methodology to Centre a Listening Revolution", Nina Eidsheim argues that waiting for institutional readiness of change will condemn us to inaction. Instead, she asks if the genre is capable of attentive listening rather than being listened to. She draws on Juliana Snapper's performance work, *Opera Listens to You* (2011), which inverted opera's traditional demand for audience attention by creating an ensemble that performed attentive listening to individual audience members' stories. In the essay, Eidsheim extends this methodology to her experience of Massimo Bartolini's installation *Due Qui/To Hear* (2024) at the Venice Biennale. There, she found herself hearing multiple operas within the soundscape of scaffolding, organ pipes, and "resonating" clay.

24 Lena van der Hoven, "We embody contradictions," 200.

25 Lena van der Hoven, "We embody contradictions," 199.

26 Lena van der Hoven, "We embody contradictions," 199.

27 Bode Omojola, "Opera is African: Oriki, Narrativity, and the Politics of Power in Yorùbá Opera," *Journal of Black Opera & Music Theatre* 1, no.1 (November 2025): 139.

Her radical proposition is as follows: “If one audience member can hear twenty-plus operas in works like *Due Qui/To Hear*, and if we can listen to that listening and acknowledge it, we already possess what we desire: a rich and complex world of opera today.”²⁸ Her critique of static repertoires of an old, sclerotic art form also resonates with Caicedo’s statement.

Eidsheim’s listening revolution refuses to grant European institutions power to determine what constitutes opera. This epistemic reorientation is most clearly articulated in Ed McKeon’s “Shadows of Time: *Njinga the Queen King* by IONE and Pauline Oliveros”, which analyses how the opera enacts what Oliveros called “Deep Listening” (a practice of radical attention that resists the extractive, colonising modes of hearing imposed by Western modernity). McKeon argues that *Njinga* addresses “the historical trauma of enslavement and its continuity through forms of coloniality by composing conditions for the emergence of ancestral subjects touched by the passage of knowledge and affects across time and space”.²⁹ The opera recounts the life of Njinga Mbande (1582–1663), the Angolan queen who resisted Portuguese colonisation. However, it does so through a temporal structure that rejects linear historical narrative, showing how Njinga creates what McKeon terms a “shadow time”. A mode of historical consciousness in which “those who are dead are never gone; they are there in the thickening shadow”.³⁰ Deep listening becomes a technology for communicating with the ancestors, for hearing voices that colonial historiography deemed inaudible. The opera’s sound world materialises this shadow time, making the past sensuously present, while with its compositional reliance on dream consciousness to intertwine the past and the present, this work confronts interactions embedded in decolonialism as a means of looking to the future.

Both Eidsheim and McKeon assert that listening is an active process of creation rather than passive reception. To listen to the decolonial, and to listen decolonially, is to reject the auditory boundaries that predetermine which sounds matter, which histories can be heard, and whose voices are recognised as knowledge. This is not only about listening to opera differently, but about understanding listening itself as the operative site where opera and its epistemology are formed.

If transformed listening enables different types of operatic knowledge, the question remains: how can composers working within European contexts attempt to depict racial and cultural identity?

In his article “Nobody Knows What Colour I Am: Time, Music, and Race in Kris Defoort’s *The Time of Our Singing*”, Pieter Mannaerts examines how a Flemish composer grapples with racial identity and historical trauma in the story of a mixed-race family in mid-20th-century America. Based on the 2002 novel by Richard Powers, the opera follows the Strom family as they navigate the impossibility of belonging in a society structured by white supremacy. Mannaerts demonstrates how a “third space”, as theorised by Homi K. Bhabha, is created by Defoort’s musical composition as a postcolonial cultural statement marked by an inherent hybridity, in which, moreover, “self-other binaries” are attempted to be overcome by the protagonists. The opera’s title comes from the last moments of the protagonist, Jonah: “Nobody knows what colour I am. I am nobody.”³¹ Mannaerts interprets these words not as an expression of racial transcendence, but as an articulation of an unspeakable position: being mixed-race in a society that demands racial

28 Nina Eidsheim, “Where Can We Find Opera? A Methodology to Centre a Listening Revolution,” *Journal of Black Opera & Music Theatre* 1, no.1 (November 2025): 165.

29 Ed McKeon, “Shadows of Time: *Njinga the Queen King* by IONE and Pauline Oliveros,” *Journal of Black Opera & Music Theatre* 1, no.1 (November 2025): 90.

30 Ed McKeon, “Shadows of Time: *Njinga the Queen King* by IONE and Pauline Oliveros,” 90.

31 Pieter Mannaerts, “Nobody Knows What Colour I Am: Time, Music, and Race in Kris Defoort’s *The Time of Our Singing*,” *Journal of Black Opera & Music Theatre* 1, no.1 (November 2025): 65.

“purity” is to inhabit an ontological impossibility. The opera denies catharsis, instead insisting on the ongoing violence of racial categorisation.

The final group of articles looks at how performance can subvert operatic conventions, either by reclaiming indigenous forms or by dismantling gender and heroic binaries.

In Gwen Ansell’s interview article “Decolonising the Hypermasculine Hero: *Nkoli, the Vogue Opera*”, she explains how the opera’s creators see the “vogue opera” form as an activist and decolonising feature. The article can be read in tension with Mlahmbi’s article, as this interview-based piece engages with the producer’s transformative, queer vision. The gestural vocabulary of voguing originated from a stylised manifestation of solidarity and defiance, employed by working-class African-American and Latinx queer communities during the 1980s. Therefore, staging the life of gay South African activist Simon Nkoli (1957–1998) through the sensibilities of vogue culture asserts an aesthetic genealogy that bypasses European opera entirely, drawing on the strategies of survival, self-fashioning and fierce resistance of African American ballroom culture instead. The South African opera rejects the tragic hero narrative structure, presenting Nkoli not as a martyred victim but as a fierce warrior whose activism transformed the anti-apartheid struggle and the LGBTQ+ liberation movement. As Ansell notes, presenting the ambiguities of Nkoli’s character is particularly effective through the vogue form. With its emphasis on “fluid spaces and rejection of rigid categories”, the form is singularly suited to embodying the narrative in ways that more traditional operatic narratives might not and thereby to enable it to challenge the stereotypical narration and staging of “gender and heroic character binaries” of 19th-century operas.³²

Moses Nii-Dortey’s “Finding *The Lost Fishermen*: Cinematic Adaptation as a Safeguard for Ghana’s Ailing Folk Operatic Tradition” addresses a different kind of survival and memory politics: how to preserve endangered operatic forms through media transformation. Nii-Dortey documents Kwame Crenstil’s 2023 film adaptation of composer Saka Acquaye’s 1965 folk opera *The Lost Fishermen*. It is the only one of the composer’s ten operas to have been staged in Ghana in recent decades, though, as Nii-Dortey argues, not successfully. Nii-Dortey attributes this to the many years of intergenerational discontinuity in transmission, the apparent archaic nature of the operas’ mainly religious and nationalistic themes, and the failure to keep pace with technological advances. The article grapples with questions of fidelity. He argues that fidelity should be understood as meaningful resemblance rather than exact reproduction. Crenstil’s film captures the story’s while using the technological capabilities of cinema, to make the work accessible to contemporary audiences. The adaptation simultaneously preserves and transforms, honouring Acquaye’s decolonial vision (created in the aftermath of Ghana’s independence in 1957 to celebrate African cultural sovereignty) while acknowledging that forms must evolve to survive.

Both Ansell and Nii-Dortey demonstrate that decoloniality does not necessarily entail the rejection of all European influence, but rather the strategic appropriation, remixing and transformation of it. The tension running through these contributions — between postcolonial analysis and decolonial action, pragmatic negotiation and radical refusal, and institutional change and individual listening practices — is not a problem to be solved, but a condition to be navigated, as Muyanga had insisted in the panel discussion. To demand ideological purity or strategic consistency is to misunderstand the reality of creating opera while Black, while African and while experiencing the ongoing violence of coloniality.

32 Gwen Ansell, “Decolonising the Hypermasculine Hero: *Nkoli, The Vogue Opera*,” *Journal of Black Opera & Music Theatre* 1, no.1 (November 2025): 167.

These articles collectively demonstrate that decoloniality in opera cannot be singular. Omojola's historical reclamation, Mhlambi's institutional critique, Eidsheim's listening revolution, McKeon's ancestral summoning, Mannaerts' temporal layering, Ansell's queer subversion, and Nii-Dortey's technological preservation each offer a different approach. Some operate within institutions, while others operate against them. Some pursue radical breaks, while others seek incremental shifts. The question is not which approach is correct, but how they might reinforce each other.

Uzor's vision of "Real Black Opera", as "more realistic, more fantastical, more political, more utopian", simultaneously captures this multiplicity.³³ To him "[r]eal Black opera questions the hierarchies of high and low, of good and bad – not in the sense of the antiheroic, but in a sense of deconstructing narrative hierarchies of an anachronistic bourgeois society that pleases itself by education, entertainment and morals, thus pleasing its self-sufficiency."³⁴ This means it is not about inserting Black singers and stories into existing structures, but about reimagining opera as a practice of integrated performance that exists wherever music, drama, embodiment and community converge, rather than as a genre defined by European institutions. Such opera already exists. The question is not where to find it, but whether we are willing to listen.

For subsequent issues we aim to engage a broader scope than in the inaugural edition. We therefore **welcome submissions** on opera and other forms of music theatre that centre Blackness—as a subject, methodology, site of identity formation, or critical lens. Authors who wish to be considered for the 2026 issue should submit their work by 15 March 2026. As before, we seek to represent the voices of scholars at all stages of their careers as well as practitioners, and we will continue to accept a range of contribution types across the journal's three sections: double-blind peer-reviewed articles by one or more authors (8,000–12,000 words), artist interviews (5,000–10,000 words), and topical statements.

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³³ Thomas Gartmann, "Black Tell revisited. Thomas Gartmann in conversation with the composer Charles Uzor," *Journal of Black Opera & Music Theatre*, no.1 (November 2025): 195.

³⁴ Thomas Gartmann, "Black Tell revisited," 195.

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