The Strange Career of *Porgy and Bess*
For Isabelle and Susannah
This page intentionally left blank
Contents

Acknowledgments xi

Introduction 1

Chapter One. A Romance of Negro Life: Porgy, 1925 13

Interlude. Charleston, 1680–1900 53

Chapter Two. A Chocolate-Covered Lithograph Strip: Porgy, 1927 73

Interlude. Charleston, 1920–1940 125

Chapter Three. Gershwin’s Idea of What a Negro Opera Should Be: Porgy and Bess, 1935 143

Chapter Four. Neither the Measure of America nor That of the Negro: Porgy and Bess, 1952–1956 185

Interlude. Charleston, 1940–1969 235

Chapter Five. Forget Any Version You May Have Seen Before: Porgy and Bess, 1959–2012 259


Notes 313

Bibliography 399

Index 413
This page intentionally left blank
Illustrations

“Summertime” sheet-music cover, 1935  2

Porgy dust jacket, ca. 1927  14

Alfred R. Waud, “Zion” School for Colored Children, Charleston, South Carolina, Harper’s Weekly, 15 December 1866  54

Porgy poster, 1927  74

Porgy advertisement, 1927  102

Alfred Hutty, Cabbage Row, 1928  126

Porgy and Bess souvenir program, 1942  144

Catfish Row set designed by Serge Soudeikine, 1935  157

Porgy and Bess poster, 1952  186

Catfish Row set designed by Wolfgang Roth, 1952  199

Porgy and Bess poster, Lausanne, Switzerland, 1955  209

Porgy and Bess cast sightseeing in Milan, 1955  213

Meeting of the South Carolina Federation of Women and Girls Clubs at the home of Robert and Mamie Garvin Fields, 1948  236

Porgy and Bess souvenir program, Houston Grand Opera, 1976  260

“Stokely and Tess,” MAD magazine, June 1967  278

Porgy and Bess, Bregenz Festival, 1997  301

Honorary grave site of Samuel Smalls, 2005  306
This page intentionally left blank
Acknowledgments

I have had the good fortune to work with a number of gifted historians in the course of my undergraduate and graduate education; the models of their own work and the specific guidance they offered to this book have been equally valuable. The late Nathan Irvin Huggins guided my first attempt at sustained historical research and narrative, and he inspired me (and countless others) with his own scholarship and generosity of spirit. At New York University, Robin D. G. Kelley’s encouragement and encyclopedic knowledge of African American history and culture, not to mention his soft spot for Gershwin, made this work stronger in so many ways. Martha Hodes, Jeffrey Sammons, Walter Johnson, and Van Gosse all helped me to sharpen and clarify my ideas about black culture and politics and lay the foundation of this book.

At the University of North Carolina Press, my editorial sages, Sian Hunter and Mark Simpson-Vos, have been nothing but encouraging, professional, and patient—very, very patient. I am grateful for the skill, care, and persistence that Dino Battista, Kim Bryant, and Beth Lassiter brought to creating the book’s cover and marketing materials, as well as for Jay Mazzocchi’s deft copyediting and Zachary Read’s attention to detail. The anonymous readers of the manuscript for the press offered incredibly useful advice that guided my revisions. Sherrie Tucker, Judith Jackson Fossett, Mary Dudziak, Penny Von Eschen, Karen Sotiropoulos, and Elena Razlogova made helpful comments on portions of this work presented at academic conferences. I would also like to express my admiration and debt of gratitude to the authors of the excellent works of Charleston and South Carolina history on which I relied for this book’s Interludes, notably R. Scott Baker, Peter Lau, Philip Morgan, Stephen O’Neill, and Stephanie E. Yuhl.

Staff members at a number of archives made my research far easier than it might have been, and for that I thank Nena Couch and Valdan Pennington of the Jerome Lawrence and Robert Lee Theatre Research Institute at Ohio State University; Brian Mitchell of the Houston Grand Opera Archives; David Haight of the Eisenhower Presidential Library; Nic Butler of the South Carolina Historical Society; Georgette Mayo of the Avery Research Center at the College of Charleston; Joyce Baker of the Gibbes Museum of
Art; and the staffs of the Beinecke Library Rare Book and Manuscript Collection at Yale, the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library’s Lincoln Center Performing Arts Research Branch, the Museum of the City of New York Theatre Collection, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. For thorough and timely research assistance, I am grateful to Mark Danley and Juliet Gorman, while Frank Poje and Hillina Seife provided translations of German- and French-language reviews that would have otherwise been impenetrable. Joan McMahon, Angie Hurlbut, Andrew Nyhart, and Noah Nyhart furnished food, shelter, and excellent company during out-of-town research trips.

Over the many years that this book has germinated, it has been my utter privilege to be part of a community of historians and fellow travelers who have offered peerless intellectual and personal companionship. They talked, listened, read, encouraged, and suggested generously and often, and in doing so made me—and this book—smarter about history and culture and writing. For what I’ve learned from their work and wisdom, I thank Paul Augustine, Josh Brown, Sally Dawidoff, Lesly de Groot, Greg Downs, Megan Elias, Lori Finkelstein, Dave Kinkela, Abigail Lewis, Rachel Mattson, Molly Mitchell, Kevin Murphy, Leah Nahmias, Leah Potter, Michael Prokopow, Elena Razlogova, John Spencer, Bill Tally, Fritz Umbach, and David Zimmerman. Karl Hagstrom Miller has been with this book literally from beginning to end, and he has read every word of it. His great gifts of friendship and encouragement would have been more than enough, but he also manages to be crazy smart about history, race, and culture.

I found my professional home the day I walked through the doors of the American Social History Project, and it was one of the best things I ever did. My colleagues Pennee Bender, Steve Brier, Josh Brown, Sally Dawidoff, Carol Groneman, Aaron Knoll, Frank Poje, Leah Potter, Donna Thompson Ray, Isa Vasquez, and Andrea Ades Vasquez have schooled me to the equivalent of a second doctorate in the practice of public history and history education. They have also been the best possible friends and colleagues, with nothing but encouragement as I inched through researching and writing this book. Two dear friends and mentors, Roy Rosenzweig and Adina Back, died before I completed this project, but both made indelible marks on my career as a public historian.

The Noonan, Driscoll, and Peart tribes have been an extraordinary source of love and support through the many years that it took to bring this book to fruition; I couldn’t have done it without them, or without Sam, Nancy, and Bob Hurlbut. My parents, Fay and Jerry Noonan, taught me everything that
matters and can’t be located in the pages of a book: hard work, perspective, perseverance, compassion, service. They watched with pride as their youngest traveled an unfamiliar path through academia, and that pride has meant the world to me. I desperately wish that my father had lived to hold this volume in his hands, but I know for certain that his sharp mind and capacity for hard work are inscribed in me and helped to make it possible. Finally, my daughters, Isabelle and Susannah, get this book’s dedication—and a whole lot more of their mother’s time from here on out.
The Strange Career of *Porgy and Bess*
Introduction

The opera *Porgy and Bess*, which tells the story of a crippled beggar, his drug-addicted girlfriend, her violent ex-boyfriend, and their long-suffering, hard-praying neighbors, has been a beloved and enduring American cultural production since its 1935 debut. Its authors—DuBose Heyward, George Gershwin, and Ira Gershwin—were white, and all of its major characters are African American, a simple fact that has yielded a fascinatingly complex series of conversations about American culture and black racial identity. The making and remaking of *Porgy and Bess* is a case study in the ways that white Americans in the twentieth century craved stories about African Americans featuring earthy authenticity and frictionless progress toward racial equality, while African Americans, particularly African American artists, had to maneuver within the cultural marketplace created by such white desires. James Baldwin identified this dynamic when he wrote of the 1959 film version of the opera: “What has always been missing from George Gershwin’s opera is what the situation of *Porgy and Bess* says about the white world. It is because of this omission that Americans are so proud of the opera. It assuages their guilt about Negroes and it attacks none of their fantasies.”

The history of *Porgy and Bess*, then, is a history of the collision between white fantasy and black pragmatism during a period when the United States was undergoing profound changes in its political, social, and cultural attitudes toward racial equality. The commentary and debate about the opera that took place in the pages of mainstream newspapers and magazines and in the parallel world of the black press centered on always-shifting and often-conflicting ideas about what constituted the most authentic, true-to-life way to represent African Americans and what signaled their progress toward racial equality. The theme of authenticity reverberates through nearly every review of *Porgy and Bess* (and in reviews of its forerunners, the novel and play versions of *Porgy*) as writers across generations staked a claim to de-
fining authentically black behavior, belief, and expression. Despite the convictions of those attempting to define it, authenticity is not a universal truth but a moving target, a highly contingent and culturally constructed idea that both reflects and shapes its own time. It is precisely those attempts to define racial authenticity that make the history of *Porgy and Bess* so revealing of twentieth-century changes in white ideas about African Americans and black ideas about the relationship between cultural representation and political progress.

Believing a book, a play, a song, or a tourist site to be authentic and true to life, somehow connected to real experience, is a powerful motivation for consumers of culture, both in the past and in our own time. This is never truer than in relation to art made by and about people who are not white. At its debut, *Porgy and Bess* was one of the very few serious theatrical works to feature a story that revolved around black characters, and white producers, critics, and audiences generally understood it to be an accurate depiction of black life. Black audiences and critics had a more complex relationship to the story. Mindful of the stereotypes these works contained, they were also keenly aware that discrimination prevented African American composers and writers from creating and widely distributing their own artistic depictions of black life. And they appreciated the respectable, highly visible professional opportunities that *Porgy* and *Porgy and Bess* provided to black performers. *Porgy and Bess* drew both praise and criticism from African Americans from its very debut. A 1936 article in the *Amsterdam News*, New York City’s leading black newspaper, zeroed in on the real-life political and social consequences of how African Americans were depicted in popular culture. “If the average white person could divorce all Negroes from an incident in the theatre we would happily welcome a ‘Porgy and Bess’ show,” wrote the author. “But, unfortunately, the masses will witness such a production with such remarks as ‘Negroes are so quaint’; ‘Negroes are so superstitious’ and carry these forms out of the theatre into their thinking about the Negro. The Negro will and does meet it in his every day contact with the whites.” He as-

(*opposite*)

While this 1935 sheet-music cover was clearly designed to promote the Theatre Guild’s *Porgy and Bess*, over time, the song “Summertime” became far better known than the opera for which it was originally composed. The art conveys the opera’s general exoticism and specific iconic elements—Porgy in his goat-drawn cart, the palm tree signifying the story’s southern setting, New York City as a far-off Oz—along with the sly joke of Porgy’s hairline, which bears a certain resemblance to that of George Gershwin himself.
tutefully traced this problem back to the nineteenth century, when white northerners’ “only conception of a Negro was a combination of what they had heard he was, and visually, as they saw the minstrel comedians. The Negro soon became the brunt of laughter of the entire country. To the wide masses of American whites he was merely a buffoon.” This “traditional stereotype of what the Negro is like has dogged him into the theatre . . . and the theatre has had a profound effect in perpetuating this stereotype.”

Blackface minstrelsy established a baseline for white expectations of how African Americans would be presented in popular culture and how those presentations would be understood as authentic and true, even nationally symbolic. Operating as a cultural form promoting black racial authenticity in a white-controlled marketplace, minstrelsy had disastrous long-term consequences for black artists and black political progress. In the 1840s and 1850s, this theatrical form—sometimes referred to as “nigger opera”—was all the rage in the working-class theatres of northern cities. White men, known as minstrels, blackened their faces and performed songs and comic sketches, including parodies of European opera and Shakespeare. Many New York City minstrel halls in the years before the Civil War were in fact known as “Ethiopian Opera Houses,” and predominantly white working-class men filled their audiences. Minstrel-show opera parodies and other routines offered as humorous entertainment the spectacle of “black” characters aspiring to high culture and hopelessly mangling it in the process. They also presented a sentimentalized version of southern plantation life that appealed to those working-class northerners who were inclined in an era of growing political conflict over southern slavery to sympathize, for a range of complex reasons, with proslavery Democrats. The distorted cultural depictions of black life did not end when slavery did. After Reconstruction, the nation healed itself by turning its back on the freedpeople and leaving them to the viciousness of southern white supremacy and its labor arrangements; this horrific political, economic, and social bargain of national reunion found cultural expression in the national culture of minstrelsy and happy plantation pageants—a visual and material culture rife with grossly stereotyped images of African Americans—and the intellectual rise of Social Darwinism.

A few antebellum commentators recognized the tangle of class and racial representations wrapped up in the minstrels’ “nigger opera” as a form of national culture. In 1854 a writer for Putnam’s Monthly complained of his fellow citizens’ lack of appreciation for more-elevated art forms, observing: “While even [the] attempt to establish an Italian Opera here, though originating with the wealthiest and best educated classes, has resulted in bank-
rupty, . . . Ethiopian Opera has flourished like a green bay tree.” The writer conceded that “the only places of Amusement where the entertainments are indigenous are the African Opera Houses, where native American vocalists, with blackened faces, sing national songs, and utter none but native witticisms.” Walt Whitman, an acute observer of American culture, agreed that elite culture and popular culture were not so easily separated and predicted that “native grand opera in America” would require banjos in the orchestra and be based on “nigger dialect.”

White commentators might agree that “native grand opera” would be based on “nigger dialect” and African American musical sound, perhaps, but none expected that it would also be performed by African Americans themselves. By the 1890s, many African American performers “blackened” their faces in deference to the prevailing attitudes of the entertainment industry in which they sought employment and performed musical and comic routines that were rooted in the blackface minstrelsy of the antebellum years and also anticipated some aspects of the vaudeville theatre about to emerge. Will Marion Cook and Paul Laurence Dunbar were among the talents of that generation of black musical-theatre composers and performers who struggled to operate on their own terms within the white-controlled entertainment world. When Cook approached music publisher Isidore Witmark in 1895 with plans to produce and market his show Clorindy as an opera, Witmark told the composer that he “must be crazy to believe that any Broadway audience would listen to Negroes singing Negro opera.” With no producer willing to back the show as an opera, Cook reluctantly cut most of Dunbar’s libretto and instead presented the show as a musical variety show, in which form it succeeded with Broadway audiences. In 1915 black pianist and composer Scott Joplin, after six unsuccessful years of seeking a producer, staged his own production of his opera Treemonisha. Lacking scenery, costumes, and lighting, the effect was, in the words of one of his friends, “thin and unconvincing, little better than a rehearsal.” Telling the story of a young woman trying to educate the poor black denizens of rural Arkansas, the opera’s folk elements were also ahead of their time, as “the Harlem audience that attended” the bare-bones production was “sophisticated enough to reject their folk past but not sufficiently so to relish a return to it.”

Two decades later, when audiences and music critics heard the debut of Gershwin and Heyward’s Porgy and Bess, white critics hailed it as the first “native” American opera, and many categorized it as a folk opera. While no one ever publicly described Porgy and Bess as a “nigger opera,” it debuted in an era when the racial conventions and representations of the long decades of
minstrelsy were only beginning to give way. It took many decades before critics and audiences fully accepted *Porgy and Bess* as a peer of “Italian Opera.” The story of how *Porgy and Bess*—trailing the legacies of “nigger opera” but aspiring to loftier status—changed and endured over six decades is the story of American culture itself, and of its changing orientation toward race and representation in the twentieth century.

The Porgy story’s southern setting contributed significantly to the white belief in its racial authenticity. Stereotypes of black authenticity rooted in regional difference began with antebellum minstrelsy’s stock characters, the rustic “Jim Crow” who represented southern slaves and the dandy “Zip Coon” who stood for free northern blacks. By the 1850s, the theatre, previously a clamorous working-class arena, became respectable entertainment for the northern urban middle class. These middle-class audiences attended a variety of plays, including numerous productions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s phenomenally influential 1852 antislavery novel was transformed into a stage play almost immediately after its publication, and a multitude of stage versions (some even adapted to present a proslavery message) filled theatres in the United States and England for decades to come. By the 1880s, northern critics and audiences expected productions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to present certain kinds of southern details, and producers complied by inserting “plantation songs” and exaggerated southern dialect. In the nineteenth century, the experience of enslavement and emancipation occurred largely in the South, the majority of African Americans lived there, and white-authored cultural representations of black southern life in the form of minstrel shows and later stories, songs, prints, and films proliferated, many promoting a return to the “happy” days of plantation life. Many whites thus possessed an illusion of the South as the site of a contented, authentic black experience, and African Americans themselves recognized it as a site of significant political and social struggle, particularly in the decades following emancipation. In the early decades of the twentieth century, however, nearly half a million African Americans migrated out of the South to northern cities. By the mid-twentieth century, popular and scholarly ideas about African American authenticity, and cultural representations of it, centered on the settings and experiences of urban life (although the South remained home to the majority of the nation’s African Americans and an important site of their political struggle).

Heyward created *Porgy* in the early 1920s, the peak of the Great Migration that marked the pivot point between two different social, political, and cultural notions of what constituted the purportedly authentic African
American experience. Recognizing the ingrained public association of African Americans and southern settings, publishers, producers, and commentators in the 1920s and 1930s deliberately promoted *Porgy* and *Porgy and Bess* as a true-to-life depiction of black southern life and musical sound. They based their claims to authenticity largely on Heyward’s and Gershwin’s demonstrated proximity to their African American subjects—Heyward for a lifetime and Gershwin for two highly publicized visits. *Porgy* and *Porgy and Bess* took their places in a long history of American cultural productions, stretching back to the antebellum period, with black southerners at their center and white authors claiming authority for their presentations from their firsthand knowledge of African Americans. White minstrel-show performers regularly recounted tales of how they learned their routines from African Americans, in part to reaffirm their own whiteness beneath the minstrel mask and in part to lend credibility to their renditions of black music and dance. With *Porgy and Bess*, the white conviction that its content reflected a realistic view of how southern African Americans lived and expressed themselves had faded by the 1950s. The work’s growing temporal distance from the era in which it was composed, and the post–World War II era’s very active struggle to change the popular image of African Americans, enabled producers and critics to promote the opera as a “period piece” in a time of growing recognition of African American claims to civil rights. *Porgy and Bess* survived as a cherished example of Gershwin music, but no one described it as an authentic depiction of African American life any longer.

While Heyward’s fictional Porgy story was in many ways a far more dignified and sensitive portrayal than those of previous white authors, what it had in common with countless other cultural artifacts cut from the cloth of blackface minstrelsy was a narrow view of black life. Heyward’s fiction ignored large swaths of African American experience: the educated middle class; job discrimination; organized, collective resistance to white supremacy. His particular set of inclusions and omissions struck a chord in American culture; they reinforced a powerful narrative about contented African Americans and southern expertise on the “race issue” that had significant political and social implications. The great story of the twentieth-century civil rights struggle is in many ways the unraveling of this narrative, dominant from the end of Reconstruction through World War II. *Porgy’s* original versions and responses to them had their part to play in reinforcing this narrative, then later (in its 1950s, 1970s, and 1980s incarnations) in reflecting and articulating its decline.

For black artists and intellectuals attempting to resist and rewrite that cul-
tural narrative, the twentieth century encompassed a series of debates and struggles over the nature of and opportunities for black cultural expression. Because it both put black performers to work and presented a popular, widely seen and discussed story of African American life, the ubiquitous *Porgy* and *Porgy and Bess* played a key role in these debates and struggles. Many black leaders believed that black artists could, through their visible creative production, somehow prove to the dominant society that African Americans were worthy of greater social respect and political rights. That role was one that black performers had long recognized; in 1905 African American singer and actress Aida Overton Walker declared: "In this age we are all fighting the one problem—that is the color problem. Our profession does more toward the alleviation of color prejudice than any other profession among colored people. . . . [W]e come into contact with more white people in a week than other professional colored people meet in a year." It was a stark reality, though, that white patronage fueled a great deal of black cultural production. That political aspiration and economic context, in tandem, persisted through much of the twentieth century, framing a complex calculus for black performers, critics, and audiences to determine which cultural productions would “uplift the race.”

*Porgy and Bess*, and the ways black commentators understood it in different periods, manifested the intertwined benefits and burdens inherent in the visibility of black performers and the white patronage that frequently enabled that visibility. Gershwin’s stipulation that only African American artists could perform the work provided black opera singers with a rare opportunity to sing professionally when major opera companies remained completely closed to them. Over the years, *Porgy and Bess* has provided steady, paying work—and often a first professional engagement—to three generations of black performers in the United States and Europe. Yet teams of white producers, directors, scenic designers, and costumers produced *Porgy and Bess* from 1935 until 1993, the year that the first African American–directed *Porgy and Bess* was staged. The visibility, and novelty, of the black casts of *Porgy and Bess* constituted a large part of the show’s appeal. In no small measure, *Porgy and Bess* appealed to “Negrotarian” appetites for the exoticism of black performers that long outlasted the Harlem Renaissance. The political role of *Porgy and Bess* cast members as representatives of the United States during the Cold War hinged on their visibility as black artists (although rather than promoting racial uplift and civil rights in the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance, they represented an American racial egalitarianism that was partial at best).
The political burden of such representation created tension for working black performers forced to take the roles available to them, however stereotyped. All actors are judged by the authenticity of the characters they render on the stage and the screen. They hone every detail of their performances in order to transport audiences to another time and place and convince them that they are seeing real characters rather than actors. For black actors during most of the twentieth century, such professional aspirations were at odds with the political work of racial uplift and civil rights. During the late 1930s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), under the leadership of Walter White, began to exert pressure on Hollywood to stop presenting African Americans solely in stereotyped roles. One short-term result was a 1942 agreement between the NAACP and the major studio heads, who agreed to stop presenting “pejorative racial roles” and employ a greater number of African American extras and technicians. Debates within the black community about the radio (and later television) program *Amos ’n’ Andy* began stirring in 1930, and in 1951 the NAACP led a protest campaign against the CBS network and the show’s commercial sponsor. African American performers who worked regularly often objected to these civil rights strategies, preferring not to jeopardize the work they could get. Within this context, black performers and newspaper commentators weighed the merits of *Porgy and Bess*.

To tell this story of how American expectations about race, culture, and the struggle for equality played out through the invention and reinvention of a single story, this book’s chapters are chronologically organized. They begin with *Porgy*, Heyward’s first novel, which he wrote after he quit his job as an insurance broker in Charleston, South Carolina, and published to critical acclaim in 1925. Chapter 2 explores the production and critical responses to the dramatic adaptation of *Porgy*, authored by Heyward and his wife, Dorothy Kuhns Heyward, in 1927; the show was a major hit that ran for nearly two years in New York City and on tour around the United States and in London. Chapter 3 considers the flood of publicity and vigorous debates over race and national music that greeted the debut of *Porgy and Bess*, which paired the *Porgy* story with one of the country’s most popular composers. The subject of chapter 4 is the 1952–56 production of *Porgy and Bess* that became one of the best-known American theatrical creations ever, thanks to a tour across the United States, Europe, Latin America, and North Africa. This tour garnered massive publicity as well as financial support from the U.S. government, which considered it an excellent vehicle for Cold War propaganda about equal opportunity in America. Finally, chapter 5 follows *Porgy and
Bess into its star-studded, big-budget Hollywood adaptation at the hands of Samuel Goldwyn and its resurrection in uncut operatic form by the Houston Grand Opera Company in 1976.

The interludes placed between this book’s chapters tell a series of stories about Charleston, the real-life site of the fictional Catfish Row. In Charleston, native son Heyward’s book, play, and opera gained fame during the 1920s and 1930s at precisely the same moment that the city’s elite white citizens were undertaking historic preservation efforts and promoting tourism as an engine of economic growth. For them, Porgy and Bess became a cherished part of the city’s identity, as Heyward’s fictionalized version of their black community traveled the nation and the globe for decades. Thomas Waring, editor of the city’s News and Courier newspaper, saw such visibility as cause for celebration. He boasted that “Porgy has done more to make Charleston famous abroad than anything since Ft. Sumter.” Mamie Garvin Fields, an African American teacher and community leader in Charleston, disagreed—vehemently. “I hated Porgy—the book, the play, the show, and the white people doing it,” she wrote in her Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir (1983). Inspired by Fields’s memoir, the interludes fill in some of what Heyward omitted from his fictional accounts—how the real “Catfish Row” and its working-class inhabitants had come to be, the community life of Charleston’s black residents living beyond Catfish Row, and the rich, complex story of African American activism that began to reshape the city’s social and political life beginning in the 1940s. This more complete, if distilled, history of black Charleston is designed to shed light on the omissions and biases of Heyward, the work’s theatrical producers, and the many reviewers who extolled its fidelity to real life.

Porgy, and later Porgy and Bess, had always presented an extremely limited account of Charleston’s African American life, which was diverse and active against segregation in ways that Heyward’s constrained, romanticized view never admitted. Charleston was the South’s largest city in the colonial era and one of its largest throughout the nineteenth century, but it was considerably smaller than other American cities. Its population on the eve of the Civil War was a mere 40,000, and by 1900 it had risen only to 56,000; for virtually all of its existence, the majority of its population was of African descent. Charleston had both urban anonymity and intimacy, ruled by a small and interlocking set of elite white families and characterized by a form of urban slavery that placed enslaved Africans both within white households and alongside their free African American peers. The particular legacies of urban slavery—seen in patterns of black labor, residency, and resistance to
white rule—shaped the early twentieth-century Charleston that inspired Heyward, as did the linguistic and cultural origins of the enslaved Africans who were brought there. The strict racial segregation that also shaped Heyward’s Charleston did not descend upon the city until after emancipation, decades also marked by black political activism and resistance to white supremacy.

Fields provides a detailed picture of black community life in Charleston beyond Catfish Row and had nothing but scorn for Heyward’s version. In *Lemon Swamp*, she uses her scathing paraphrase of Heyward’s description of the residents of Catfish Row playing craps, fighting, and scattering at the appearance of a white police officer to make a point about how a black schoolmate was unable to become a police officer because, for white Charlestonians, “the cop was there to intimidate black people, not to be one.” And she saw clearly how Heyward’s famous version of black Charleston both demeaned its residents and hindered their ongoing struggle for equality. As a teacher on nearby James Island, Fields received a breathless report from one of her students about white men who appeared and offered community members fifty cents apiece to put on a prayer meeting for their benefit. Appalled, Fields linked the episode directly to the tourists inspired by Heyward’s fiction: “I found out that DuBose Heyward was making a lot of money off his book about a poor boy called ‘Porgy.’ . . . [W]hen I began to think how the people came over giving our people 50 cents to pray and make up their scene, I hated *Porgy*.” Fields understood her own story as a necessary counterpoint to Heyward’s, both because of real differences in social class within Charleston’s black community and because of Heyward’s complete omission of organized activism among the city’s African Americans from his story of black life in the city. While Heyward’s story gained fame during the 1920s, “In those same 1920s Charleston woke up. The Negroes were getting organized for their own uplift. . . . We got ready to fight, with other black people. The people we got ready to fight against were not in Catfish Row; and neither were we.”

In addition to providing a more wide-ranging history of black Charleston, the interludes explore white Charleston’s embrace of Heyward and the Porgy story. If the history of *Porgy and Bess* is a national and international story, it is also a local one. The city’s leading white citizens saw the novel, play, and opera as a boon to tourism and a source of local pride, and they emphasized its authentic local details at every opportunity. But as the twentieth century wore on and civil rights protests escalated in the South and across the country, it became increasingly difficult to sustain the fantasy version of black life
that *Porgy and Bess* provided. Which is not to say that Charleston did not continue to try; the story of how Waring and other elite white Charlestonians worked to keep the association between the city and the opera strong during the 1950s illuminates the growing gap between southern reactions to *Porgy and Bess* and those of the rest of the country. When a local amateur theater company attempted to mount its own production of the play *Porgy* in 1954, its white leaders found themselves at odds with a changing political climate. A few years later, what should have been an innocuous local-color feature in the *News and Courier* about the descendants of the real person on whom Heyward based the character Porgy set off a surprising chain of events that proved the city’s uneasy history of white racial paternalism and black acquiescence was coming to an end.
1925 was the year of the “New Negro.” There was the anthology of African American fiction, poetry, and essays by that name; edited by Alain Locke and published in December of that year, the work became a manifesto for a generation of black artists determined to be passionate, productive, race-conscious, and visible. African Americans were leaving the South in unprecedented numbers, extricating themselves from the bonds of segregation’s economic, political, and social disenfranchisement to find new opportunities in northern cities. Known as the Great Migration, it brought more than a million African Americans out of the region and marked a critical collective step toward greater black political participation that would grow as the twentieth century progressed. Robert Abbott, editor of the Chicago Defender, one of numerous African American publications active in 1925, dubbed this mass movement “a second emancipation.” In 1925 A. Philip Randolph founded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids, an all-black union whose activism gained benefits for its members and selection as the first African American union granted a charter by the American Federation of Labor. That same year, the pioneering black film director Oscar Micheaux released Body and Soul, his silent film melodrama about a corrupt black minister, produced by his own Micheaux Film Corporation.1

Paradoxically, 1925 was also a banner year for those who preferred, for lack of a better term, the “Old Negro,” or even no negroes at all. The “Old Negro,” created by decades of white cultural distortion, retained a powerful grip on American culture. In 1925 Maxon Lester Graham opened the first Coon Chicken Inn restaurant in Salt Lake City, which featured fried chicken,
PORGY
by DU BOSE HEYWARD

Love and life are chaotic in this beautiful and deeply moving novel of the Southern negro.
African American waiters, and a smilingly servile black man as its ubiquitous logo. In Chicago, white entertainers Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll developed the radio characters Sam ’n’ Henry, heirs to the blackface minstrel past and forerunners to their more famous Amos ’n’ Andy show, which debuted two years later. The comic actor Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry made his Hollywood debut in the film The Mysterious Stranger; his later stage name, Stepin Fetchit, would become synonymous with the grossly stereotyped characters that he was forced to portray for most of his career. In August the resurgent Ku Klux Klan marched 40,000 strong down Washington’s Pennsylvania Avenue, cheered on by 200,000 spectators. Nationwide, Klan membership stood at nearly 2 million, an all-time peak, with members in every state. Seventeen African American men died at the hands of lynch mobs in 1925, and across the United States, “fitter families” contests at state fairs and expositions promoted the “science” of eugenics and rewarded families for their psychological and physical health; the winners were invariably white.2

As these mid-decade events suggest, the 1920s were a conflicted era when it came to race, both looking backward toward a white-supremacist past and holding the promise of growing African American political, social, and cultural agency. Literature, art, and music created by and about African Americans flourished among white urban elites during the 1920s and seemed to promise exciting new opportunities for black artists. At the same time, white southern women in the United Daughters of the Confederacy petitioned the U.S. Congress for a statue on the Washington Mall to commemorate the faithful “mammy” figure of southern lore.3 The debut novel of a little-known regional poet, DuBose Heyward of Charleston, South Carolina, arrived in the midst of this contradictory cultural milieu. His Porgy, published in 1925, reflected its decade’s racial contradictions. Heyward was by no means a Klansman or a eugenicist, but his novel promoted a vision of African Americans in the South that was sentimental and paternalistic, looking backward to a “Golden Age” in the midst of a century-changing migration of African Americans out of the South. Uneducated, sensuous, religious, violent, hard-working, colorful, good-humored, wise, serenely long-suffering in the face of segregation’s myriad injustices—Heyward’s black characters epitomized a

(opposite)

The dust-jacket art and copy for a late 1920s edition of DuBose Heyward’s Porgy sold book buyers on a tale of “the Southern negro” with a “deeply moving” love triangle in a setting that was dark, decaying, “chaotic,” and savagely menacing.
vision of American race relations congenial to southern and northern whites alike. Literary critics across the country embraced Porgy.

White supremacy came in many forms in the 1920s, and sentimental paternalism certainly lacked the menace of a Klan rally, a lynching, a eugenics fair, a coercive sharecropping contract, or a voter-registration literacy test. Yet it carried significant political and cultural costs, particularly when, as was the case with Heyward’s Porgy, it gained a national audience for a racial worldview shaped by white southern privilege. Literary critics around the country praised Heyward for his authentic understanding of black southern life; nearly all believed that, as a white southerner, his proximity to African Americans gave him special knowledge and insight that others lacked. Yet Heyward, like virtually all white southerners, lived in a segregated world that structured how he understood both class and race in profoundly important ways. Born into an elite Charleston family whose straitened economic circumstances required him to work from a young age, he came into contact with African Americans as workers in domestic and commercial settings, such as when he worked as a cotton checker on the Charleston docks. Black working-class life was readily apparent to his observing eye, and he rendered it on the pages of Porgy and other novels. But the existence of Charleston’s black middle class was either invisible or uninteresting to him. Common sense suggests the latter; from middle-class or elite backgrounds themselves, white southern writers likely found the lives of middle-class African Americans insufficiently exotic. The structures of segregation suggest the former; educated, middle-class African Americans confounded the southern system of racial hierarchy as it formed during the post-Reconstruction era. White southerner George Washington Cable noted this tension in 1885, when he argued that blacks of “character, intelligence, and property” should not have to endure the conventions of public segregation. Cable was a lone voice, however, and the system of Jim Crow segregation remained impervious to class distinctions. But middle-class African Americans persisted as an unspoken challenge to the premises of racial segregation, and they remained largely absent when white writers and artists portrayed authentic southern blackness. In the fiction of white southern authors during the 1920s, the few middle-class black characters were marginalized and corrupt, as Heyward’s “lawyer” Simon Frasier, or ill-fated, as in Paul Green’s 1926 play In Abraham’s Bosom, where the aspiring Abraham McCranie is thwarted brutally by whites and passively by other blacks.

Porgy also touched down in the midst of debates among African American writers and intellectuals about authentic black culture and its artistic presen-
The cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance promoted the creative powers of African American artists of all genres, and many sought out “folk sources” among the black rural poor for their visual and literary art. Many black writers, chief among them W. E. B. Du Bois, debated the intellectual, political, and marketplace considerations that shaped black artistic production and offered up prescriptions for sources and approaches that would have the greatest impact on black social advancement. All sides in these arguments viewed issues of cultural representation and racial authenticity as inseparable from questions of social class in the African American community. These Harlem Renaissance writers did not fail to praise white writers, including Heyward, who attempted serious literary portrayals of black characters, but the main focus of their critical dialogues remained the need to cultivate more, and more unfettered, cultural production by African Americans themselves.

Heyward also linked social class and black authenticity, but to a very different end. Central to his understanding of African Americans was the idea that encroaching urbanization and modernity (forces to which he often obliquely referred in his writing as “reform” or “reformers”) were destroying their rural innocence. Heyward’s authentic South was unhurried, earthy, and perfectly symbolized by its resilient and forgiving black workers. His poetic antimodernism had a nonfiction counterpart in the manifesto I’ll Take My Stand, a collection of essays published in 1930 by a group of southern intellectuals who dubbed themselves “Agrarians.” The Agrarians argued that industrial development fostered a culture of consumption that undermined small-town, rural southern values. Heyward’s sentimental conflation of racial identity and antimodernism was part of a larger southern intellectual tradition, one that stretched back to the decades following the Civil War and Reconstruction. In those late nineteenth-century decades marked by rapid industrialization and an attempt to reconnect a badly sundered polity, northern and southern elites found common ground in a shared nostalgia for the preindustrial values and social control symbolized by antebellum plantation society. This shared nostalgia became an important basis for the symbolic “reunion” between North and South, one that abandoned southern African Americans and ceded their fate to the white southerners who were deemed to understand them best. As the famed southern historian C. Vann Woodward observed, “One of the most significant inventions of the New South was the Old South.”

Porgy, and the critical dialogue about race, class, and region of which it was a part, embodied just such a conflation of Old and New South. In a de-
Porgy's success gave continued credibility to a southern view of race relations. It was a southern liberal view, to be sure, and the praise heaped upon the novel and its author had implications primarily in the literary world. But such cultural validation sprang from the same northern assumptions of southern white authority over African Americans that jeopardized their well-being and opportunities at every turn after the final pullout of federal troops from the South at the end of Reconstruction. The long-term effects of untrammeled southern white supremacy led, by the 1920s, to an exodus, as African Americans by the millions registered their opinion of white southern authority by departing the South. Porgy, as a text and a catalyst for cultural commentary, spotlights a moment in U.S. history when the status and visibility of African Americans was changing, a harbinger of even more profound change yet to come.

Set in an ill-defined Golden Age, probably the earliest years of the twentieth century, Porgy combines melodrama and meticulously drawn details of character and locale to paint a picture that is deeply sympathetic to many of its characters yet also draws freely on a host of racial assumptions and stereotypes. Heyward’s novel tells the story of Porgy, a local beggar with crippled legs, and Bess, a drug-addicted prostitute, who together experience transforming love and ultimately heartbreak. With this story at its center, Porgy also details the lives and customs of the black residents of Catfish Row, a decaying grand mansion in Charleston now inhabited by numerous poor black fishermen, stevedores, domestic workers, and their families. The central characters also include Crown, a fiery-tempered stevedore and Bess’s lover; Maria, proprietress of a cookshop and a protective maternal figure; Serena, the deeply religious wife of Robbins, who is killed by Crown; Sportin’ Life, a drug dealer who has traveled beyond Catfish Row to New York City; and Peter, a grandfatherly friend to Porgy.

The novel’s plot is set in motion by a dice game that ends in bloodshed, as a drunken Crown, believing he has been cheated, kills Robbins with his cotton hook. The residents of Catfish Row disappear into their homes to avoid the inevitable police attention to come. Robbins’s widow, Serena, prays with her neighbors and collects money from them for her husband’s burial, and then the community processes to the local graveyard to bury Robbins. When a white detective comes to Catfish Row and interrogates Porgy and Peter about the murder, he hauls Peter off to jail as a material witness, to be held
until Crown can be found. A few weeks later, Bess appears in Maria’s cookshop, begs a meal, and proceeds to Porgy’s room, knowing that his begging earns him “good money fum de w’ite folks.”

After Serena asks her “w’ite folks” for help in freeing Peter from jail, a white lawyer named Alan Archdale visits Catfish Row and arranges to have Porgy deliver a payment for Peter’s bail, thus freeing the old man. Bess remains with Porgy, and both are newly content, despite the hostility of Serena, Maria, and the other women of Catfish Row. Their domestic serenity ends, however, when Sportin’ Life tempts Bess into snorting “happy dust,” or cocaine, and Bess gets into a fistfight with another woman, causing the police to arrest her. After ten days in jail, Bess returns feverish and delirious to Porgy’s room, and Porgy tries both prayer and a conjurer’s spell to cure her. After she is well, all of Catfish Row’s residents participate in the annual parade and picnic put on by the “Sons and Daughters of Repent Ye Saith the Lord” lodge. At the picnic, on the Charleston coastal island of Kittiwah, Bess encounters Crown as he hides from the law; he vows he will return to Charleston, and her, when the cotton crop is in.

Back at Catfish Row, several of the men set out to sea in their fishing boat, the Seagull, one of the many small boats manned by African American fishermen that made up Charleston’s “Mosquito Fleet.” Not long after the boat’s departure, a sudden hurricane blows up, forcing the residents of Catfish Row to huddle together for safety, praying and singing, on the building’s second floor. During a lull in the storm, Clara runs out of the house in search of her husband, Jake, leaving their baby with Bess; she too disappears when the storm flares again. In October, when the stevedores return to the port to load its cotton crop onto outgoing ships, Bess begs Porgy to protect her from Crown. Late one night, as Crown attempts to enter Porgy’s room, Porgy kills him. White detectives investigating this murder first question Serena, then Bess and Porgy, and come to no conclusions. Porgy is summoned to identify Crown’s body at the coroner’s office; in his superstitious fear of looking upon the dead man’s body, he attempts to flee the officers and is charged with contempt of court. The novel ends when Porgy, jailed for five days, returns to Catfish Row to discover that Bess is gone, lured by alcohol to accompany a group of stevedores to Savannah.

Porgy is a sympathetic but profoundly conservative novel in the truest meaning of the word. Heyward wants Charleston and its African American residents to stay just as they are, locked in the amber of his novel’s Golden Age. Published in the midst of a mass migration of African Americans out of the Jim Crow South, Porgy argues for the futility of escape or advance-
ment. Maria, a mammy figure and the soul of no-nonsense pragmatism, embodies Heyward’s celebration of the status quo, while Sportin’ Life represents all that is wrong with black life outside of the cocoon of Charleston and Catfish Row. Yet the novel, with its deeply paternalist view of race and overreliance on long-established stereotypes of black behavior, also evinces an understanding of white supremacy’s arbitrary and vicious power and the limited economic options available to most African Americans in the early twentieth-century South.

While critics gave Heyward credit for special insight into the African American setting he portrayed in *Porgy*, the novel’s use of narration and dialect marks out sharp divisions between white and black characters. The third-person narrator, who observes and comments upon the characters and situations, has a highly literate and articulate voice. In the novel’s opening pages, the narrator, a stand-in for Heyward himself, describes Porgy’s aptitude for begging as evidence of “a beneficent providence for a career of mendicancy.” Such phrasing establishes the narrator as a detached observer, sympathetic to the characters but highly educated and having nothing in common with them. The narrator’s tone can also be ethnographic, asserting racial judgments by describing a funeral cortege as “almost grotesque, with the odd fusion of comedy and tragedy so inextricably a part of negro life in its deep moments,” and black church members at a picnic as “exotic as the Congo.” The narrator’s grammatically correct and perfectly spelled language also marks a difference from the characters being described, whose conversations are rendered in heavy dialect. The dialogue of the novel’s few white characters (Alan Archdale, police officers, judges) is also rendered without any accent or dialect, although they would have possessed at least the southern accents of any white Charlestonian. In this way, dialogue becomes a marker for literacy and education among the characters (a convention of difference continued in the opera *Porgy and Bess*, where white characters speak rather than sing their lines).

Linguistically marking all of the novel’s African American characters as uneducated and even illiterate is just one among many racial stereotypes that Heyward relies upon in *Porgy*. Despite Heyward’s sentimentality toward and even affection for his characters, the novel is laden with descriptions and situations that echo broad stereotypes—many rooted in blackface minstrelsy—of African American character and behavior. Picnic preparations by members of the “Sons and Daughters of Repent Ye Saith the Lord” lodge include the loading of watermelons onto a boat and a boisterous parade of lodge members in elaborate uniforms, such as Peter’s “sky-blue coat, white
pants which were thrust into black leggings, and a visored cap” and a young boy who is “scarlet-coated, and aglitter with brass buttons.” Minstrel-show routines often used such images to burlesque African American associational life as an inept and overblown imitation of white customs, and watermelons were a staple visual joke of both the minstrel stage and the wider visual culture of early twentieth-century America. For Heyward, the chaotic abandon of the scene represented a tantalizing, racially defined lost innocence; African Americans were to be envied for the very childlike qualities that were otherwise scorned by whites. With their ability to “abandon themselves utterly to the wild joy of fantastic play,” the celebrating African Americans “had taken the reticent, old Anglo-Saxon town and stamped their mood swiftly and indelibly into its heart.” In their childlike spontaneity, they left “behind them a wistful envy among those . . . whom the ages had rendered old and wise.”10

Other scenes evoked racial stereotypes in a far more ominous way. The fight between Crown and Robbins, begun during a dice game and ending in Robbins’s death, is described in terms that would have reinforced the popular white notion that black men were little more than animals. According to the narrator, during the fight “a heady, bestial stench absorbed all other odors,” and “Crown was crouched for a second spring, with lips drawn from gleaming teeth. The light fell strong upon thrusting jaw, and threw the sloping brow into shadow. . . . The other arm held the cotton-hook forward, ready, like a prehensile claw.” In an incident that would have been familiar to minstrel-show audiences, when a white police officer accuses the old man Peter of having killed Robbins, “Peter shook violently, and his eyes rolled in his head. He made an ineffectual effort to speak, tried again, and finally said ‘Fore Gawd, Boss, I ain’t nebber done it.’” Peter, in denying his own guilt, promptly reveals Crown as the murderer to the laughing officer, who had intended to elicit this information all along. Yet Heyward includes the detail that no blackface stage routine ever would: the white police officer is holding a gun to Peter’s head as he makes the admission.11

Heyward also drew heavily on accepted notions of the simple, unambitious, uneducated African American. The “languor of a southern May,” with its slackening pace of work, was “a season dear to the heart of a negro.” To illustrate his protagonist’s unique depth of character and set him apart from his neighbors, the author describes Porgy’s mouth as “at once, full-lipped and sensuous, yet set in a resolute line most unusual in a negro.” The novel also portrays the irrational superstition of Catfish Row’s residents. Heyward describes at length a graveyard scene that includes the mourners’ unchecked
screams, call-and-response prayers and spirituals, and, at the burial’s conclusion, a rush to leave the graveyard that sounds like “the stampeding of many cattle” as the crowd hurries out on the belief that “De las’ man in de grave-yahd goin’ tuh be de nex’ one tuh git buried.” Another episode combines stereotypes of black superstition and irresponsibility. When Porgy is deciding how best to treat Bess’s mysterious illness, he rejects going to the hospital and instead asks a fisherman to take money to an island conjure woman “tuh cas’ de debbil out Bess,” a solution rooted in the African traditions that survived slavery among some African Americans. The fisherman misses his boat and spends two days drinking instead, but Porgy never learns that and believes the conjure woman’s spell has cured Bess. Peter’s suggestion that they “sen’ she tuh de w’ite folk’ hospital” is greeted with the shocked rejoinder: “Ain’t yuh knows dey lets nigger die dey, so dey kin gib um tu de student” as medical school cadavers. This exchange manages to attribute the failure to take Bess for medical treatment to superstition rather than to the segregation that barred black residents from Charleston’s white hospitals and the justified fear that black life was cheap to white officials.12

Alongside these stereotypes, Heyward’s eponymous hero is a complex and more visibly self-reliant character. Porgy is the one resident of Catfish Row whose dealings with the white world are chronicled rather than implied (as with Serena’s references to her “w’ite folks”). Serena tells Porgy “yuh gots so much sense when yuh talks tuh w’ite folks,” and indeed his successful begging and interactions with the white lawyer Archdale demonstrate Porgy’s shrewd insight into how to get what he needs in a white-supremacist society. While Heyward depicts others on Catfish Row shrinking from whites, Porgy faces down a gun-brandishing white detective; by contrast, Peter’s inability to do so costs him his freedom and his livelihood. Heyward also includes scenes of Porgy counting his money and declaring his manhood. Contradicting his own literary conceit, or perhaps slyly complicating it, Heyward creates in Porgy a fully realized, emotionally complex character who exemplifies the survival strategies necessary among African Americans in Charleston’s Golden Age.13

While most of the black characters in Porgy are poor, the sole African American character with a professional trade exemplifies both the white paternalism ruling Charleston society and Heyward’s own dim view of black aspiration. Simon Frasier speaks in the same dialect as Porgy and is equally reliant on the financial benevolence of local whites, but he considers himself far superior. Because he “voted the democratic ticket in the dark period of reconstruction,” white leaders allow Frasier to serve as a lawyer for his own
people, regardless of the fact that he has no legal training. Frasier’s brief appearance in the story arises when he is summoned by Archdale, the sympathetic white lawyer, who admonishes him to cease his practice of selling fake “divorces” to poor, uneducated blacks. Although Frasier had defrauded other blacks this way for years, Archdale now forces him to stop because “the gentleman who has come down to improve moral conditions among the negroes” has complained about the practice.14

Heyward’s aversion to those who would “improve moral conditions among the negroes” is clear from his definition of the Golden Age in which he sets his novel. The narrator explains that Porgy lived in the Golden Age of begging because his “plea for help produced the simple reactions of a generous impulse, a movement of the hand, and the gift of a coin, instead of the elaborate and terrifying processes of organized philanthropy.” This Golden Age was thus a society in which southern whites took care of southern blacks without interference or any systematic attempt to lift African Americans beyond their lowly station. Heyward puts this paternalism into his characters’ mouths as well, as when Porgy expresses his guiding philosophy that “when nigger mek de buckra laugh, den he know he done won.” In another incident, Serena’s “white folks” (described as having “owned half the slaves in the county,” including Serena’s father) intervene to get Peter, imprisoned by the police until they can find Crown, out of jail. Heyward’s paternalism is also evident when Maria rebukes the slick outsider Sportin’ Life, who has been sitting in her cookshop talking with a group of men about the “good-lookin’ white gals in dis town.” Maria asks furiously whether she should kill him now herself or “leabe [him] fuh de w’ite gentlemens tuh hang attuh a while.” She complains that in New York, “De fus t’ing dat dem nigger fuhgit is dat dem is nigger. Den dem comes tuh dese decent country mens, and fills um full ob talk wut put money in de funeral ondehtakuh pocket.” In desperation, she warns him: “Fuh Gawd’s sake, don’t talk dat kind ob talk tuh dese hyuh boys. Dis county ain’t nebber yit see a black man get lynch. Dese nigger knows folks, and dey knows nigger. Fer Gawd’ sake keep yuh mout’ off w’ite lady.” Although expressed by an African American character, it is nonetheless a powerful articulation of southern whites’ view that “their” African Americans had no business migrating north and would only suffer from northern cities and northern ideas.15

Yet as Maria’s angry warning demonstrates, Heyward’s story also suggests the limits of paternalism, the harsh realities of white supremacy, and the strategies of solidarity and resistance employed by African Americans living under the heel of Jim Crow. Heyward presents these facets of Afri-
can American life, yet without the approbation that he bestows on what he considers to be more positive racial attributes; these scenes are offered neutrally, eliciting no “wistful envy,” but no condemnation either. Three characters spend time in jail over the course of the novel, all under unjust conditions that Heyward describes but does not find remarkable. At the jail in which she is imprisoned for ten days, Bess spends her days in a broiling, grassless exercise yard and her nights “locked in a steel cage, which resembled a large dog-pound” and possessed an “almost unbreatheable stench.” Yet he concludes that the female prisoners there “could not be said to suffer acutely under their imprisonment” and “awaited the expiration of their brief sentences with sodden patience.”

Throughout *Porgy*, the residents of Catfish Row demonstrate steadfast solidarity in the face of the white world’s power over them. Both Maria and Bess agree not to turn Sportin’ Life over to white police despite his perversive, drug-dealing influence, and Bess serves ten days in prison as a result of her silence. The novel repeatedly describes how the residents of Catfish Row close ranks, disappear, or prevaricate when white policemen and lawyers arrive, in ways that are sometimes comic but also poignant, conveying a palpable sense of what was at stake. But these descriptions also subtly reinforce the idea of blacks as slippery, untrustworthy, and somehow inhuman, as when the narrator describes the arrival of the police into a Catfish Row altercation: “[T]he uproar stopped suddenly at its peak. Shadows dropped back and were gulped by deeper shadow. Feet made no sound in retreating. Solid bodies became fluid, sliding. Yawning doorways drew them in.”

Serena deflects the questioning of white police who suspect her of murdering Crown by feigning illness, with the help of two friends who swear she has been sick in bed for several days. The police depart, thwarted, despite knowing that she is deceiving them.

Heyward also indirectly acknowledges the severe economic limits that segregation imposed on black Charlestonians. The able-bodied male residents of Catfish Row work on the wharves loading and unloading boats as stevedores, or as fishermen; the women work as domestic servants for white families. Maria is unique among the women in owning her own business, a cookshop. Porgy, physically crippled, must resort to begging, while the elderly Peter drives a wagon. Heyward even acknowledges how the economic disadvantages of gender influenced family formation for black women. When Porgy criticizes two young women for taking up with new men soon after losing their partners in the hurricane, Bess chidingly reminds him that “all two dem gal gots baby fuh keep alibe. . . . Dey is jus’ ‘oman, an’ nigger at dat. Dey is
doin’ de bes’ dey kin—dat all.”18 Heyward also describes the economic con-
sequences of Peter’s unfair jailing early in the story; an exploitive leasing con-
tract for his wagon allowed the owner to immediately repossess it when Peter
missed a payment, and the furniture paid for on installment credit was repos-
essed as well. When he returns from jail, Peter must resume his role in these
exploitive arrangements, paying for his wagon and furniture all over again.

Heyward’s story was also unique in its treatment of the love affair be-
tween Porgy and Bess. Initially attracted to Porgy because she hears “he gits
good money fum de w’ite folks,” Bess quickly grows to love him. Both Bess
and Porgy are transformed by their union: Porgy sheds “the defensive bar-
rier of reserve that he had built around his life,” and Bess’s “face was losing
its hunted expression.” White authors almost never imbued African Ameri-
can characters with any emotional depth, and the early twentieth-century
theatre enforced an unspoken taboo against any serious portrayals of roman-
tic love between two African American characters.19 Heyward’s depiction of
Porgy and Bess’s loving relationship and contented home life quietly broke
new ground.

Despite the contradictions and subtleties of Heyward’s novel, its ultimate
message rejects the possibility of positive change for Catfish Row. Sportin’
Life, malevolent representative of the urban North, is physically ejected from
Catfish Row by Maria, who knocks him unconscious with a brick to the head
and, once he comes to, warns him that if he ever returns, he will leave as a
corpse. Then, in the words of the narrator, she “placed a foot in the small of
his back . . . [and] catapulted him once and for all out of Catfish Row and
the lives of its inhabitants.” Bess, plied with alcohol by a group of stevedores,
leaves for Savannah with them, descending back into the desperate life that
her happy domestic interlude in Catfish Row had briefly spared her. Porgy’s
desperate attempt to escape being taken to identify Crown’s body sends him
in his goat-drawn cart lunging for the woods at the city’s outskirts, a des-
tination “as elusive and desirable as the white man’s heaven.” Surrounded
by laughing white spectators and chased by a patrol wagon, Porgy has no
reasonable chance to escape, yet, terrified at what awaits him, he makes the
attempt with all of his being. From Porgy’s perspective, the scene is remi-
niscent of nothing so much as the attempt of a slave to escape a plantation;
the novel’s white onlookers treat it as a comic spectacle. Porgy ends the novel
back at Catfish Row, abandoned by Bess, a saddened man with “a face that
sagged wearily.”20

DuBose Heyward wrote a complex, yet fundamentally conservative, fic-
tional account of the African Americans who inhabited his native Charles-
ton. His identity and experiences as a white Charlestonian deeply shaped both his debut novel’s subject and the ways in which readers understood it. Heyward was born to a Charleston family that was prominent in name yet poor in means. The family’s finances grew even grimmer when Heyward’s father died in a mill accident when DuBose was two years old. His mother, Janie Screven Heyward, turned her interest in folklore into a source of income for her family, presenting a program titled “Unique Dialect of the Disappearing Type of Negro” to tourists and locals in the Charleston area and across the South. Janie Heyward’s presentations and publications (which included the 1912 pamphlet “Songs of the Charleston Darkey”) attempted to convey “the feeling which existed between the old-time Darkey, and his Master,” feelings such as “loving sympathy,” “loyalty,” and “a spirit of mutual kindness.” She credited the “mauma,” or African American mammy, who had helped to raise her for influencing her presentations.21 Like other white children in elite Charleston families, DuBose Heyward grew up under the influence of a paternalist vision of black culture and southern race relations and, in his case, an additional urge to preserve it for white cultural consumption.

According to his wife, DuBose Heyward’s childhood included “long happy summers on his aunt’s plantation, where his only playmates were Negro children.” He left school as a teenager and began working full-time to support his family. From his first paid employment, he exercised authority over black workers and customers. Early jobs included collecting burial-insurance payments in Charleston’s black neighborhoods and clerking in a hardware store; he also spent summers supervising black laborers on his aunt’s plantation. In that job, his wife recalled, he “spent the day in the saddle riding from one group of workers to another, leaving instructions or taking back reports on progress. I imagine he often held up progress with long chats with the workers. He spoke Gullah like a Gullah.”22 When he was twenty, he took a job as a cotton checker and timekeeper for a steamship line, work that brought him into regular contact with the African American men who worked as stevedores on the Charleston waterfront. Three years later, he started an insurance business with a childhood friend. Heyward was a member of the city’s Interracial Committee, a local arm of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, an organization founded by southern whites seeking to promote dialogue among white and black community leaders. During World War I, Heyward (whose fragile health precluded his enlistment for active duty) coordinated war-related volunteer work among Charleston’s black population.23
Heyward was also a founder of the Poetry Society of South Carolina, a group that aimed to raise the profile of serious southern literature in a period when northern critics and intellectuals often scorned southern culture. Founded in 1920, the Poetry Society actively attempted to challenge H. L. Mencken’s famous 1917 dismissal of the South as a cultural wasteland, the “sahara of the Bozart.” To rescue southern literature from Victorian sentimentality, Mencken challenged southerners to write about gritty reality, which was generally interpreted to mean African American subjects. Heyward’s attempt to answer Mencken’s call began with his active work as the Poetry Society’s secretary. He also spent the summers of 1921 and 1922 at the MacDowell Colony, the famed New Hampshire artists’ retreat, where he met his future wife, playwright Dorothy Hartzell Kuhns. In 1924 Heyward quit his insurance business and began writing full-time. He got the idea for his “negro novel,” as he referred to it, from a newspaper clipping about an attempted shooting by a local African American beggar.24

While Porgy was Heyward’s first novel, he was a prolific writer on subjects that often, although not always, explored the dramas of race in his native South. Before his death in 1940 at age fifty-five, he also published numerous novels, plays, and volumes of poetry. In addition to Porgy, Heyward’s major works included the novels Angel (1926), Mamba’s Daughters (1929), Peter Ashley (1932), Lost Morning (1936), and Star Spangled Virgin (1939). For the stage, he wrote Brass Ankle (1930) and adapted both Porgy (1927) and Mamba’s Daughters (1939). His poetry was published in many magazines and in his own volumes, including Carolina Chansons: Legends of the Low Country (1922), Skylines and Horizons (1924), and Jasbo Brown and Selected Poems (1931). With his reputation as a novelist and playwright well established, he also wrote the Hollywood screenplay adaptations for Eugene O’Neill’s The Emperor Jones (1933) and Pearl Buck’s The Good Earth (1934).25

Heyward was not the only 1920s novelist writing about southern, usually rural, black characters. White southerners wrote most of these novels, although a few were written by African Americans. While hardly a massive shift in American literature, it was enough of a trend to spark comment in the era’s literary journals. A 1929 editorial in Dial magazine declared that “even magazines of class are going negro-literature mad. The more mystical, voodooish, and brooding the tone, the faster the story is snapped up.” Dubious about the ability of white writers (including “an alarming number of white women”) “to catch the song of the negro,” the editorialist cynically advised aspiring short-story writers: “Go South; return burdened with notes; flood the magazines. Readers in Iowa or Montana will not know the differ-
en. Plenty of people up North will swallow it whole.” Heyward summarized his propitious timing more concisely when he observed: “[T]n the current world of letters it is almost as chic to be a Southerner as to be a Negro.”

Heyward and fellow South Carolinian Julia Peterkin were the most prominent and critically acclaimed of the white southerners writing novels about black subjects in the 1920s. (Peterkin’s major works include the short-story collection Green Thursday [1924] and the novels Black April [1927] and the best-selling Scarlet Sister Mary [1929], which won the Pulitzer Prize.) Because of their identity as white southerners, publishers, reviewers, and readers granted Heyward, Peterkin, and other authors before them (such as the nineteenth-century dialect-story writer Joel Chandler Harris of Georgia) the cultural authority to write about black characters. Rewarded with significant critical attention, prizes, and numerous readers, Heyward and Peterkin were able to advance their version of southern black authenticity with resources few other dissenting voices possessed. And their portraits of southern African Americans were grounded in their own identities and class positions in southern society. As well-off white southerners, both Heyward and Peterkin lived in a segregated world where they primarily encountered blacks through an employer-employee relationship in which whites were inevitably the employers. This was particularly salient in the case of Peterkin, an active member of the United Daughters of the Confederacy who based her stories and novels on the African Americans who worked on her family’s plantation.

Heyward published a number of nonfiction essays and interviews that laid out his ideas about southern literature and the essential nature of African Americans as literary subjects. They appeared at different moments in Heyward’s career, from less than a year prior to his decision to devote himself full-time to writing to several years after Porgy’s success had established him as an authority on southern African Americans. But if their vantage points ranged from unknown new voice to recognized literary authority and their audiences from regional to national, these documents were consistent in their basic articulation of Heyward’s assumptions about southern literature and racial identity. And they were explicit, in a way that the fictional Porgy was indirect, in expressing Heyward’s belief that African Americans retained a primitive capacity for emotional release long lost to whites and that “a race personality” was more salient than any individual’s characteristics. Generations of white artists—from blackface minstrel performers to popular songwriters and dialect-story authors—used such assumptions to devastating effect, and they found a ready audience among white Ameri-
cans. If the dynamic of such white-conceived versions of African American culture involved both “love and theft,” Heyward’s work reflects a similar dynamic. Heyward, like his mother before him, presented the African American world that he could observe in a sentimental, even admiring, light, yet his observations—disproportionately valued in the cultural marketplace because of his own race and status—remained the basis for a host of damaging and well-worn stereotypes.28

In 1923 Heyward published “And Once Again—the Negro” in the Richmond-based literary magazine The Reviewer. With this essay, the energetic secretary of the Poetry Society of South Carolina reached a regional, rather than merely a statewide, audience of southern literature aficionados with his ideas about race and literature. In it, Heyward combined his trademark local-color details, anecdotes about conversations with his black employees, and wry distillations of contemporary sociology to express his sorrow that African Americans were soon to be “saved” by the misplaced zeal of white reformers. Deliberately attempting to turn stereotypes of black laziness and sexual promiscuity on their heads, he nonetheless maintained an air of incredulous superiority and reinforced the racist notion that African Americans, instinctively docile, would submit readily to the “supreme tragedy” of soul-deadening reform.

Heyward opened the essay by describing his most recent reading, “an article in a magazine that takes itself very seriously,” which proposed “education in the moral code of the white race will bring enlightenment” to “Our Colored Brother.” An adversary thus established, he countered the knowing pronouncements of such earnest literary endeavors and reform-minded ideologies with his own authentic experience, relayed as a series of laid-back, common-sense observations. He began with a pastoral description of the languorous Charleston scene outside of his window, the centerpiece of which was a local dockworker, “a great black sprawl[ed] in the wreck of a chair . . . peel[ing] stalk after stalk of stout, purple sugar cane.” Heyward announced that the stevedore is “superlatively happy now” that a successful labor strike has enabled local stevedores to “earn in three days sufficient money to support life for a week.” According to Heyward, this man intuitively knew what “students of sociology” were theorizing at length: “[I]n an ideal civilization, a man should expend but half of his power to secure the necessities of physical existence and devote the remainder of this time to the realization and enjoyment of life.”29

Heyward also recounted, in some detail, a conversation with his gardener. The gardener, too, had found a simple solution to a vexing social problem.
Instead of marrying a woman outright, he undertook a three-year “trial” with her, a partnership that produced two children, and then they parted ways, all without the benefit of state-sanctioned marriage or divorce. Because she had already taken up with another man, no one (save Heyward) saw any need for the gardener to support the children financially. Heyward’s washerwoman, too, had an advanced view of marriage; she had no intention of taking her new husband’s name and declared that “he ain’t goin’ ter get my name neither.” Heyward compared her situation to that of a white couple that he “met in an advanced art circle,” who made the same choice and were forging a bold path in the face of embarrassing social inquiries from “hotel clerks and others.” Like the dockworker with his three-day workweek, this couple (and the larger black social world that all three of them inhabited) proved effortlessly pragmatic compared to white elites.

Using his observations of the working-class African Americans in his midst, Heyward deftly managed to assert the superiority of white southern insight into the “race problem” while also offering condescending praise for stereotypes (unwillingness to work, unconventional sexual morals) that were more commonly fodder for bigots. Heyward instead suggested that these traits might be an appealing alternative to white middle-class norms. If intrigued by notions of minimal labor and free love, Heyward was in the end no advocate of them, and he settled for asking rhetorically of his black subjects: “Are they an aeon behind, or an aeon ahead of us?” Heyward is sure, however, that these unrestricted behaviors will soon be a memory, as “the reformer will have [African Americans] in the fullness of time. They will surely be cleaned, married, conventionalized. They will be taken from the fields, and given to machines. Their instinctive feeling for the way that leads to happiness . . . will be supplanted by a stifling moral straightjacket.” Gazing mournfully on his emblematic dockworker, Heyward concluded: “I cannot see him as a joke. Most certainly I cannot contort him into a menace. I can only be profoundly sorry for him. . . . He is about to be saved.”

Heyward recognized that most white southerners (and northerners) saw his black laborers through the lenses of “joke” or “menace,” and his paternalism enabled him to transcend those categories and add the lens of pity. His rhetorical turn in this _Reviewer_ essay paralleled the way that his fictionalized _Porgy_ was presented and received as a cultural product. It rested on a foundation of his personal, and therefore authentic and authoritative, experience of the African American race; it treated its subjects with a hitherto unknown dignity; yet it showcased them in a distant and proscribed realm from which they had no hope of betterment and appeared to desire none. What
African Americans themselves might see as crucial upward mobility, Heyward viewed as “a stifling moral straightjacket.” Highlighting his subjects’ intertwined burdens of race and class, Heyward feared that blacks would be “saved” from their picturesque, unthreatening poverty and well-defined place in southern society.

Two years later, Heyward’s “The New Note in Southern Literature” appeared in *The Bookman*, a publishing industry journal. Coming just four months before *Porgy*’s publication (which was serialized in *The Bookman*), this essay was no doubt intended to influence a national audience of literary tastemakers who could establish the debut novelist’s success. Heyward began by sketching an incomplete history of “southern letters” since the post–Civil War period, limiting his analysis to white authors and their white readers. In Heyward’s view, this period of white southern literary production was marred by an excessive deference to middle-class social norms that dictated polite ignorance of any “Negro problem.” This produced a regional literature characterized by, in Heyward’s phrase, “good taste,” one in which white literary treatments of black life “dealt altogether delightfully with the Negro of the past” or “caricatured [the Negro’s sense of humor] beyond recognition, and produced a comedian so detached from life that he could be laughed at heartily.” George Washington Cable, the lone white author willing to tackle the racial taboos of the Victorian South, suffered “the retribution of an outraged society” and served as a cautionary example to subsequent white writers. But Heyward was optimistic that a new era was dawning, and he argued that “the prejudices of the audience” were dissolving in the white South beneath an onslaught of local poetry societies, newspaper book pages, and regional literary magazines. Heyward praised several up-and-coming white southern authors, mostly playwrights, who were “observing and recording” southern life (particularly “Negro life”) “with honesty and fearlessness.”

Despite generic acknowledgments of the need for African American writers to produce literature about African American subjects, Heyward’s conceptual and practical efforts to promote southern literature excluded African Americans such as Charles Chesnutt and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. In both his inclusions and omissions in “The New Note in Southern Literature,” Heyward dismissed the contributions of black authors to the very endeavor for which he praised white writers. Noting that the plays and novels he was lauding depicted rural blacks, he observed that “the authentic word has yet to be spoken for the Negro of education who is striving to adjust himself to the civilization about him” (though he failed to note his own failure in this regard in his forthcoming *Porgy*). Citing one novel on such a
subject by a black author, Walter White’s *The Fire in the Flint* (1924), Heyward compared it to “the comic fiction Negro type,” arguing that such works “fail to convince” because “the material has been subjected to such excessive exaggeration that the illusion of truth cannot survive.” Offhandedly disparaging White’s fictional effort as “doubtless the advance guard of a long procession of novels of protest by members of the race,” Heyward also scolded that “it is high time that the Negro produced his own literature showing lights and shadows in their true value.” Heyward not only failed to mention a prominent earlier novelist of black middle-class life, the African American Charles Chesnutt (a North Carolinian driven to Ohio by the violence of post-Reconstruction white supremacy), but he also failed to include the African American Jean Toomer in his review of contemporary southern fiction writers taking on racial taboos “with honesty and fearlessness.” This is not entirely unsurprising, given that in a 1923 incident, Heyward demonstrated neither honesty nor fearlessness in his treatment of Toomer as a fellow southern writer. Heyward and another Poetry Society of South Carolina founder discovered that Toomer, who had joined by mail from Washington, D.C., was African American. Fearing that the Poetry Society would be discredited by the disclosure of a black member, they quickly and discreetly dropped a notice for Toomer’s forthcoming *Cane* from a newsletter listing of new books by Poetry Society members. The demands of Heyward’s own budding literary reputation—along with his avowed ambivalence about the prospect of African American workers being “cleaned, married, [and] conventionalized” by reformers—combined to make him both myopic and defensive about the evident contributions of African American writers to the subject of race in the American South.33

While Heyward was a proponent of southern literature as a distinctive genre since his earliest days as an unknown writer, *Porgy*’s success provided him with a larger platform from which to put forth his ideas. In a period of great movement and migration by black southerners, Heyward argued that a singularly steadfast sense of place gave southern writers, and southern literature, its unique character. In a 1931 magazine interview titled “The Newly Articulate South,” Heyward asserted that “the southern writer will set his story, naturally, where he himself belongs” and explained: “There are in some sections, of which the South Carolina Low Country is one, planters who still live upon land that was granted to their families by the British Crown in Colonial times. The effect upon these people of generation following generation upon the same familiar ground is the development of a bond of loyalty and affection between a man and his environment, such as seems to me to
be lacking in almost every other part of America.” This narrow definition of southern attachment to place excluded, of course, the African slaves whose families had not been granted land by the British Crown or any other government. Yet it also denied the experiences of black southerners who departed their homes in large numbers in the first two decades of the twentieth century. It was a conception of the South shaped by Heyward’s identity as a white man from an elite family, and it reflected the strong nostalgia for a romanticized, segregated South that undergirded even his most subtle writing about race. A more lighthearted example of Heyward’s belief that true southerners were those who remained in the South appeared in his 1929 interview with the New York Sun, where he advised aspiring authors: “Stay in your home town. . . . Shun New York as if it were a plague. It is too noisy, too hectic, too high strung, too un-American. Stay among your own people and write of what you know and feel.” As if to prove Heyward’s point about the South’s strong regional chauvinism, southern newspapers widely reprinted this excerpt from the Sun interview under the gleeful headline “‘Stay Home!’ Is Heyward’s Advice to Young Authors.”34

Heyward’s implicitly exclusive philosophy of southern literature was matched by his continued exclusion of African American writers from the realm of recognized southern literature, an omission authorized by the traditions of segregation. In 1931 Heyward helped to organize the Conference of Southern Writers, held at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Thirty-four authors who wrote primarily about the South attended, and every one of them was white. Commenting on this conference, Heyward characterized southern writers as “possess[ing] a common point of view toward life, a state of mind that has been described [in some quarters with ridicule] as ‘typically southern,’ a sense of values opposed for the most part to the conventional standard of American success.”35 The whites-only invitation list reflected the social and intellectual consequences of a segregated society: if including Jean Toomer in absentia in the Poetry Society threatened that organization’s viability, white and black writers certainly could not gather in person on a southern college campus. Even if social convention had allowed blacks’ inclusion, Heyward’s definition of the group’s shared values posed another barrier; black writers could hardly afford his rueful disdain for “conventional success.”

Following the commercial and critical success of Porgy as a novel and a play, Heyward’s literary renown rested on his reputation as a white southerner who possessed special insight into African American life and culture. Newspaper reviewers and feature writers seized on elements of his official
biography to craft an image of Heyward as a white man from an “aristocratic family” whose childhood poverty put him in unique proximity to African Americans. A 1929 article, published during the release of Heyward’s *Mamba’s Daughters* (dubbed his “new novel of the Charleston Negroses”), improvised liberally on Heyward’s official biography. It described how Heyward’s family “had lost its prosperity as a result of the Civil War” and, consequently, the young Heyward “was brought up in a section that, as a whole, was well-nigh impoverished.” This poverty gave the future novelist a front-row seat to the “charms and pathos” of Catfish Row, then an impoverished black neighborhood. The article proclaimed that Heyward “loved to steal away from his nearby home, and play with the little Niggers,” and rhapsodized: “What drama, humor and heartbreak did the young DuBose witness! What a fund of rich and of tragic memories of the colored folk did he store up!” Another profile of Heyward also elaborated on the bare facts of his official biography to paint a picture of a white southerner deeply perceptive and sensitive to the lives of poor African Americans. Commenting on Heyward’s work experience as a cotton checker on the Charleston waterfront, this columnist surmised: “His instant perception and his swift sympathy mingled with a rare degree of sensitiveness gave him great facility in learning the complexities and contradictions of the Negro nature, as well as in picking up their phraseology and their idiosyncrasies of speech.”36

Heyward offered his own elaboration on the facts of his biography in his “introduction” to the official acting version of the play *Porgy*. Published in the United States in 1928, this essay explained both his general attraction to the African Americans in his Charleston midst and the specific source of his Porgy story. In his opening sentences, Heyward lyrically introduced his “preoccupation with the primitive Southern Negro as a subject for art” by contrasting his intellectual responses to the “civilization” and “chaste beauty” of white Charleston to his emotional responses to the “primitive” “substratum” of the city’s black society, particularly the “polychromatic pageantry” of African American lodge parades, working stevedores, and the sound of spirituals. Using an evolutionary metaphor, Heyward inverted Social Darwinist thinking to praise African Americans for retaining “a certain definite, but indefinable quality that remained with my own people only in a more or less vestigial state, and at times seemed to have departed altogether like our gills and tails.” As in “And Once Again—the Negro,” he assured readers that “from the beginning, [his] approach to the subject was never [a] philanthropic urge to succor an unfortunate race,” distancing himself from those who sought to ameliorate black poverty or strive for racial reform. He also
declared his “envy” of “the primitive Negro as the inheritor of a source of delight that [he] would have given much to possess.”

This “introduction” contained Heyward’s most explicit expression to date of his notion of essential racial characteristics, “a sort of race personality that dominated and swayed the mass, making of it a sum vastly greater than the total of its individual entities.” He freely admitted that “the behaviour of individuals was a secondary consideration” in his initial artistic interest in African Americans. Possessed of this general attitude toward members of the visible but unknown African American working class, Heyward came across a brief *Charleston News and Courier* report on the court case of Samuel Smalls. Smalls, “a cripple . . . familiar to King Street with his goat and cart,” was held on a charge of aggravated assault for his attempt to shoot Maggie Barnes. Seeing “passion, hate, despair” in this account of what he previously assumed to be the “commonplace” life of a local beggar, Heyward was inspired to write his novel. But concerned that his fictional tale had “assumed the significance of a biographical sketch,” he hastened to remind readers: “From contemplation of [Smalls’s] real, and deeply moving, tragedy sprang Porgy, a creature of my imagination, who synthesized for me a number of divergent impressions and emotions.” Inhabiting his outsider role with a greater degree of modesty than at the introduction’s outset, Heyward acknowledged that because Porgy was his fictional creation, he was able to “impose [his] own white man’s conception of a summer of aspiration, devotion, and heartbreak across the color wall.”

Heyward was sympathetic to his African American subjects, and in the early twentieth-century South, such concern was not to be taken for granted. But his essays and interviews unambiguously demonstrated what his fiction merely suggested: his well-meaning folkloric impulses had the effect of promoting a deeply paternalistic worldview that protected white class privilege and the ethic of segregation. He, like most other white writers, endorsed the idea of a “race personality” as a way of understanding African American attitudes and behavior, and he sentimentalized the cultural characteristics of working-class black people. Middle-class blacks were entirely absent from his writing, and black authors were entirely absent from his conception of southern literature. In all of these essays and interviews, Heyward was both establishing and bolstering his authority as a chronicler of authentic black life in the South. But he was also promoting the idea that there was something regrettable about African Americans’ aspiration to education and economic well-being.

Nearly 800 miles north of Charleston, at the intellectual center of the
cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, a number of African American writers were debating questions about literature, representation, authenticity, and social class. While Heyward was encouraging white southern writers to take a serious and sympathetic fictional approach to their black neighbors, African American artists and intellectuals also urged black artists to take up the same subjects; all sought authentic and true portrayals of black life. Unlike Heyward, however, they operated in a very different context and with different political and cultural priorities. These writers, themselves middle- and upper-class African Americans, pondered the ways that art could most usefully advance black political and social equality. They recognized white writers who created sympathetic portrayals of African American characters, but they forcefully advocated for black writers to depict their own race. Porgy’s 1925 arrival on the literary scene, and its critical success, landed in the middle of these debates and in a small way became part of them.

The Crisis, a monthly journal published by the NAACP and edited by W. E. B. Du Bois, was a key venue for these debates about race and literature. In a 1921 editorial titled “Negro Art,” Du Bois worried that black artists shied away from portraying “the criminals and prostitutes, ignorant and debased folk” that inhabited all communities, both black and white. Black artists, surrounded by “a vast wealth of human material” in the diversity of African American experiences, “fear to paint the truth lest they criticize their own and be in turn criticized for it.” Because of decades of distorted and one-dimensional depictions of African Americans, they “fear that evil in [them] will be called racial, while in others it is viewed as individual.” White artists, less politically constrained, “often see the beauty, tragedy and comedy more truly than [African Americans] dare.” Du Bois urged Crisis readers not to protest works like Eugene O’Neill’s The Emperor Jones because it was a harbinger of truthful works by African Americans yet to come. Two years later, Alain Locke and Jessie Fauset similarly used their Crisis column “Notes on the New Books” to acknowledge the new wave of “seriously intentioned art” emerging by whites writing about black subjects and characters. “The attitudes of farce and sentimental comedy are rapidly giving way to those of serious problems and heavy tragedy,” they observed; “we can no longer complain of not being taken ‘seriously.’” But they also worried that perhaps African Americans were “being taken over-seriously” in fiction by whites, observing that “there is too much perpetuation of the fiction of a separate ‘race temperament,’ ‘race psychology.’” The political consequences of this were significant, perpetuating the “tragedy” of two races “that thinking so much
alike . . . must live so differently by the artificial restrictions and conventions, which tragically stagnate and pollute the group life of each.” They concluded that, regardless of advances in white writing about blacks, the truth about African Americans “will never be adequately told until it is self-seen and self-spoken.”

In 1926 Du Bois once again used the pages of The Crisis to engage these questions of race, politics, and cultural production, this time through a symposium titled “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?” Twenty-two literary figures, both authors and publishers, answered a series of passionate, pointed, and even contradictory questions about art, social class, and authentic representation. Du Bois bemoaned the absence of art presenting “Negroes of education and accomplishment” and asked if black or white artists should be “under any obligations or limitations” when creating black characters. In another question, he suggested that black writers “will be tempted to follow the popular trend in portraying Negro character in the underworld rather than seeking to paint the truth about themselves and their own social class.” And he wondered, “What are Negroes to do when they are continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted?”

Du Bois understood the influence of a white-dominated publishing marketplace: “Can publishers be criticized for refusing to handle novels that portray Negroes of education and accomplishment, on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting?” And, getting at the heart of the matter, he asked: “Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid?”

One of the respondents to “The Negro in Art” was DuBose Heyward. His debut novel was also the focus of one of the symposium’s questions. Du Bois asked respondents, “Does the situation of the educated Negro in America with its pathos, humiliation and tragedy call for artistic treatment at least as sincere and sympathetic as ‘Porgy’ received?” Heyward’s answers rather blandly made a case for the value of any literature produced for solely artistic purposes; fiction “destroys itself as soon as it is made a vehicle for propaganda,” he insisted, and an artist who portrays “the worst characters of a group” should be beyond criticism if he is “sincere.” He also answered that literature by and about “the educated and artistic Negro . . . will find his public waiting for him when the publishers are willing to take the chance.” Other respondents had more pointed advice. Joel Spingarn, a publisher and the chairman of the NAACP, asserted that even imperfect books from black authors were “instruments of progress as real as the ballot-box, the school-
house or a stick of dynamite.” Walter White insisted that “genuine artists will write or paint or sing or sculpt whatever they please,” and many other respondents expressed similar sentiments. African American poet Countee Cullen did not endorse “any infringement of the author’s right to tell a story” but acknowledged the fact that “what would be taken as a type in other literatures is, where it touches us, seized upon as representative.” Somehow, “negro artists have a definite duty to perform in this matter, one which should supersede their individual prerogatives, without denying those rights.” A version of this debate also took place in the pages of The Nation, where George Schuyler and Langston Hughes sparred over whether a definable “Negro art” existed at all. Coming down on opposite sides of the question, each nonetheless used the example of black middle-class life to argue his case. They agreed that middle-class African American households looked remarkably similar to middle-class white households. But where Schuyler saw this similarity as evidence of a positive black assimilation into American society, Hughes viewed it as a damaging denial of racial heritage, a “mountain” standing in the way of authentic African American cultural production.

“I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda,” declared Du Bois; “all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists.” Heyward was just such a purist—though of course, he could afford to be. Heyward “writes beautifully of the black Charleston underworld,” noted Du Bois, “because he cannot do a similar thing for the white people of Charleston, or they would drum him out of town. The only chance he had to tell the truth of pitiful human degradation was to tell it of colored people.” Despite their mutual admiration, Du Bois and Heyward stood poles apart in how they understood the political implications of literature. Yet both saw a similar possibility for a positive black influence on American culture. Both men yearned for a society that valued art and contemplation over go-getter capitalism and social striving. In a 1926 speech to members of the NAACP, Du Bois asked: “We who are dark can see America in away that white Americans can not. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals?” He went on to describe a world full of “Beauty,” yet “the mass of human beings are choked away from it, and their lives distorted and made ugly.” Perhaps, he exhorted the crowd, African Americans could help to create “a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life.” Du Bois saw this possibility for black influence as the task of the race’s educated elite, the “talented tenth”; he yearned for the black man to be “a co-worker in the kingdom of
culture.” Heyward, too, envisioned the possibilities of black culture improving the dominant ethos, but he saw it in the casual attitudes and sensual appreciations of the black working class. Imbued with a “mysterious force that for generations had resisted the pressure of our civilization,” Heyward wrote, African Americans “had the power to stir [him] suddenly and inexplicably to tears or laughter.” In Heyward’s worldview, a black stevedore who works only when necessary is “superlatively happy,” and he regards such a man “with a wistful envy.”

Heyward’s nonfiction reflections on race, region, and literature reached a limited audience of like-minded souls. His first published fiction, however, gained him national attention. Heyward’s timing in writing a serious novel about African American characters could not have been better. *Porgy*’s marketing materials and reviews joined the national and regional literary conversation about race that had been taking place in Harlem, Charleston, and points in between. Although only a first novel by an unknown southern poet, *Porgy* debuted in the literary mainstream; it was serialized in *The Bookman*, an influential New York publishing journal, and reviewed in several major newspapers and magazines. A few months after its release, *Porgy* topped the *Chicago Tribune*’s best-seller list and was checked out from the Chicago public library more than any other book except one. The novel went to at least a fifth edition, and in July 1926 Heyward sold the motion picture rights to Cinema Corporation of America for $7,500.

In its marketing materials, publisher George H. Doran Company put forward a set of ideas about white authority, black exoticism, and universal human emotion designed to entice readers and frame their encounter with the novel. According to the first edition’s dust jacket, “The author has had the rare courage to select a Negro for his central character, but so richly has he endowed this character with humanity and emotion that all sense of race is submerged in the larger telling of a powerful story.” With this sentence, Doran simultaneously asserted both the novel’s distinctive and even daring subject matter (“rare courage”) and its universality. That universality was key, not only as a hallmark of great literature but also as a signal that this novel was not trying to make a political argument about race. Readers knew immediately that *Porgy* was not, in short, racial propaganda. Doran’s text implicitly contrasted Heyward’s serious treatment of his subject (“so richly has he endowed this character with humanity and emotion”) with the vast majority of early twentieth-century American textual and visual culture, replete with one-dimensional caricatures of African Americans. Yet it is precisely this rich emotional texture that, according to the jacket copy, elevated

*Porgy*, 1925 • 39
the novel out of the realm of the racially specific and into that of the uni-
versally human. Heyward, by imbuing Porgy with “humanity and emotion,”
managed to “submerge” the specificities of race. Such a formulation, while
arguably counterintuitive—would not a fully humanized portrait of a black
character increase a reader’s sense of racial injustice?—shrewdly reassured
potential white readers that they need not fear racial advocacy, since in Porgy
“all sense of race is submerged.” Porgy offered the titillation of a glimpse into
African American life and the comfort of a universal, rather than disquiet-
ingly specific, story. The rest of the jacket copy touted Heyward’s southern
authenticity and, indirectly, his own racial identity: “Already well known as
a poet, this native of Charleston, member of an old Southern family, writes
of his city of blossoms and memories with tenderness as well as frankness,
and of the Negro with kindly detachment and understanding.” By noting
that the author was not only a “native of Charleston” but also a “member of
an old Southern family,” Doran conveyed that Heyward was white, despite
his subject matter. Describing the setting’s “blossoms and memories” and the
author’s “kindly detachment,” the jacket text evoked romantic notions of the
genteel South and further signaled that this novel was more paternal than
strident on the subject of southern race relations.44

The dust-jacket art and text on a later edition of the novel (see page 14)
conveyed both the exotic melodrama of pulp fiction (via the art) and the im-
primatur of serious literature (via the text). On the front cover, a watercolor
image in deep blue and gray shades featured the windows of Catfish Row in
the background and the trio of Crown, Porgy, and Bess in the foreground.
Even with her back to the viewer, captured in profile, Bess’s face wears a
discernible expression of fear as Crown’s large hand grips her slender arm.
Porgy, between Crown and Bess, gazes with resolute jaw into the middle
distance. Crown dominates the tableau, looming bare chested and scowling,
towering over the much smaller Porgy and Bess. In the lower right corner of
the front cover, five lines of small print explain: “Love and life are chaotic in
this beautiful and deeply moving novel of the Southern negro.” The copy on
the book’s back cover includes a photo and biographical description of Hey-
ward, along with a brief synopsis and quoted praise from nationally syndi-
cated newspaper columnist Heywood Broun. The biographical information
communicated Heyward’s status as a knowledgeable, and privileged, white
southerner, noting not only his lifelong Charleston residence but also that
he inherited “from a long line of Colonial ancestry the essential American
tradition and the philosophy of aristocratic planters.” Broun’s quote high-
lighted the story’s action (“It is a full, fast story. Knives flash and there are
two superb murders”) and Heyward’s unique sensibilities (“There is humor in the book, but the author never makes his Negroes funny”).45

After Porgy’s initial release, favorable quotations from reviewers and other authors dotted print advertisements and the jacket copy of later editions. All emphasized the novel’s African American characters or classified the work, a first novel, as a serious literary achievement; some argued that the former qualified the novel as the latter. In a September 1925 advertisement, Doran described Porgy as “a fine character study of a Southern negro” and touted the “rare understanding by an author who comes of an old Charleston family.” Other featured quotes included raves by Frances Newman (“undoubtedly the most admirable book about Southern negroes that I have ever read”) and Broun (“Heyward is sensitive to their emotion and understands to the full the tragedy of his characters”). Some reviewers noted the paucity of serious fiction dealing with African American characters and praised Porgy for helping to fill that void in American literature. Mary Roberts Rinehart, herself a best-selling author, praised Porgy as “an epic of a hitherto untouched side of American life. It has its roots in our soil and belongs among the permanent additions to our literature.” Virginia novelist Ellen Glasgow asserted that “nothing finer has occurred in American literature since ‘Uncle Remus’” and declared Porgy “a work of genius.” Even in its briefest advertisements, Doran promoted Porgy as “a magnificent novel of Negro life.”46

Reviews of Porgy unfailingly hailed the novel as unprecedented in its authentic and sympathetic portrayal of its African American characters. But the reviews were both consistent in their themes and remarkably revealing of personal—and more significantly, regional—assumptions about race and marginalized populations. Reviewers, particularly those writing for southern publications, used the novel as a springboard for confident assertions about the nature of the African race and even of other races; in praising Heyward’s insight and authority, they frequently invoked their own. Almost everyone, it seemed, knew what essential qualities characterized African Americans as a group and knew that Heyward had succeeded in conveying them. If Hughes, Du Bois, and other Harlem Renaissance writers were striving in 1925 to establish a “new Negro” in literature, Porgy’s rapturous reviewers for the most part embraced Heyward’s nostalgic depiction of the South’s “old Negro.”

Virtually all reviewers marveled at the verisimilitude of Heyward’s ostensibly fictional world. The Charleston Post’s review announced Porgy as a “Remarkable Analysis of the Negro’s Psychology” and credited Heyward with achieving “the difficult feat of seeing the negro character from its own point
of view.” The boosterish Post, Heyward’s hometown paper, was not alone in its assessment; the New York Times also praised Heyward’s “intimate and authentic” portrait of “his chosen community.” Words like “sympathy” and “understanding” appeared in numerous reviews, often coupled with descriptions of Heyward’s personal experience of African Americans. “He knows his people and knows his city,” asserted a New Orleans newspaper, and the Columbia State acknowledged his “deep and loving insight born of a lifelong familiarity and affection for the race.” To the Louisville Courier-Journal, the novel was “a realistic picture of everyday life,” and to the Norfolk Virginian-Pilot, it was “a fine, veracious tale.” The New Republic went so far as to claim that “Porgy may be counted as the Negro’s contribution to American literature as well as Mr. DuBose Heyward’s.” Countee Cullen, writing for the National Urban League’s journal, Opportunity, diverged from the consensus view of Heyward’s authenticity. Cullen, while praising the novel as “completely likable,” gently chided its inaccuracies of dialect.47

Many reviewers went beyond merely praising Heyward’s authenticity and elevated his literary accomplishment over those of previous generations of white authors who wrote about black characters. Virtually all white reviewers noted the singularity of Heyward’s novel, as if no black writer had ever penned anything about southern black people. (The sole exception, NAACP cofounder Mary White Ovington, cited the work of Charles Chesnutt.) Such casual erasure of black literary accomplishment gave white voices like Heyward’s disproportionate influence in the world of letters. Reviews in both southern and northern publications agreed with the Atlanta Journal’s assertion that “DuBose Heyward has told a story of the southern negro that has long waited for the proper interpreter.” Many reviews listed by name the white writers that Heyward had surpassed: Octavius Roy Cohen, Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, Joseph Beckham Cobb, Ronald Firbank, Thomas Stribling, Hugh Wiley, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. To many reviewers, Heyward’s most significant achievement was to elevate “the negro” above cheap humor. The Charlotte Observer lamented that “in fiction, the negro has always been caricatures. . . . As a race, the negro has been used as a clown to be played up by second-rate humorists.” The Charleston Post proclaimed of Porgy and his compatriots: “There is nothing about him of the old house-servant type to which Page and Harris accustomed us. . . . Still less do these negroes belong to the musical comedy variety which ingratiates itself by means of toothsome smiles and dislocated English.” Even Cullen agreed that “Mr. Heyward strikes the golden mean in his humorous

42 • Porgy, 1925
passages; he does not offend us with the buffoonery and burlesque of which we are rightfully sick and tired.”

Opinions differed as to how Heyward came by such authentic insight. The *Los Angeles News* attributed Heyward’s seriousness of purpose to his background, since “Heywood [sic] is a South Carolinian, and he has seen deeper than the average southerner.” Heywood Broun of the *New York World* believed that Heyward achieved his nuanced characterizations in spite of his aristocratic provenance, confiding in readers: “I was fully prepared for another of those condescending books about fine old black mammies and such like.” Ovington agreed, noting that “it is remarkable that he, a Charlestonian of family, should have gotten so close to the life of the Negro.” The northerners Broun and Ovington grasped Heyward’s larger philosophies of racial difference and saw in his racial perceptions a gesture toward acknowledging black equality. Ovington, echoing Heyward’s own nostalgic attitude, described his fictional characters as “descendants of slaves who are struggling upward. In a generation or two they will have left Catfish Row and become respectable, but then no poet will write of them.” Broun took up Heyward’s argument that, in many respects, African Americans could teach whites a thing or two about the enjoyment of life. If “the usual attitude of white writers in the South” was to explain difference as inferiority, he praised Heyward for finding “Negro life more colorful and spirited and vital than that of the white community.” Despite the fact that “no very flattering picture is painted of the people of Catfish Row . . . none of this is presented as the fruit of criminal tendency. . . . If the law is transgressed by these people, it is because they are more adventurous, more daring, more alive than the community which made the law.” Cullen, too, believed that Heyward’s novel “gives one the uncanny feeling that Negroes are human beings and that white and black southerners are brothers under the skin.”

If Heyward’s skilled evocation of the “alien quality” of African Americans suggested political progress to Broun, Cullen, and Ovington, to most reviewers it brought to mind only lengthy lists of racial stereotypes, minus any progressive inference. With remarkable consistency, reviewers for southern, northern, and national publications spotted, and elaborated on, the same putatively universal attributes of black behavior, temperament, and experience. To these reviewers, the residents of Catfish Row were primitive and exotic, animal-like in their behavior and instinctive emotional responses. *The Nation*’s review described the characters as “the swarming Negroes who inhabit the tenement called Catfish Row” and singled out such scenes as a
“full-blooded Negro dozing in atavistic calm . . . the primitive bestial fight; the hysteria of the funeral gathering.” The New York Times referred to “the casual manner of those childlike peoples,” and many others cited a tendency to superstition and religious ecstasy. According to the Columbia State, “In Porgy are blended the predominating characteristics of the Negro. . . . His religion, having nothing whatsoever to do with his reasoning powers, being simply an emotional outpouring, is a great comfort to him. He is often a leader in the ‘spirituals’ which do so much to assuage the grief or relieve the pent up feelings of primitive people.” The Roanoke News described the novel’s black characters as “cinctured with superstition, flooded with cacophonous colors and sounds beneath which there seems to flow an ancient and mysterious rhythm,” while the Atlanta Journal identified “spirituals, superstition, pageantry, passions” as chief among “the rich primitive colors which this material so abundantly affords.” The Charleston Post also identified Catfish Row as “a place of direct thinking and primitive instincts,” where Maria “exerts an influence . . . which recalls the ancient matriarchal rule of some African tribes.” Not just primitive superstition and ancient rhythms but also lawlessness characterized these fictional stand-ins for all African Americans. The Charlotte Observer decreed that “it is obvious that [Catfish Row] is the correct scene for a realistic darky story” because “there is crap shooting and murder in the story, as well as lust and worse crimes.” Once again, Ovington proved an exception among white reviewers, describing Catfish Row as a multidimensional place where “men gamble and women take dope, and babies are born and cared for tenderly and love is strong and sometimes faithful.”

Some reviewers saw Porgy, both the character and the novel, through the stereotype of black primitivism improved by contact with white civilization. The Charleston Post described the novel’s eponymous hero as a “savage . . . curiously crusted over with certain gentlenesses and suavities caught from the old-time city in which he was born.” The New Republic described Catfish Row as being as “primitive in feeling as the Congo and incongruously in contact with civilization,” while the Raleigh Observer agreed that the novel presented the “half barbaric strain that is a part of the African’s heritage, although it is veneered over by contact with the whites.” The Norfolk Virginian-Pilot thought the novel “suffers somewhat from stretches of sophisticated writing that seem at variance with the simplicity and primitive passion of its theme.” The New York Times recounted Porgy’s career as a beggar and circumstances that “compel him to adopt the hustling tactics of an alien philosophy. In spite of himself, Porgy has become a ‘go-getter,’” achieving precisely the
kind of capitalist success from which Heyward wished to shield him and his real-life counterparts.51

In the most pernicious blanket characterization of all, reviewers applauded Heyward for conveying “the peculiar mixture of tragedy and humor that characterizes the black man’s nature.” It was nearly impossible to avoid acknowledging that black people in general, and the people of Catfish Row specifically, suffered terribly at white hands. But by asserting that a forbearing temperament was intrinsic to African Americans, reviewers, like Heyward himself, were able to steer clear of the idea that such treatment called for racial justice. “It is a pitiful story, setting forth the pitiful condition of the people of whom he writes,” declared the Nashville Banner, “yet it has no little humor; it would hardly be possible to eliminate all humor from the South Carolina Negro.” As a race man, Porgy was a veritable Job, but according to a Savannah reviewer, “his philosophy of life, his grim acceptance of things as they are, with the familiar minor key characteristic of many of his race, together with a quiet humor and persistent cheerfulness, make him a lovable and very forgivable person.” Also forgiving Porgy for his suffering, the Columbia State observed that “he reconciles himself to his lot with the patient endurance typical of his race, but in his face there is a look of eternal waiting.” The reviewer then wondered idly, and with no little disingenuousness: “This is frequently noticeable with the Negro. It is a waiting for a release from some bondage of which we wot not?” To the New York Times, Heyward succeeded in expressing “an intimate and authentic sense of the dignity, the pathos, the unending chords of a folk melancholy,” all part of a “sympathetic and convincing interpretation of negro life.” To many reviewers, Porgy was an updated version of Stowe’s patient Uncle Tom.52

The commentators who made such confident claims about Heyward’s ability to convey an authentic story each relied on the belief that he or she understood what was essential and unique about African Americans as a race. Yet some also admitted the limits of their knowledge in an unintentional affirmation of Du Bois’s theory that African Americans lived behind what he poetically described as a veil, observant of white behavior but careful to remain concealed (a state of being that he also more pragmatically deemed “the defence of deception”). “Old Porgy is a character familiar to many Southerners,” intoned a Savannah newspaper, while the Louisville Courier-Journal remarked: “The negroes are more primitive than those that most of us know. . . . But they are as recognizable as negroes as they are real as men and women.” The Raleigh Observer commented that Heyward’s descriptions of the “state of religious exaltation” evident in the saucer burial scene
were akin to “standing outside a ‘meetin’ house,’ and watching the actual phenomenon take place.” Southerner Frances Newman, writing in the *New York Herald Tribune*, was a bit more cautious in asserting her own authority in racial matters. “I do not know whether or not Porgy’s emotions are emotions that a crippled Negro beggar could suffer and enjoy,” she wrote, “and I do not know whether or not the affection and the weakness of his Bess are ethnologically possible.” Yet she still concluded with some assurance: “Whether or not ‘Porgy’ is as much like life[,] and I feel that it is, it is very definitely art.” Carlotta Moffat wrote in the *Charleston News and Courier* that “it takes only about 200 pages for Mr. Heyward to make Catfish Row and its inhabitants as real to us as the negroes we know.” Yet Moffat frankly admitted that she did not know much, continuing: “All of us in the south realize that most of the time white people simply do not know what they are saying to each other and what they really think about things. There is something secretive in their attitude to us,” which Moffat speculated was “possibly caused by the gulf between the savage and the civilized man, that often brings us suddenly in our dealings with them up against a stone wall.” To the *Charleston Post* writer, they were “a people whose intimate psychology so often escapes us,” and the *Greenville (S.C.) News* characterized *Porgy* as offering “the cultured white” the ability to “level race barriers and penetrate to the heart of living nature by and through the mind of the uncultured black.” Cullen agreed that a certain veil stood between whites and blacks, offering this measured praise: “As far as any white man can understand a Negro’s feelings, Mr. Heyward scores; and inasmuch as there are depths in a black man’s mind totally inexcessable to the most adroit white plumbing, Mr. Heyward should regard his as a satisfactory performance.” Then, he deftly turned the tables on white reviewers’ assertions of Heyward’s accomplishment in conveying African American characters. Referring to the description of the white jailers’ callous disregard for their black female prisoners, Cullen noted that Heyward “understands white southerners better than most other white novelists do.”

Broad assumptions about black, white, and even Chinese racial characteristics appeared in reviews of *Porgy*, suggesting its power to tap into the racialized thinking that marked American society in the 1920s. If southern reviewers felt particularly confident in their pronouncements about essential African American nature, the reviewer for the *Los Angeles News* exhibited the same assurance in comparing Heyward’s black characters to his own assumptions about the Chinese. Citing as an example the cautious deceit with which black residents greet the white attorney, Alan Archdale, on his first visit to Catfish Row, the *Los Angeles News* claimed that “the manner of living of the
Negroes in Catfish Row is reminiscent of the life of any Chinatown.” As an oppressed minority group, African Americans were “Oriental in their outlook on life and they make the white people serve them, outwitting the police and the lawyers as the Chinese do. They are remarkable readers of human nature and instinctively know when the white people are for or against them.” 

_Porgy_ was, according to this reviewer, very much like _Ways That Are Wary_, a volume of short stories set in Chinatown published that same year. Ovington, too, saw a parallel, comparing Catfish Row’s reaction to white law enforcement—and white ignorance of what really happens in black neighborhoods—to a scene in the opera _L’Oracolo_, a 1905 tale of kidnapping, murder, madness, and opium in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Analogizing the segregation of two ethnic communities, she concluded that “Catfish Row is as far removed from the understanding of Charleston as Chinatown is from that of white San Francisco.” (Reviewers of the novel were not the only ones to assume a one-size-fits-all attitude toward racial difference; Heyward wryly recalled being told by his Hollywood employers that he was hired to write the screenplay for Pearl Buck’s _The Good Earth_ because “negroes were not a Caucasian people. Neither were Chinamen. I wrote understandingly of Negroes. It was obvious then that I would understand the Chinese.”)

_Porgy_’s scenes of black strategic dissembling in the face of white law enforcement resonated with many other reviewers as well. For southerners, they frequently served as evidence of the novel’s authentic portrait of African Americans; northern reviewers saw these same scenes as illustrations of white cruelty. For the _Raleigh Observer_, “readers who are familiar with negroes continually run across passages strongly reminiscent of personal encounters,” such as the stonewall of feigned ignorance that greets the white Alan Archdale on his first visit to Catfish Row. Carlotta Moffat agreed that “the description, by the way, of the white lawyer’s visit to the Row and the sudden cessation of its activities is one of the best things in the book in its knowledge of negro character.” To the _Nashville Banner_, that scene evidenced dubious racial morality, blacks’ “cupidity before the law in their loyalty to their own color against the whites. No Negro, whatever his sin toward some other negro, need ever fear a witness of his own color. . . . The consequence was the innocent and helpless in Cat Fish Row suffered cruelly at the hands of their own race.” Not surprisingly, Broun made a very different moral judgment of the same behavior, writing that “in the few contacts between whites and Negroes which occur in the book it is always the white man who meets the problem stupidly and by set rule. Intuition and shrewdness are endowed wholly to the black men of the book.” Broun also praised Hey-
ward for “presenting the Negro community as behaving in an intelligent and civilized fashion in spite of the incredible stupidity of the white law which surrounds them.” Ovington also saw black characters who were “all but overflowing with life,” while the novel’s white characters “seem thin-blooded and mean”; and the *New York Times* deemed that “the interventions of the whites are often meaningless, often disastrous, always impertinent. Mr. Heyward establishes by implications an antithesis in civilization which is not wholly to the glory of the white race.”

One thing that southern and northern reviewers could agree on was that Heyward’s novel was refreshingly free from polemics or politics. Ovington praised his “detachment from propaganda, his sure intuitions,” and the *Raleigh Observer* concluded that “‘Porgy’ is one of the few books dealing with negro life that the South will accept as portraying negroes rather than whites dressed in negroes’ clothes.” Perhaps that was because, in the opinion of the *Charleston News and Courier*’s Moffat, “all of the white people are not mean to them. Some of them are, but some others are very good to them. To southern people that is one of the most convincing things about the book. Mr. Heyward, we feel, is writing about life, not promoting a theory of society.” The *Atlanta Journal* saw in *Porgy* “a true picture of the attitude existing between the races in the south.” Even Broun, despite his incisive commentary on how Heyward’s novel depicted southern whites, concluded that “it is pretty generally free from propaganda.” The editor of *The Bookman*, in recommending the novel, described *Porgy* as “not a Negro problem novel” but rather “simply a character study done with loving care.”

*Porgy* was DuBose Heyward’s first novel, and it went a long way toward establishing the parameters of his literary career. In June 1931 *The Bookman* summarized that career in its “Authors in Epigram” feature with the verse “Haunted by darkies / who sing while they toil / he raised a renascence / on whiter soil.” The success of both the novel and play *Porgy*, followed by the success of his 1929 novel, *Mamba’s Daughters*, established Heyward as a respected literary voice who depicted African American characters with sensitivity and authority. None of his subsequent novels achieved the critical acclaim accorded to *Porgy* and *Mamba’s Daughters*, and, not coincidentally, none of them fictionalized Charleston’s African American population. Were it not for George Gershwin’s interest in his first novel, Heyward’s body of work would have faded rather quickly into relative obscurity.

In an age of longing for both the “new Negro” and the “old Negro,” reviewers’ insistence that *Porgy* was refreshingly apolitical on questions of race amounted to polite shortsightedness, a narrow (and genteel) assumption that
only blunt didacticism counted as a political message. The political implications of Heyward’s tale were subtle but powerful, inducing critics with a range of opinions on racial segregation and justice to connect the novel’s characters and plot to their own experiences and beliefs. After a decade of widespread migration by African Americans out of the South (not to mention the arrival of unprecedented numbers of European immigrants widely understood to be of non-Anglo-Saxon racial stock), northern commentators saw racial difference as a national, and not solely a southern, question. Few commentators, North or South, doubted the authenticity of Porgy’s character and plot details, which nonetheless reinforced a number of deeply rooted American prejudices about African Americans. Two stereotypes had subtle, yet particularly pernicious, political implications: the idea that African Americans possessed an intrinsic mix of pathos and humor with which they endured their social, political, and economic deprivation; and the notion that there was a single “race personality” dominated by primitive impulses. However sympathetic the characters and situations in Porgy may have seemed in 1925, its reinforcement of those ideas impeded progress toward equality for African Americans.

Two reviews, penned by Emily Clark and Theophilus Lewis, staked out the extreme ends of the spectrum between “old Negro” and “new Negro” embodied in critical discussions of Porgy. They are notable for using especially candid language to lay bare the political and cultural tensions that most reviewers evaded. Clark, a colleague of Heyward and a proponent of southern regional literature, was the editor of The Reviewer. If Heyward’s reflections on the Great Migration and the vanishing population of South Carolina’s “old Negroes” struck an elegiac chord, Clark’s were downright hostile. In praising her friend’s novel, Clark expressed her unequivocal anxiety about “the yellow folk of Harlem, who for the moment overflow into Broadway and the pages of Vanity Fair” and “who at present are so chic . . . in both American and English literature.” She contrasted these strange figures, whom she dubbed “alien souls . . . exotic creatures [who] bewilder and alarm me,” to “the Negroes that I know, and sometimes love,” who are, in Heyward’s rendition, “as substantial and legitimate as any white folk.” There is nothing authentic or worth literary scrutiny among the new, northern Negroes; “they are an excrescence, no more a legitimate subject in contemporary literature than the two-headed boy in the circus is a legitimate hero for a novel.” In Clark’s estimation, African Americans were not only unsuitable subjects for fiction; they also were inept creators of it because “black folks themselves . . . do not delve into human motives or investigate their own or other mental
processes.” Heyward, by contrast, had created “a presentation as authentic as any we are ever likely to have” of “the mystery, the simplicity, the oriental elements combined with the extreme homeliness of the Southern Negro that we have known and will soon no longer know.”

Theophilus Lewis was precisely one of the “alien souls” who alarmed Clark so, an African American drama critic with a caustic style and a sharp sense of cultural politics. Writing for The Messenger (a publication cocreated by black labor leader A. Philip Randolph), Lewis’s review of Porgy (which appeared alongside a review of Alain Locke’s The New Negro) dismantled the prevailing critical response to the novel and its authenticity. Lewis began by describing a particularly effective fictional portrait of a black man, Batouala, a 1921 novel by Afro-Caribbean francophone author René Maran. Like Heyward, Lewis saw a positive attribute in what was usually ascribed a negative racial trait: Batouala’s “keen appreciation of the delights of lassitude, his ability to make meditation an engrossing and mellow diversion and his reluctance to dally with work unless it promised some immediate ministration to the wants of the soul.” Also like Heyward, he subscribed to the idea of a race personality among African-derived people. Lewis claimed Batouala’s “mental traits” as his own and those of “every black man [he had] ever heard airing his thoughts.”

But unlike his reaction to the “familiar” and “convincing” Batouala, Lewis concluded: “If Porgy were a genuine negro, I ought to be able to detect some trace of kinship between him and myself”; and he declared that he found “Porgy every whit as strange . . . as Al Jolson or Florian Slappy.” For Lewis, Heyward could never write convincingly of black characters because he was white. A racial essentialist, Lewis believed “Maran was able to make Batouala a virile and convincing character because he had shared the major part of his biological background, and so became privy to numerous little nuances of living and untranslatable thoughts handed down by their common ancestors.” Heyward, by contrast, “possessed no such common fund of hereditary notions” and was left to “substitut[e] his own feelings for the alien feelings which baffle him.” The result was akin to “attempting to fit one’s teeth in the sockets of another man’s jawbone.”

Lewis also took aim at the critics’ praise for Heyward’s scenes of strategic dishonesty by the black residents of Catfish Row in the face of white authority, arguing that any minority group will react the same way “in the face of superior and hostile odds.” Of such behavior, Lewis noted: “No doubt it is just as germane to the Negro problem as it is to the Irish question. It is no less relevant to the Jewish question. I have seen many an isolated Nordic,
overawed by a mob of wrathful shines, conceal his habitual arrogance and eat humble pie.” As for the novel itself, rather than the intellectual assumptions with which other reviewers had greeted it, Lewis reserved his dismissive consideration of it for his review’s penultimate paragraph. He concluded of *Porgy* that “aside from its false picture of Negro life, it is not so bad” and described it as an effective melodrama with “a certain wistfulness woven in the tale which gives it a novel and seductive charm.”

Lewis’s invocation of Al Jolson and Florian Slappy—white performers best known for their blackface stage acts—and his recognition of *Porgy*’s crowd-pleasing sentimentality was prescient. A mere two years after the release of the novel, the theatrical adaptation of *Porgy* (written by Heyward and his wife, playwright Dorothy Kuhns Heyward) debuted at New York City’s Theatre Guild to critical acclaim. The play featured a cast that was made up of virtually all black actors—a relatively new phenomenon on Broadway stages, where African Americans rarely performed in dramatic roles. The staging of the play, and the critical responses to it, continued the political and cultural dialogue about authentic black stories and the authority to tell them, a debate that was made all the more complicated by the presence of the black actors creating *Porgy*’s scenes and characters.
This page intentionally left blank
Catfish Row, Heyward’s fictional name for a house located at 89–91 Church Street in the oldest section of the city, had its physical origins in Charleston’s earliest decades and reflected the city’s history of slavery and emancipation. Located three blocks from the southern tip of the peninsula between the Ashley and Cooper Rivers, the blocks that became Church Street were part of the settlement established by the Carolina Proprietors in 1680, which remained a jumble of residential and commercial streets through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Slave labor in a small and crowded city meant that black and white residents of Charleston lived in close proximity, a defining characteristic of the city during more than a century of slavery and even into emancipation. From 1820 to 1850, slaves made up half of the city’s population, and the majority of Charleston’s population was of African descent from 1720 to the eve of the Civil War in 1860. Not only did urban slaves, who were primarily domestic servants and artisans, frequently live in or near their owners’ homes, but their tasks took them onto the city’s streets every day. One white minister described the city’s slaves as “divided out among us and mingled up with us, and we with them, in a thousand ways.” Swedish visitor Frederika Bremer was less affectionate when she noted during an 1850 visit to the city that “Negros swarm the street.”

Many slaves lived in the homes of their owners, while others lived in courts or alleys that cut through existing city blocks and were lined with wooden row houses and tenements. Downtown Charleston had several of these alleys. Given the proximity of the enslaved to their masters, this part of the city was racially mixed during the era of slavery. Much of that residential integration
Alfred R. Waud, “Zion” School for Colored Children, Charleston, South Carolina, Harper’s Weekly, 15 December 1866. Black Charlestonians demonstrated a commitment to education both before and after the Civil War. They defied antebellum laws that made reading and writing a crime for slaves, and after the war, they established schools like the Zion School for Colored Children, notable for being entirely led and staffed by African Americans. (Courtesy of American Social History Project, Graduate Center, CUNY)
continued past the Civil War and into the early twentieth century, as former
slaves continued to occupy this downtown alley housing, now paying rent.
In addition, between the end of the war and 1880, the black population of
Charleston increased by more than half as emancipated slaves moved into
the city seeking jobs, schools, lost kin, and protection against the white vio-
ience to which isolated rural areas exposed them. Most of these freedpeople,
poor and experienced only in agricultural labor, lived in crowded, unhealthy
shanties. Much to the chagrin of white families, some of them settled in
the war-torn city’s abandoned white homes. An illustrated travel account
from 1875 described some downtown streets where “here and there the resi-
dence of some former aristocrat is now serving as an abode for a dozen negro
families.” White Charlestonian Francis Parker described her husband’s shock
when he returned to the city only to find that “their beautiful house had been
occupied by Charles Macbeth’s plantation negroes, with their pigs & poul-
try. They were cooking in the drawing room, & as you may imagine every-
thing was abused & soiled.” Mr. Parker required the assistance of an armed
soldier to reclaim his home.3 Decades later, Heyward was clearly taken with
the poetry of this displacement, and the early pages of his novel include this
description of the decaying grandeur that was one such home:

Catfish Row, in which Porgy lived, was not a row at all, but a great brick
structure that lifted its three stories about the three sides of a court. The
fourth side was partly closed by a high wall, surmounted by jagged edges
of broken glass set firmly in old lime plaster, and pierced in its center by a
wide entrance-way. Over the entrance there still remained a massive grill
of Italian wrought iron, and a battered capital of marble surmounted each
of the lofty gate-posts. The court itself was paved with large flag-stones,
which even beneath the accumulated grime of a century, glimmered with
faint and varying pastel shades in direct sunlight. The south wall, which
was always in shadow, was lichenized from pavement to rotting gutter; and
opposite, the northern face, unbroken except by rows of small-paned win-
dows, showed every color through its flaking stucco, and, in summer, a
steady blaze of scarlet from rows of geraniums that bloomed in old vege-
table tins upon every window-sill.

Within the high-ceilinged rooms, with their battered colonial mantels
and broken decorations of Adam designs in plaster, governors had come
and gone, and ambassadors of kings had schemed and danced. Now be-
fore the gaping entrance lay only a narrow, cobbled street, and beyond,
a tumbled wharf used by negro fishermen. Only the bay remained un-
changed. Beyond the litter of the wharf, it stretched to the horizon, taking its mood from the changing skies; always different—invariably the same.4

For Heyward, this house was a mournful and potent symbol of the “lost cause,” an embodiment of the material, financial, and—chiefly—psychological losses that elite white families had experienced with the end of slavery. He had not needed to look far for inspiration: this “Catfish Row” was located next door to the home once occupied by his own elite ancestors. It, too, had fallen into disrepair by the 1920s and had at one point served as tenement housing for African Americans. Known as the Heyward-Washington House, it became the first project of historic preservationists in Charleston, who began restoring the home in 1929, four years after the publication of *Porgy.*5

If urban slavery in Charleston resulted in slaves and masters living side by side in the lower part of the city, African Americans who could choose where to establish their residences responded to that pattern by living further uptown, amid Irish and German immigrants on “the Neck.” (These included both free African Americans and those slaves whose owners, tired of crowding their slaves into their households, allowed them to live elsewhere.) Those who could afford to build their own homes did so on the Neck, establishing a black community there starting in the 1830s. To some whites, such an autonomous community appeared menacing. In 1856 grand jury testimony about one part of the Neck described “negro rows” remarkably similar to the Catfish Row described by Heyward and realized by generations of set designers. This witness raised the alarm that “as many as fifty to one hundred negroes, or persons of color, are sometimes residing, shut out from the public street by a gate, all the buildings having but one common yard, and not a single white person on the premises.” Even worse, “the neighborhoods of these rows are constantly disturbed by the fights, quarrels, and the turbulence of the inmates.” Beginning during Reconstruction, African Americans increasingly came to live on the Neck and in other uptown neighborhoods. Because of this population shift, by the time Heyward’s early twentieth-century Golden Age arrived, Charleston’s downtown neighborhoods, while still racially mixed, were whiter than they had ever been.6

As with the city’s demography and residential geography, the labor performed by *Porgy*’s African American characters was also rooted in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Charleston. Most of the city’s enslaved adults were domestic servants; an 1848 employment survey revealed that among slaves with identified duties, 78 percent were listed as “house servants.” Many male slaves were hired out, either by their owners or by them-
selves, to perform a range of skilled and unskilled trades. By the nineteenth century, there was no unskilled or skilled occupation in which slaves did not participate; the city of Charleston even maintained a number of slave fire companies, which supported and supplemented the work of the city’s white volunteer fire companies.7 Black peddlers were everywhere visible on the streets of Charleston, and Africans also dominated the waterfront and fishing trades; as early as 1770, a city ordinance noted that “the business of Fishing is principally carried on by Negroes, Mulattoes, and Mestizoes.” Male slaves, however improbably, also plied the city’s waterways as sailors, boatmen, and ferry pilots. In addition to working as domestic servants, female slaves and free African American women worked as seamstresses or washerwomen. Beginning in the eighteenth century, many market vendors, ubiquitous on the city’s streets, were black women.8 All of these occupations gave slaves opportunities to be out and about in the city, to interact with each other and with whites. During slavery, black men, both free and enslaved, dominated so many skilled trades that white workingmen frequently complained of unfair competition.9

Heyward populated his Catfish Row with stevedores, fishermen, street vendors, and domestic servants—an accurate reflection of the job categories held by African Americans during slavery and after emancipation, although his eye for the picturesque sometimes clouded his recognition of the realities of such jobs. (The obvious exception is his title character, Porgy, who is a beggar. While based on an actual African American man who was a familiar presence on the streets of downtown Charleston, it is nonetheless an atypical occupation and functions in the context of the novel to make its black practitioner completely dependent on the generosity and goodwill of elite white Charlestonians.) Black fishermen, fishing in crews of two to seven to a boat, were known colloquially in Charleston as the “mosquito fleet,” which numbered as many as fifty boats during the late nineteenth century. Heyward offers a vivid description of the mosquito fleet arriving in the harbor after an unusually large catch, using a level of detail no doubt born of repeated observation. In Porgy, the fishermen of the fleet prepare to go out the next day as well despite gathering storm clouds, setting up the loss of Jake and his crew aboard the Seagull—a major plot point for Heyward, though an unlikely mistake for seasoned fishermen to make.10 Heyward’s description of the stevedores of Catfish Row focused on their “great size,” “vast physical strength,” and the seasonal slowdown of work they were enjoying during “the languor of a Southern May.” Heyward also notes that the stevedores “earn[ed] more money than the others,” but his novel does not explain that
they achieved those higher wages because of a remarkable labor militancy that began during Reconstruction, when they formed the Longshoreman’s Protective Union Association, and continued through numerous successful strikes into the 1880s. (A major motivation for organizing for higher wages was precisely the irregularity of their work, which Heyward saw as the context for a charming indolence but for the workers meant that even reasonable daily wages left them with little pay over the course of a year.) Wharf workers were not the only African American laborers organizing unions and staging strikes during the early years of emancipation; coopers, carpenters, tailors, cigar makers, brick masons, and journeymen mechanics also formed labor organizations, all attempting to seize the moment to set the terms of their work in previously impossible ways.

The trade in enslaved Africans was essential to Charleston’s wealth and prominence as the fourth-largest city in British North America. Nearly 93,000 slaves were imported into South Carolina between 1706 and 1775—more than into any other colony—with most of those entering in the two decades leading up to the American Revolution. Between 1804 and 1807, South Carolina reopened the foreign slave trade; it was the only state in the new nation to do so. During that time, an estimated 40,000 enslaved Africans disembarked from the gruesome holds of slave ships onto Sullivan’s Island, at the mouth of Charleston Harbor. Between 1820 and 1860, a substantial majority of white Charlestonians owned slaves. The monetary value of the enslaved people themselves and the businesses surrounding the transactions of slave sales—auctioneers, financiers, traders, newspaper advertisements—created enormous wealth for white Charlestonians.

This massive influx gave South Carolina, particularly the coastal Low Country, one of the most Africanized slave populations in the United States. During the colonial period, only about 8 percent of slaves imported into Charleston were shipped elsewhere, and South Carolina slave owners had strong preferences for Africans from particular ethnic backgrounds. The isolation of the Low Country, particularly the Sea Islands, ensured that African religious and cultural practices became less diluted over generations, and the slaves there became known as “Gullahs.” Gullah language, which Heyward attempted to render in Porgy’s dialogue as a quaint regionalism, was in fact a linguistic product of the eighteenth-century slave trade, an amalgam of the languages of enslaved Africans, Portuguese slave traders, and the English/Jamaican patois of the Caribbean. Gullah dialect gave slaves from different African linguistic traditions a common means of communication, and
their relative isolation on Sea Island plantations lessened their need to learn English to communicate with their largely absentee owners.14

Gullah slaves in Charleston and the surrounding Low Country practiced a religion that incorporated elements of Christianity into African beliefs and practices, a combination that Heyward renders accurately in Porgy. Their blend of African spiritual practices and Christianity came about in part because colonial Charleston’s white citizens, nominally Anglican, were not a particularly pious group, and it was well into the nineteenth century before they came to accept the notion that instructing slaves in Christianity could reinforce their own dominance as masters. Yet white attitudes toward promoting Christianity among the enslaved were always tinged with fear of insurrection. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the state passed laws restricting the right of slaves to practice Christianity, forbidding them to hold religious meetings after dark. In Charleston, African Americans had some ability to worship in Christian churches. In 1815 the city’s Methodist church included more than 3,500 members, and African Americans soon after established their own African Methodist church. But city officials frequently harassed that church, arresting its ministers and congregants, and they finally closed it down in 1821. The following year, white fears about religious instruction appeared to be realized when Denmark Vesey, a free African American inspired by Christian beliefs, and the African-born slave known as Gullah Jack were arrested and executed along with numerous others who were believed by whites to have been plotting a slave uprising.15

If the practice of Gullah religion was frequently under siege, its syncretic African/Christian worldview emphasized collective spirit rather than individual experience and held comfortably at once the notion of Christian salvation, the presence of evil spirits, and the power of conjuration to combat them—a worldview summed up in the Gullah saying “Love God and fear the devil.” This mix of Christian devotion and respect for the supernatural is evident in Heyward’s descriptions of Catfish Row’s response to death and disease. At the funeral for the murdered Robbins, Heyward describes an obviously Christian funeral, with one mourner invoking Saint Peter and the group singing a spiritual about “Leanin’ on my Lord / Who died on Calvary.” Unlike a more decorous white service, however, at this graveyard scene “the air was stabbed by scream on scream,” and at the funeral’s conclusion, the mourners stampede out of the graveyard, believing that the last one remaining there would be the next person to die. Similarly, when Bess is sick, Porgy both prays with the devoutly Christian Serena and arranges for a
“conjure woman” on one of the islands to cast a spell for her recovery. Heyward also acknowledges the African cultural practices that survived slavery and persisted into his fictional Catfish Row when he describes a group of black women parading through the streets of downtown Charleston on their way to boats that will take them to Kittiwah Island; the women are clothed in “scarlet, purple, orange, flamingo, emerald; wild, clashing, unbelievable discords; yet, in their steady flow before the eye, possessing a strange, dominant rhythm that reconciled them to each other and made them unalterably right.”16

Critics almost universally understood the novel and play versions of *Porgy* to be a product of Heyward’s close proximity to African Americans, and indeed the novel brims with finely wrought descriptions derived from firsthand observation. Daily contact between white elites like Heyward and African American slaves had been a hallmark of Charleston since the city’s beginnings, as was a particular brand of white denial about the brutal realities of the slave system from which they benefited. The intimacy of slaves and their masters was such that Daniel Huger Smith, writing a memoir of his childhood in antebellum Charleston, could reach back over more than fifty years to name every slave and their main area of work for both of his grandmothers’ households. Yet the power of white denial about slavery caused him to refer to them as “servants,” not slaves. According to Smith, “every family of importance” took sufficient pride in their human property to outfit them in custom-tailored livery, making their ownership visible while the slaves were abroad in the city.17

What these slave owners did not want urban proximity to make visible to their neighbors, however, were the violent punishments that were necessary to keep slaves in bondage. Because urban life was less private than plantation life, many urban slave owners were reluctant to undercut their reputations for paternalism by being overheard punishing their slaves in their own homes. Charleston (and other southern cities) had a public workhouse where owners could send slaves to be “corrected” for twenty-five cents; an 1807 law limited punishments to no more than twenty lashes, administered no more than twice per week. According to at least one late eighteenth-century description of the “sugar house,” as the workhouse was then apparently known, it contained “dreadful machinery” for punishing slaves and a “viewing bench” so that “spectators [could] regale themselves with a view of the agony of suffering humanity.” After the alleged Denmark Vesey uprising in 1822, the city abandoned this “reasonable” approach to punishment and added a tread-
mill where slaves’ arms were fastened above their heads and they suffered whippings if they failed to keep up with the machine’s pace. Charleston’s two public workhouses averaged over 150 “corrections” per month during the 1850s. Smith recalled that “the jurisdiction of the master over the slave for small offences did not cease in the city, but the punishment was inflicted in an orderly way by a police official at a public institution called the workhouse.” The slavery-era workhouse evolved into the Jim Crow-era prison, depicted by Heyward as oppressively hot, “a steel cage, which resembled a large dog-pound . . . [where] an almost unbreathable stench clogged the atmosphere.” With a history, dating back to slavery, of white city officials meting out disproportionate punishments to African Americans, Heyward’s black characters and the city’s actual black residents in the early twentieth century had a justifiable suspicion of white law enforcement, regardless of the situation.

Enslaved Africans and free African Americans in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Charleston experienced contact with the white world to a greater degree than most slaves, who labored in rural isolation. Male slaves who practiced trades, vendors, and laundresses were able to move around the city relatively free of white supervision, and most slaves lived in their owners’ homes or close by. A large proportion of urban slaves worked as domestic servants, experiencing particularly intimate contact with whites on a daily basis, and those who were hired out interacted with a variety of white supervisors. Many had opportunities to earn money for their labor, to indulge in liquor, to adopt European cultural habits, and to engage in interracial sex. Interracial mixing in grog shops caused no little civic anxiety in white Charleston during the mid-nineteenth century: twice the city’s grand jury argued that such sites of interracial liquor consumption should be closed because “the unrestrained intercourse and indulgence of familiarities between the black and white . . . are destructive of the respect and subserviency which our laws recognize as due from the one to the other and which form an essential feature in our institutions.” In short, many of Charleston’s slaves were closely familiar with the daily behaviors and expectations of whites and were able to carve out a measure of autonomy for themselves. They used this knowledge and independence to resist enslavement and oppression in the ways available to them. One of those strategies was to flee; runaway-slave ads in Charleston often described the public setting of the slave’s trade or noted that the absconded was “well known in the city,” a sign that for Charleston’s slaves, visibility was not necessarily the same as surveillance. Another strategy, short of
running away, was an attitude of self-assurance (seen by whites as impudence or insolence), which was documented in visitors’ accounts and descriptions in runaway ads.21

_Porgy’s_ African American characters demonstrate this self-assurance and knowledge of how to deal with Charleston’s white residents in the few situations when Heyward brings the two groups into contact. The circumstances of such meetings bolster Heyward’s picture of white paternalism, as practiced by certain Charleston families, but also make a case for black dishonesty as a valid (and highly effective) strategy in the face of the city’s abusive white police force. Porgy faces down an armed and angry white police officer with an unflinching lie about his whereabouts on the night of Robbins’s murder, a lie that keeps him out of jail. Similarly, Serena and two other women convincingly feign illness as an alibi to the frustration of white detectives seeking information about Crown’s murder, while Porgy and Bess stonewall the detectives with straight-faced denials of Porgy’s guilt. When the attorney Alan Archdale, the novel’s only named white character, appears in Catfish Row, a similar reaction occurs, as residents withdraw from their activities, leaving “the protective curtain of silence which the negro draws about his life when the Caucasian intrudes” to hang “almost tangibly in the air.” As soon as Archdale identifies himself as an attorney for the Rutledge family, who had owned Serena’s father and on whom she called for help in freeing Peter from police custody, all previous denials that anyone named Porgy lived there were replaced by a warm welcome. Strategic deception is not the only tool available to Catfish Row’s residents. Porgy uses flattery and humor to ingratiate himself with the whites from whom he draws his begging income; Heyward even has him acknowledge that “when nigger mek de buckra laugh, den he know he done won.”22

One key strategy of resistance to white dominance that Heyward chooses not to show is literacy. In fact, he ridicules it: the only literate black character, the ersatz lawyer Simon Frasier, is a con artist who sells fraudulent divorces to gullible African Americans. But efforts to gain literacy and education were a hallmark of Charleston’s black population during both slavery and freedom. The independence and mobility of urban life provided slaves with widespread access to the printed word and many opportunities for education, a fact that alarmed whites. In 1800 Charleston’s City Council, frustrated that “the law heretofore enacted for the government of slaves, free negroes, mulattoes, and mestizoes, have been found insufficient for keeping them in due subordination,” authorized the police to forcibly disperse any gatherings “for the purpose of mental instruction” of the city’s African American popu-
lation. Twenty-six years later, the Charleston City Council was still fighting its losing battle against slave literacy, this time declaring it “incompatible with public safety” because it would enable slaves “to carry on illicit traffic, to communicate privately among themselves, and to evade those regulations that are intended to prevent confederation among them.” Defying the laws that prohibited their education, some slaves maintained secret schools, hired free African Americans to tutor them, or learned to read at church. In 1742 the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts opened the Charleston Negro School and used two slaves, purchased as children and taught to read, to teach other slaves; enrollment was as high as seventy students in 1755, and children attended during the day while adult slaves attended at night. Free African Americans in the city established the Brown Fellowship Society in 1790, in part to provide schools for African American children, and went on to establish other similar organizations in the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century (such as the Minor’s Moralist Society) whose purpose was to sponsor schools for black children. According to the 1850 census, an astonishingly low 1 percent of the free black population of Charleston could neither read nor write. Restrictive legislation was no match for the motivated black learners of Charleston; even in 1859, after many decades’ worth of attempts to limit educational opportunities for even free African Americans, a slaveholder indigently observed “the crowds of black children who throng our streets every morning on their way to school, with satchels well filled with books.”

This strong tradition of education among Charleston’s free African Americans continued after emancipation and expanded to include the newly freed slaves. Together, they established and paid for schools; the first of these opened in March 1865 (mere weeks after the city’s mayor surrendered to Union forces) and served both white and black students. Charleston’s black population sacrificed mightily to attend and financially support the chronically underfunded schools, and literacy rates among the city’s African Americans reflected their extraordinary efforts, climbing from 45 percent in 1870 to 70 percent by 1900. The first schools to open after the war’s end served 1,200 black students and between 200 and 300 white students, children of “loyal” white German and Irish immigrants (who nonetheless insisted that their children not occupy the same classrooms as the African American students). When financial support from white northern missionary societies waned, black parents paid for books, supplies, and tuition. While many white northerners came to the Reconstruction-era South to teach the emancipated slaves, most teachers of freed slaves were other
African Americans. In Charleston, this corps of teachers came largely from the city’s free black population, which included families who could date their freedom back to the colonial era. This segment of Charleston’s African American population is conspicuously absent from Heyward’s Porgy—no black characters are educated or practicing professional occupations—yet they were a significant force in Charleston’s history. Charleston’s free black population originated in the eighteenth century, with slaves who were emancipated by their owners, slaves who purchased their own freedom, and an influx of Haitians during the early 1790s. The number of free African Americans in Charleston doubled between 1790 and 1800 (rising from 3.5 to 4.8 percent of the city’s overall population), and from 1800 to 1860 they ranged between 5 and 8 percent of the population. Largely made up of skilled and semiskilled tradesmen and their families, Charleston’s free African Americans also included a handful of slave owners. Despite their economic differences, they all inhabited the precarious space between enslavement and freedom, living proof of African American capability in a society ruled by the dogmas of white supremacy. Within that space, however treacherous, they were able to build the schools, charitable associations, businesses, and churches that helped to sustain African American community life during and after slavery. After emancipation, such organizations and their members participated in newly available political opportunities and organized campaigns to challenge segregation.

What Heyward omits about free African Americans and their descendants, Mamie Garvin Fields supplies with vivid abundance in her memoir of life as a member of Charleston’s black middle class. Born Mamie Garvin in Charleston in 1888, Fields grew up as proud and knowledgeable about her family’s lineage as any of Heyward’s peers. Her family life illustrated the tenacious commitment to respectability, and the occasionally tenuous economic status, of middle-class African Americans in the era of Jim Crow. Her father, a carpenter, refused to allow his wife and daughters to work as domestics in white households. But when the struggle to pay for high school tuition for all of the girls became too much (there were no public high schools for black students in Charleston), Mamie and her mother journeyed north to work in service to a family in New Jersey. Septima Poinsette Clark was born ten years after Fields and went on to become a teacher and civil rights activist. She similarly recalled her parents’ refusal to allow her or her sisters to work in domestic service in private homes or hotels, determined not to expose them to the sexual exploitation at the hands of white men that was common in such workplaces.
Fields and other family members belonged to a number of the formal and informal civic, professional, religious, and social associations that sustained the city’s African Americans. Fields’s father and husband were both members of trade unions, and she viewed unions as “one of our civic organizations” in the black community. Many of the social associations began as mutual aid to ensure support for members who were sick and proper funeral services when members died. Fields also described the private “parlor societies” that functioned similarly; at meetings of the Lily, to which her grandmother belonged, “they used to open with a song (every club had its special song) and pray. Then they took up the dues. Since they always had some sick people to pay out, somebody reported on that. Everybody would give a little bit for the dead and, after that, meet awhile. At the end they would sing another devotion.”30 Some of these organizations manifested the class and color consciousness prevalent among Charleston’s African Americans during this period. This was a community that distinguished between those who had descended from families that were free during slavery (known as “bona fide free” or “free issue”) and those whose ancestors had been slaves (known as “sot free”). The Brown Fellowship Society, founded as a mutual aid society in 1790 and later renamed the Century Fellowship Society, was an example of these distinctions in action; membership required both a steep fee and, for most members, light skin. Some historians argue that the onset of severe segregation in the late nineteenth century mitigated such distinctions and forced African Americans to recognize their shared situation and act collectively against it.31 But Fields recalls that such distinctions, in practice, even extended to the Avery Normal Institute, a pillar of black Charleston established during Reconstruction that educated generations of black professionals, including many teachers, and served as a focus of educational and cultural life. Fields, darker skinned than her siblings, refused to attend Avery because she believed that having darker skin “kept you from being invited to parties. And it kept you back academically. I heard right along that if you were black, you couldn’t get school honors, no matter how well you studied.”32 Such social tensions within Charleston’s black community were no doubt real, but the abundance of organizations that brought African Americans together for education, mutual support, and sociability are evidence of a population that was hardly passive or dangerously divided in the face of white supremacy.

Heyward affectionately lampoons black religious and associational life with his comic portrait of the parade of members of the “Sons and Daughters of Repent Ye Saith the Lord” through the streets of Charleston. At the
end of the Civil War, Charleston’s black community wasted no time in establishing their own houses of worship; in May and June 1865, black members of the city’s Baptist and Methodist churches established their own congregations, and the national African Methodist Episcopal Church had also begun organizing new outposts in Charleston. As with schools, the freedpeople undertook great effort and sacrifice to build and support these new churches, and by 1877 Charleston’s white churches no longer included any black worshippers. Black churches and religious societies were a center of community life during the Reconstruction era and after. The religious societies, whose elaborate names likely inspired Heyward, included Mary and Martha, the Rising Sons and Daughters of Bethlehem Star, and the Sons and Daughters of Zion Number Two; there were also numerous nonreligious fraternal organizations. All of these associations sponsored parties, concerts, banquets, picnics, and parades. Some public celebrations and parades carried political meanings. The city’s African Americans celebrated emancipation with a giant parade on 29 March 1865, with thousands of adults and schoolchildren marching with signs and the tools of their trades, and they continued to celebrate Emancipation Day (1 January in commemoration of Lincoln’s signing of the Emancipation Proclamation) with parades for years to come. From Reconstruction into the early twentieth century, black churches organized the city’s only Fourth of July celebrations, which white residents pointedly avoided. And Fields recalled the city’s first—and last—Labor Day parade, when disorganized white workers were upstaged by the carefully planned and choreographed marching of the black workers relegated by segregation to the rear of the parade. Heyward’s fictional parade ended at the city’s waterfront, where the assembled African Americans boarded a boat to Kittiwah Island for a picnic. In some respects, his scene captures the essence of what Fields fondly recalls as large, lavish, church-sponsored picnics at a rented hall known as the Alhambra, across the Cooper River in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. Fields, however, adds one pertinent detail absent from Heyward’s fictionalization: the picnics took place across the river because segregation ensured that there were no public spaces in Charleston available to large groups of African Americans, so “for a big picnic, we had to go in the country.”

In the pages of Porgy, the parade of African Americans through the streets of Charleston is so spectacular that “the aristocratic matrons broke the ultimate canon of the social code and peered through front windows at the procession as it swept flamboyantly across the town.” Heyward’s brief acknowledgment of whites observing the African Americans in their midst reflects
a historical truth about Charleston. While white and black residents had shared public space since the city’s founding, on various occasions, whites were amused, bemused, scornful, or alarmed by the sight of African Americans in public. One frequent target for white comments was how African Americans dressed, particularly African American women. Early in his novel, Heyward notes the presence of black women dressed “gorgeously in the clashing crimsons and purples that they loved,” and later, in his portrayal of the parade, he describes the entrancing arrival of “the sisters,” clad in “scarlet, purple, orange, flamingo, emerald.” In late eighteenth-century Charleston, some whites noted the “extravagance of their dress” among slave women, while others observed slaves “dress[ing] in Apparel quite gay and beyond their condition” or wearing “excessive and costly apparel.” The ability to afford “extravagant” clothes might suggest the profitability of the hiring-out system for slaves, or the desire of owners to make sure their slaves represented them well in public. Conveying a public image through clothing was not simply a matter of the master’s preferences, however. One antebellum white observer described the scene on Sundays, when African Americans “crowd the streets in the height of fashion. . . . All through the week they sweat and bark in the sun with a slouch hat, shirt sleeves rolled up & on Sundays they dress up in fine clothes, wear a silk hat and gloves.” In 1822 the Charleston City Council saw a dangerous defiance of racial hierarchies in these sartorial preferences, noting of the city’s slaves that “the expensive dress worn by many of them” was both “highly destructive to their honesty & industry” and “subversive of that subordination which policy requires to be enforced.”

If subordination seemed in short supply among Charleston’s African Americans in 1822, it largely evaporated in the months following the Confederacy’s 1865 defeat. With freedpeople streaming into Charleston from the countryside, the city’s own emancipated slaves also exercised their new ability to change employment. This was particularly notable among domestic servants, who were described by one newspaper as “perfect nomads”—a stark contrast to the nostalgic memories of Heyward and other whites about the faithful caregivers of their youth. African Americans also exhibited a noticeable lack of deference in everyday social interactions with whites. Young black men began gathering on the Battery, a public space previously restricted to whites only, and defended themselves with fists and bricks when white youths attempted to dislodge them. One white observer described the racial mixing on the Battery as a “nauseating sight,” while another complained more generally that “every mulatto is your equal and every ‘Nigger’ is your superior.” William Heyward, an elderly white Charlestonian and likely
an ancestor of DuBose Heyward, stopped going to the Charleston Hotel for his meals in 1868 because “the negro waiters [were] so defiant and so familiar in their attentions.” Heyward had a precise definition of his preferred racial hierarchy: “If I cannot have them as they used to be, I have no desire to see them except in the field.”

 Individual interactions among African Americans and whites were a form of micro-level political expression, to be sure, but not the city’s most significant one. African Americans in Charleston, and indeed throughout South Carolina and the South, undertook a range of political activities as soon as the opportunity presented itself. In June 1865 more than a thousand black Charlestonians signed a petition to President Andrew Johnson demanding the right to vote. They understood that political involvement and self-determination were a matter of survival and dignity in a society not at all ready to grant them full equality, despite occasional examples of white courtesy. Reverend Francis L. Cardozo, an educator who would become South Carolina’s first African American holder of statewide office when he became secretary of state in 1868, acknowledged that he had been “treated with the greatest personal kindness by many Southern gentlemen . . . [and] received from them individual favors and acts of kindness.” But he warned his fellow black citizens: “This is no question of individual or personal consideration, it is one of those great national questions that rise up to affect us as a whole people.” In November 1865 the first Colored People’s Convention was held in Charleston’s Zion Church. Delegates from across the state debated resolutions and protested the unfair strictures of the state’s “Black Codes,” passed in the months after the war by white southern legislatures desperate to restrict the citizenship rights and employment possibilities of the African Americans in their midst. Sixty-four black residents of Charleston were elected or appointed to federal, state, or local offices during Reconstruction, including three men who were elected to the U.S. Congress. During most of Reconstruction, African Americans held half of the seats on Charleston’s city council, and the city’s police force was half black.

 Charleston’s black community put considerable effort into keeping public spaces and public accommodations free from segregation. In December 1866 the city’s first horse-drawn streetcars rolled into service, and at first neither the streetcar company nor the city government instituted any rules about who could ride where. Many conductors, however, had their own ideas about segregated accommodations and tried to force black passengers to stand on the platforms outside of the cars rather than sit on the inside. By the spring of 1867, a campaign to guarantee equal seating on the streetcars was under
way, starting with the courts and, when that proved unsuccessful, moving on to sit-ins and other disruptions of service, such as placing large stones on the streetcar tracks. On 26 March 1867, a mass meeting on the issue adjourned, and some of its attendees forcibly seized streetcars and demanded to be seated inside. At least one white conductor resisted by halting the car and had to be rescued from a growing black crowd by the police. Over the next several weeks, protests continued, the Freedmen’s Bureau intervened, and the threat of court action combined to convince the streetcar company to grant all customers access to all seats. A month later, Major General Daniel Sickles, the U.S. government’s military commander of South Carolina, issued an order forbidding discrimination on street railways, railroads, and steamboats. An 1870 lawsuit (brought under the Civil Rights Act passed by the U.S. Congress in 1866) forced Charleston’s new Academy of Music to seat all patrons regardless of race. The city’s elected representatives were equally active against discrimination. Benjamin A. Boseman, one of Charleston’s African American representatives in the state legislature, introduced the state’s first comprehensive civil rights bill in 1870. It banned racial discrimination on “common carriers” or in any other business requiring a state license or charter; those in violation faced fines, imprisonment, and the revocation of their licenses or charters.

Heyward’s writing, in *Porgy* and in his nonfiction essays, manifested the white attitude of gentle paternal amusement toward the African Americans they encountered in public. While white elites no doubt experienced such benign reactions, for most of the city’s history, they also had every reason to fear violence at the hands of African Americans. Such fears dated back to the eighteenth century. White Charlestonians, like white slaveholders throughout the U.S. South, lived in constant fear of slave uprisings; in an urban setting, such an uprising would most likely be accompanied by arson. Fire, of course, was a constant hazard in cities where the streets were dense with wooden structures, but in Charleston every fire contained the additional threat of slave insurrection: slaves might have set it, and even if they had not, they might well take advantage of the chaos it caused. Fear of slave insurrection existed always as a percolating undercurrent and, on occasion, burst into public panic. Persistent panic over slave uprisings in Charleston occurred during the 1740s, following the Stono Rebellion, and again during the 1790s, as a revolution broke out on the Caribbean island of Saint-Domingue that would result in the founding of the Republic of Haiti in 1804. Refugees arrived in American port cities, including Charleston, accompanied by rumors that some came with a mandate to stir local slaves to insurrection. The city
doubled its watch, and in 1795 South Carolina legislators banned the immi-

gation of free people of color from other nations. In 1797 the Charleston State

gazette reported that two slaves were executed for participating in “a Con-
spiracy of several French negroes to fire the city and to act here as they had

formerly done at S. Domingo.” Nearly three decades later, during the sum-
mer of 1822, public panic erupted again when former slave Denmark Vesey

was arrested and charged with planning a violent uprising among the city’s

slaves. Based on the fruits of coercive interrogations and little else, Charle-
ston officials arrested more than 100 African Americans and executed thirty-
five of them, including Vesey. While many historians now believe that Vesey

was not in fact planning an armed uprising, the fact that whites had every

reason to fear that he was remains an enduring truth about the relationship

between whites and African Americans in antebellum Charleston.

After emancipation, white fear of black violence became frighteningly
real. Many black Charlestonians had no intention of accepting the white

domination that had previously governed the city, and they fought back:

black civilians interfered with white police attempting to make arrests, black

soldiers sparred with white police, and some black citizens even committed

murder. Such events inverted the norm elsewhere in South Carolina and

the South, where white violence terrorized rural African Americans. In July

1865 Charleston witnessed its first race riot, between white and black Union

troops, which was touched off when black troops came to the aid of a black

freedman in a skirmish with a white soldier. The following year, violence be-

tween freedpeople and whites broke out again, this time sparked by a con-

frontation between black and white youths on the Battery that spilled into

the rest of the city and lasted, sporadically, for a week. When one white

Charlestonian wandered into the midst of a mob of African Americans

and then attempted to flee, he was struck by a hail of thrown bricks and

beaten and kicked while he lay on the ground. One of the men involved later

bragged: “[I] killed the rebel son of a bitch . . . [and] he will not be the last

I will kill.” Much of the violence took the form of politically motivated

clashes between Republicans and Democrats. Such political violence peaked

in Charleston during the tumultuous election of 1876, when the Democratic

ticket, led by gubernatorial candidate Wade Hampton, sought to “redeem”

white South Carolina from a decade’s worth of black political participation.

On 6 September, a major battle broke out in the streets of Charleston when

African American Republicans began attacking African American Demo-

crats, and armed white Democrats sprang to their defense. According to a

New York times account, on the first night, black rioters “held King Street,
the main thoroughfare, from midnight until sunrise, breaking windows, robbing stores, and attacking and beating indiscriminately every white man who showed his face,” and the violence continued for days, driving white residents indoors to peek fearfully out from behind their curtains. The street brawls continued after the election returns came in.\(^{43}\)

Daniel Huger Smith, a Confederate army veteran, was on the streets of Charleston in the fall of 1876. He recalled not only violence but also a profound reversal in traditional patterns of racial deference. “The sidewalks and sides of the street were filled with negroes and many negro women,” Smith remembered, “who cursed and jeered and yelled and blasphemed.” He even “heard from one black woman most virulently nasty remarks on my personal appearance.” Here was evidence that black women were not, in fact, the kindly mammys of the white imagination, but rather active participants in Charleston’s street violence throughout Reconstruction. Smith was dumbfounded at such a response, particularly because it came from African Americans who were familiar to him. He wrote of the incident: “Now I passed that corner at least four times every day and those negroes knew me perfectly well. When, therefore, they greeted the shot [Smith had been hit by a brick] with yells and cheers of derision, I realized that it was as much as my life was worth to take no notice of the incident.” Smith’s urge to enforce the more familiar racial hierarchy of black deference to white came both rhetorically—“it was as much as my life was worth”—and literally at peril to his own safety. His demand “Who threw that brick?” was greeted with more insolence (“A pestilent scoundrel answered ‘Wha’ you want to know for?’ And another one said ‘A woman trow um!’”) and incipient violence; unarmed, Smith was saved only when other whites drew their weapons in his defense. The day after the election, Smith was in the midst of the violence again, and this time the weapons were more lethal than thrown masonry: “As I walked down the street I saw some negro women passing rifles from a window to a lot of men on the sidewalk. . . . I loosened my revolver in its holster, which I held in my left hand, and I ran up the street with many women and some men barking at me ‘Kill um! Kill um! Kill um!’ But no one killed me, and I killed no one.”\(^{44}\)

The Republican Party in South Carolina lost that election in 1876, and U.S. troops exited the South Carolina state capitol on 10 April 1877. In Charleston as elsewhere in the South, gerrymandering, cumbersome voting procedures, intimidation, and fraud combined to exclude African Americans from participation in electoral politics. The number of black officeholders quickly dropped to a token few, as did the black membership of the city’s
police and fire departments; after 1883, no African American served on the Charleston City Council until 1967. Segregation remained more a patchwork matter of custom through the 1880s, but in 1889—over the opposition of many lawmakers and the state’s railroad companies—the state legislature passed a law repealing South Carolina’s 1870 antisegregation law. Segregationists in the legislature did not stop there; they began to introduce bills to require segregation in public accommodations. Between 1889 and 1898, the railways successfully fought off a bill that mandated separate cars for African American and white passengers. But by 1900, full and rigidly enforced segregation of public and commercial spaces had descended on South Carolina and Charleston—railroads, streetcars, ferries, restaurants, steamboats, restrooms, drinking fountains, schools, hotels, parks, playgrounds, and even, once again, the Battery. Charleston was also stagnating economically. By the 1890s, the spread of railroads in the South had displaced Charleston’s importance as the region’s premier port, and the city’s fortunes declined precipitously. In 1895 a state constitutional convention was convened with the purpose of completely disenfranchising South Carolina’s African Americans, which it accomplished by establishing as state law a range of barriers to suffrage, from residency requirements that excluded itinerant laborers to poll taxes, literacy tests, and the wide discretion given to local election managers, who were always white. White Charlestownians were doing their best to act as if emancipation had never happened. In 1899 North Carolina native and Atlantic Monthly editor Walter Hines Page commented during a visit to the city: “I can’t find white men here whose view of the negro has essentially changed since slavery.” Such was the Golden Age in which Heyward set Porgy.
After a debut novel that garnered acclaim from New York to Hollywood, with no small measure of attention paid to his life story in the process, DuBose Heyward had a right to feel like a recognized member of the American cultural scene. And he was—except, on occasion, for one distinguishing detail. “I spend much of my time living down the rumour that I am a negro,” Heyward told a reporter in 1929. Again putting autobiography in the service of promoting his literary output (this time the dramatic adaptation of *Porgy*), he recounted to a different reporter the cases of mistaken identity he encountered on a speaking tour of American universities, where at least one program introduced him as “not only a member of Harlem’s intellectual colony, but . . . also a Southern Negro of the old tradition.” Heyward attributed this mistake to faulty assumptions among northerners, who believed the author “must be a negro because the novel had such sympathy with the black people. There is the general feeling that the South is antagonistic to the negroes and that is quite untrue.” A Charleston newspaper similarly took the opportunity to blame northern ignorance by printing with un concealed delight an anecdote about “a ‘very cultivated’ New York woman” who, on a visit to Charleston, “took occasion to express her views on the lack of opportunities for the highly educated negro in the South.” Asking indignantly, “What avenues are open to them in the South?,” the visitor cited the case of DuBose Heyward, who in Charleston “struggled making a living selling insurance—and just as soon as he comes to New York—look at the fame he has gained through the production of ‘Porgy!’” Even as late as 1934, a reader wrote to the African American *Chicago Defender* newspaper’s “Forum” column to inquire, “Is DuBose Heyward, the author of ‘Porgy’ a Negro?” 1
THE THEATRE GUILD PRESENTS

PORGY

BY DU BOIS & DOROTHY HEYWARD

REPUBLIC THEATRE
42 STREET WEST OF BROADWAY
Heyward may not have been black, but he had indeed achieved a measure of fame through the creation of *Porgy*, and the repeated cases of mistaken racial identity constitute a revealing allegory for the difference between his novel and his play of the same name and subject. For with the play version of *Porgy*, the participation of African American performers changed the way the public, both black and white, understood this story, and this added element would reverberate throughout the twentieth century’s productions of the subsequent opera *Porgy and Bess*. Racial authenticity, enacted by black bodies, was the dominant mode that white critics used to evaluate *Porgy*, whether they believed it had achieved a documentary realism or argued that it had not. Racial authenticity was the lens through which the Theatre Guild (which produced the play), critics, and audiences—substantially guided by interpretive frames fashioned by the Guild and the critics—saw and evaluated Heyward’s play. For black critics, the theatrical production of *Porgy* prompted a more complex conversation about authenticity, class, and racial representation, but one that always pivoted back to the pragmatic demands of black theatrical employment and cultural legitimacy.

Like Heyward’s novel before it, the theatrical version of *Porgy*—adapted in collaboration with his wife, Dorothy, billed as a “folk play,” and brought to life nightly by a group of talented African American performers—deliberately blurred the lines between artifice and documentary. The Heywards’ drama drew considerable attention for establishing the critical and commercial viability of African American performers in serious roles on Broadway. The *New York Times* proclaimed it “a chocolate-colored lithograph strip,” and no wonder. Building on the novel’s reputation, the Theatre Guild and the Heywards used program notes and publicity to situate *Porgy* as an authentic depiction of southern black life. These devices verified and explained the facts underlying the fictional representations onstage, guiding audiences toward particular ways of interpreting what they saw. For newspaper readers and Theatre Guild subscribers who had not yet seen *Porgy*, reviews and press

( opposite)
The Theatre Guild billed its 1927 production of *Porgy* as a folk play, and its advertising materials made use of an appropriately unstudied illustration of the residents of Catfish Row—anonymous but clearly African American—leaning out of the windows that would become an integral part of the show’s stage set. The Theatre Guild’s telling mistake in rendering author DuBose Heyward’s first name as “Du Bois” also invoked African American intellectual and NAACP founder W. E. B. Du Bois. (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University)
accounts that mentioned authenticating details communicated the show’s accuracy as a major part of its appeal. Many reviewers took the bait, like the critic who enthused: “It lived so completely that one forgot that this was a mere theater, just ‘off Broadway.’ It was Charleston. It was Catfish Row. It was the colored quarter, seen intimately, graphically, photographically.”

Positioning *Porgy* as an authentic depiction of African American life, the Theatre Guild emphasized the play’s factual basis rather than its artistic license. This framing, combined with the novelty of African American actors performing serious and substantive (rather than comic and/or servile) characters onstage, convinced most white critics that *Porgy* presented a version of black life that was more real than imaginary. The Guild and the Heywards were also careful to assure audiences that the play lacked a political agenda or any controversial miscegenation themes. *Porgy* fashioned its own brand of scenic segregation, with only a handful of fleeting white characters among a large black cast and scenes where black fear of white authority was suggested rather than plainly enacted and sometimes even presented as comic. With this combination, *Porgy* and responses to it defined authentic blackness as southern yet apolitical—the South with only a subtle hint of white supremacy, even as white supremacy was prompting an unprecedented exodus of African Americans out of the South to northern cities. The play’s soft-focus view of southern race relations, along with black characters given a depth and sympathy previously unseen on mainstream stages, held tremendous appeal for white northern audiences and critics.

*Porgy’s* appeal for black northern audiences and critics lay largely with its African American cast. Heyward was not the only white man whose race mattered in relation to *Porgy*. In 1932 Al Jolson approached the Theatre Guild with a proposal for a musical version of *Porgy*, starring himself in blackface and featuring music by Jerome Kern and book by Oscar Hammerstein II, two of Broadway’s biggest names. The Guild, sensing a commercial blockbuster, urged Heyward to accept the offer. Heyward had already begun conversations with George Gershwin about a musical adaptation, but Gershwin assured him: “If you can see your way to making some ready money from Jolson’s version I don’t know that it would hurt a later version done by an all-colored cast.” With Gershwin’s reassurance that the Jolson project would not preclude his, Heyward, also tempted by the money, reluctantly agreed, but with a caveat: he would not work on the Jolson production so that he could be available to work with Gershwin when the composer was ready to proceed. With the Jolson version about to go into production, fate intervened: the working partnership between Kern and Hammerstein broke up, leaving Jolson without a show.
Before the production’s demise, the *Chicago Defender* reacted to news of the Jolson project with scornful fury. Characterizing the news that the “white mammy singer” would be singing the role of Porgy as “an obscene suggestion” and “a bombshell to the lovers of Race talent in the theater,” this black newspaper doubted that Jolson, “while a fine actor of mammy parts,” could “come through in such a piece as ‘Porgy.’” The casting offended not simply because the vehicle was more dignified than the average “mammy” song; more important was the disappointment experienced by those who “expected that Race men and women would once more be ready to demonstrate to the Theater Guild their skill.” How, the *Defender* wondered, could Jolson play the leading role “with some of the finest singing actors in the entire Race walking the streets unemployed[?]” The *Defender*’s anger reflected the broader black critical debate over *Porgy*. A central, if largely unspoken, theme of the black reaction to *Porgy* was a celebration that this black-cast drama’s phenomenal success had dealt the legacy of blackface minstrelsy on American stages a mortal wound. No less important was the prominence that its roles brought to numerous African American performers, boosting the careers of those who could also do their part to “uplift the race” by burying the racist legacies of stage minstrelsy once and for all.

Efforts at racial uplift came in many forms and places for African Americans in the early twentieth century—at church, in school, on streetcars, on the job, in theatre audiences, in every public place where the vicious stereotypes and idle buffoonery that signified “negro” in most white imaginations could be countered. The desire of middle-class and elite African Americans to define and project racial respectability and to police the boundaries of black behavior extended to all avenues of social and cultural life and engendered no small amount of tension with the working-class and poor African Americans who were the target of their reform impulses. This concern with presenting middle-class respectability extended to popular culture as well, where a narrow range of racial attributes (uneducated, servile, content, comically overreaching) prevailed. If the stage was the source of many of those enduring falsehoods, it was also a place where the damage could be repaired and new images crafted, if only the right plays could be presented and correct audience decorum enforced. But the politics of such cultural representation operated on an exceedingly thin edge, and *Porgy* offers an illuminating example of the contradictions that the mainstream theatre held for African Americans in the 1920s.

Professional theatre remained as segregated as most professions in America in the 1920s, and even the rare crossover successes faced open prejudice. Just
six years before Porgy’s Broadway debut, Charles Gilpin’s performance in the title role of Eugene O’Neill’s The Emperor Jones gained him critical accolades but also controversy, when the Dramatic League of New York honored him for the best theatrical performance of the year and several white members of the group publicly announced their refusal to share a table with the actor at the awards dinner because of his race. African American stage performers were relegated almost exclusively to musical and vaudeville productions, occasionally appearing in minor roles as servants in dramatic productions otherwise cast with white actors. Yet when a few managed to achieve prominent roles in mainstream dramas—produced, viewed, and reviewed by whites—their work was still evaluated in a context of racial stereotype, for that was the language that most reviewers relied upon even to praise their performances. So it was with mainstream press reviews of Porgy: many sentences extolling the authenticity of the black working-class characters on display, from their emotional outbursts to their violence and shiftlessness, followed by a few sentences praising how convincingly the actors portrayed these types. This left black actors, themselves members of the black middle class and presumably well aware of the importance of representation and respectability, forced to make a profound trade-off. With Porgy, which for most of them constituted their biggest break as professional actors, they received the kind of glowing reviews of their talents that all performers crave. But the more reviewers praised the verisimilitude of the show and the actors’ performances, the more a narrative of racist stereotypes and racial characteristics was repeated. For the many reviewers and audiences inclined to view it that way, the considerable skills of the actors cemented the Porgy story as a true representation of African American life.

Such tensions around public performance and racial representation were hardly new, and black actors before and after those who performed in Porgy faced those same trade-offs, and some with even worse implications. But a thorough examination of the ways that people (both those who produced it and those who watched it) wrote about Porgy offers a window into a particular moment in American views regarding race. In the late 1920s, thanks in large part to the cultural and political activism of African Americans, mainstream popular and elite culture began to recognize black contributions in a newly, but not entirely respectful, way. White critics viewed Porgy (and another of the era’s black-cast plays, In Abraham’s Bosom) as anthropologically true documents of black life, but reactions to both remained couched in long-standing white conceptions of blackface minstrelsy and plantation fantasy. Among these was viewing the South as the source for the authentic
black experience; however true this might have been in the nineteenth century, it was significantly eroded both as demographic fact and cultural conceit by the late 1920s. Not just Heyward but white critics and audience members felt authorized in their claims to “know” African Americans and thus to judge *Porgy*’s authenticity as a social document. Yet, in a backhanded sort of racial progress, such overbearing assumptions were now accompanied by a new awareness that African Americans had a different opinion of their beloved play. Ultimately, however, *Porgy*’s most important racial politics lay in the fact that while critics and audiences praised Heyward, the Theatre Guild, and the play’s cast for their sensitive, authentic portrayal of African American characters, what they were praising was a picture of docile authenticity existing apart from white society. Few if any of those heaping praise on *Porgy* understood that they lauded a portrait that, both in its local particulars and its larger social meanings, was rapidly departing the American scene.

*Porgy* debuted in October 1927 to the near-universal praise of New York City’s theatre critics. After its first Broadway run, which lasted nearly a year, the *Porgy* cast took to the road, logging performances in Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago, where the Theatre Guild offered subscription series. The show’s popularity soon took it on a more far-flung tour to cities large (Baltimore, Washington, Denver, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit, St. Louis) and small (Lincoln, Nebraska; Tacoma, Washington; St. Joseph’s, Missouri; Grand Rapids, Michigan; and Youngstown, Ohio). The show also played a return engagement in New York City at the Martin Beck Theater and ran for nine weeks in London; additional engagements in Paris, Berlin, and Vienna were planned but ultimately unrealized. *Porgy* eventually logged nearly two years of continual production, generating enormous publicity for the story and unprecedented visibility for its African American cast.

Most critics hailed the transformation of *Porgy* from novel to play. *New York Herald Tribune* theatre columnist Percy Hammond was typical when he argued that *Porgy*’s stage adaptation was even more successful than other recent dramatic adaptations of popular novels. Hammond also suggested that the play’s genesis was a rags-to-riches tale, recalling doubts harbored by the city’s theatre professionals, who “regarded as improbable that the theater-goers would sanctify [Porgy’s] lowly career with their attentions. What excitement, it was inquired, could there be in the activities of a legless Afro-American beggar, living, loving and killing in a city so distant from New York?” *Chicago Daily Tribune* book reviewer Fanny Butcher, an ardent fan of
the novel, deemed the play “as veracious in its way as the book was.” But at least one critic took exception to the transformation of a favorite novel into staged drama. Hans Stengel of the *New York Journal American* complained that the play had eschewed its genuine drama to become “a group of sketchy illustrations” mired in a production “shrieking with loud, harsh notes, slamming on ‘local color’ with a gigantic steam shovel,” and overcome by “irrelevantly overworked spirituals.”

In adapting the novel into dramatic form, the Heywards wanted to avoid the “Broadway formula,” and they retained a great deal of the original source material. But they made some significant changes that diminished (and in some instances erased) the signs of desperation and racial injustice found in the novel. (Hammond, for one, approved of the tenor of these changes because they “turned the squalor of the book into a dim glamor that seemed to augment rather than diminish the realism of the scenes.”) In the play, the action never leaves Catfish Row—Porgy’s begging on the streets of Charleston and, more important, several scenes in the jail are rendered invisible because they occur onstage. Bess’s fever—in the novel a result of her time in a crowded, hot, unsanitary jail—occurs in the play after her trip to Kittiwah Island. The play also moves out of the novel’s “Golden Age” and into the present. In the novel, Bess is a pitiful character before she meets Porgy, and there is little room for doubt that she sells her body for drugs. The play’s Bess, in contrast, is worldly and flirtatious, more glamorous than desperate. The dissatisfied Stengel griped at this makeover: “The collaborators have (or perhaps the Guild’s inscrutable general staff) changed the ‘tall gaunt woman with an ugly scar on her left cheek, hard lines etched by the acid of utter degradation’ into a red-hot mama from flamboyant Harlem.” Similarly Peter, the neighborhood elder taken by the police to testify about the murder of Robbins, is described in the novel as earning his living by hauling goods in a rented cart; one passage includes a brief description of the exploitative contract through which he rented the cart and the fact of its repossession after missing only one payment. In the play, Peter’s occupation is transformed into honey vendor, an opportunity to dramatize the local color detail of Charleston’s black vendors who promote their wares in song.

Sportin’ Life, a marginal figure in the novel, becomes a much more prominent character in the play. A former Charleston resident returned from the big city, his unmistakably “New York” presence contrasts starkly with the rest of Catfish Row; at the play’s conclusion, Bess leaves with him for New York, whereas in the novel she leaves with a group of stevedores headed toward Savannah. While the novel ends with Porgy’s despair that Bess has left him,
the play concludes with Porgy gamely deciding to follow her and setting off in his goat-drawn cart “Up Nort’—past de Custom House.” This addition to the plot evoked the migration of African Americans to northern cities that was peaking in New York City and elsewhere by the time of *Porgy*’s production. Yet it did so in a way that cast a disapproving eye on such a movement, since Sportin’ Life is clearly a malevolent figure and Porgy’s journey seems quixotic but also absurd, given his physical disability and naïveté about the wider world.

The transition from page to stage took place not only in the authors’ imaginations but also in the real world of director, actors, and audience. The rehearsal process brought changes to the Heywards’ script, which included shortening it from four to three acts; cutting a tableau scene of Porgy struggling against an ill-omened buzzard; moving Crown’s death onstage; and cutting some spirituals. Even after rehearsals, the tinkering continued as the Theatre Guild, concerned about a tepid opening-night reaction to the play, requested revisions. While the Heywards spent three days holed up in a New York City hotel room, positive critical responses appeared and ticket sales grew. Their hastily conceived new ending, which brought the policeman and patrol wagon back to create a more dramatic conclusion, was never used. Other, less easily documented, changes also occurred in the transformation of Porgy’s story from words on paper to bodies onstage. As in the novel, the play script presents the black characters’ dialogue in an extreme, almost phonetically rendered dialect, while the words spoken by the few white characters betray no hint of dialect or even regional accent. It is impossible to know how the actors delivered these lines, or whether the white and black characters onstage sounded like they lived in the same southern city. Needing to make the words intelligible to audience members as far away as the back row, the African American performers likely muted the extremity of the “Gullah” dialect. The conventions of vaudeville—and its close kin, blackface minstrelsy—must have hovered over the scenes in the play meant to be comic, such as that between Lily and Peter about the validity of their marriage, or the scenes when black characters attempt to deceive and evade white police. Performers had to achieve comedy without racial caricature before largely white audiences conditioned to expect the latter.

If *Porgy*’s African American cast members were deploying their considerable skills in a play freighted with racial meanings, they at least had an unprecedented amount of company on Broadway stages during the 1927–28 theatrical season. The show’s debut at the Guild Theatre occurred amid what seemed to be, depending on one’s perspective, a flood of African American
performers onto Broadway stages. The 1927–28 season was a boom time for Broadway, with more actors employed than in previous or subsequent seasons during the 1920s and 1930s. Shows featuring black actors rose on that cresting theatrical tide. The presence of more black actors than ever before was news; a wire-service article appearing the same month as Porgy’s debut was carried by newspapers around the country under a variety of titles, including “Deluge of Colored Actors on Broadway” (Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch), “Hordes of Colored Players Swoop on Broadway” (Washington Times), “Negro Performers Sought in New York” (Springfield (Mass.) Republican), and “Negro Shows Now Highbrow in New York” (New Bedford (Mass.) Times). The article noted several shows about to open on Broadway with African American cast members, including Porgy, a Provincetown Theatre revival of In Abraham’s Bosom, the musical Show Boat, the drama Lulu Belle, and others. The article noted that “the principal influences producing this situation have been the high brow producers, including the Theatre Guild, the Provincetown Players, Florence Ziegfeld Jr., David Belasco, and others of high theatrical standing.” Despite the vaguely alarmist tone of some of the wire-service article titles, the number of black actors on Broadway was hardly overwhelming: of fifty-three musicals that season, five had all-black casts, while only two of 162 straight plays featured all-black casts. At about the same time as the wire-service report, with its array of cautionary headlines, the Afro-American newspaper ran optimistic articles on the phenomenon, announcing “Many Big Productions Will Use Race Actors This Season” and predicting “a revival of interest in this phase of stage work.”

While Porgy represented a major opportunity for black actors in Broadway dramas, many more black performers found work in Broadway musicals during the 1920s. Despite the media’s breathless response, this was hardly a new phenomenon, and neither was the decade’s intense investment by many African Americans in the possibilities of black performance for racial advancement. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, African Americans gained their first opportunities on professional stages performing for white audiences through musical theatre in the forms of minstrelsy and vaudeville. In those Jim Crow years, the popular stage was one of the few public spaces open to African Americans, making black actors uniquely visible to white as well as black publics. At the turn of the twentieth century, African Americans in popular theatre were “staging race” in complex ways that helped to forge a black middle-class identity and a “politics of respectability” in the face of severe racist perceptions. Like other middle-class blacks working for racial uplift, black musical-theatre artists were acutely aware of how whites
perceived their work as they relied on white producers and audiences for their very livelihoods. To be sure, black artists (many of whom performed in burnt cork like their white minstrel predecessors) had no choice but to present racist stereotypes of black behavior. During the 1890s, a “coon craze” swept popular music, and black songwriters penned many of the songs, which delighted white audiences and reinforced racial stereotypes. Yet skillful black musical-theatre artists took their opportunities to mold a popular culture already steeped in racial categorization and eliminate the worst of the racist stereotypes that populated white-authored songs and shows. Black-authored musicals such as *Jes Lak White Fō’ks*, *Abyssinia*, and *In Dahomey* were distinctive, containing sly critiques of African American elites, stories about “passing” for white, and diverse reflections on the role of Africa in turn-of-the-century black political culture. Moreover, African American artists took advantage of the flexibility of live performance to improvise in subtle ways that played directly to the segregated balcony and (quite literally) over the heads of white audiences seated in the orchestra.18

But white audiences were ever present, even beyond the theatre’s walls. If some middle-class African Americans disdained black musical theatre and vaudeville for failing to present images of black respectability, others recognized that black performers, themselves usually educated and certainly skilled, could advance the cause of racial uplift through both their onstage and offstage comportment. Bert Williams and George Walker, performers with their own touring company, were sufficiently mindful of the responsibility of black actors to represent the race that they produced a booklet, which was distributed to all company members, laying out rules for public behavior. Williams and Walker warned their employees: “Knowing that the bond of prejudice is drawn so tightly about us . . . conduct yourself that your manner and mode of life will disarm all criticism and place you above reproach.”19 Black theatre critics also saw popular culture as a means to present black respectability and paid nearly as much attention to the offstage lives of black performers as to their onstage work. They often used their columns to exhort black performers about proper behavior, from hygiene to travel etiquette, reflecting their awareness of the public nature of black performers’ offstage lives. Some challenged the behavior of black audiences, as well; the *New York Age*’s Lester Walton chastised fellow black audience members at *Bandana Land* for “their unsuppressed laughter and merriment.”20 Two decades before the Harlem Renaissance, African American artists and critics recognized the connection between black middle-class uplift strategies and black musical theatre.

*Porgy, 1927 • 83*
During the 1920s, the black press sounded the same themes, cheering the rising visibility of black performers in front of white Broadway audiences and using their presence as an opportunity to underscore the larger political work that African American actors performed, both within and outside of black communities. In 1925 The Messenger ran an entire issue devoted to the arts, with articles championing the notion of the arts as a means of uplifting the status of the entire race in the eyes of white America. A few months after Porgy’s debut, theatre critic Theophilus Lewis also penned a lengthy and passionate essay titled “The Negro Actor’s Deficit” in the journal Ebony and Topaz (the piece was subsequently reprinted in the New York Amsterdam News). Lewis’s article evidenced the fierce belief among some African Americans that theatre was an opportunity for another kind of racial uplift: elevating the class status and aspirations of African Americans themselves. Both onstage and offstage, black performers bore the double burden of entertaining audiences while also strengthening their entire race.

Writing about theatre performed by black actors for black audiences, Lewis took the actors to task for failing to elevate theatre’s intellectual content and the horizons of black audiences along with it. He assailed actors in black vaudeville and musicals for appealing “only to the lowest elements of the race” and charged “the poorest respectable classes either avoid it or attend its performances with shamefaced apologies. The middle and upper classes hold it in contempt and the more intelligent actors themselves are disgusted with it.” Lewis blamed the black actor for his failure to “master his audience and make it like a progressively higher form of entertainment” and accused most black actors of lacking “race pride.” He believed that “the cultural value of the actor . . . must be judged by his ability to raise the theatre above the plane of amusement and make it an instrument for the expression of the higher spiritual life of his people.”21 For black actors, then, securing paid professional work was not enough: they needed to make theatre edifying and uplifting, not merely for its own sake but as a matter of racial obligation.

The special Messenger issue on the arts struck a more positive tone, emphasizing black performers’ ability to “create impressions” of the race among whites of all walks of life and noting their contributions of money and talent to black philanthropic causes. Calling them “our greatest advocates in the court of race relations,” one essay noted that black actors influenced white thinking through both their performances and their interactions with managers, the press, and the variety of technical and support workers in the entertainment world. This view seemed to be borne out by a New York Times editorial reflecting on the death of black musical-revue star Florence
Mills. The *Chicago Defender* reprinted this editorial, which credited Mills as having been “one of the leaders whose accomplishment sets the whole racial movement a notch or two forward.” Endorsing the notion that black performers could help to break down prejudice with merit alone, the editorial cited the prodigious talent and, equally important, “strict discipline” and “unpretentiousness” of performers like Mills and Roland Hayes for “elevating the Negroes and impressing the white man with honest worth.” Actor and singer Paul Robeson understood this dynamic when he wrote in *The Messenger* of his hope to serve as a “racial asset” like Hayes, who served the race when “thousands of people hear him, see him, are moved by him, and are brought to a clearer understanding of human values” because of his artistry.22

Robeson’s example of the tenor Hayes as a racial emissary was apt, since during the 1920s black performers found work on Broadway almost exclusively through musical revues. *Shuffle Along*, conceived and written by the black vaudevillians Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, was the first black-cast revue on Broadway to draw large white audiences. It debuted in 1921, four years before *In Abraham’s Bosom* and six years prior to *Porgy*. Modeled on popular musical revues with all-white casts such as George White’s *Scandals* and Florenz Ziegfeld’s *Follies*, the black-cast musical revues of the 1920s featured elaborate song and dance numbers performed by sumptuously costumed, light-skinned chorus girls. Interspersed among the splashy musical routines were broad comedy sketches and the occasional ballad.23 Skeptical that white audiences would turn out for a black-cast musical revue, white producers initially booked such shows only during the off-season and in out-of-the-way venues. But *Shuffle Along*’s eventual enormous financial success proved that a black revue could draw a large white audience on Broadway, and it spawned numerous imitators and successors. Musicals with all-black casts became such a common sight on Broadway in the 1920s that one 1927 reviewer suggested renaming New York’s renowned theater district “the Great Black Way.”24 While black performers Sissle and Blake created *Shuffle Along*, whites produced and created the majority of black musical revues on Broadway. Lew Leslie, a vaudeville performer turned producer, was the most prominent of these white producers, creating several of the most successful black-cast musical revues of the decade, including *Plantation Revue* (1922), *From Dixie to Broadway* (1924), and the *Blackbirds* series (*Blackbirds of 1928*, etc.). As with DuBose Heyward, theatre columnists and reviewers often expressed surprise that Leslie was white.25

The majority of these black-cast musical revues had southern references in their titles, plots, songs, and settings, reinforcing for white critics and audi-
ences the notion that African American racial authenticity, at least the stage variety, lay in the South. While the black-cast musical revues of the 1920s moved away from the broad southern stereotypes of earlier minstrel shows, those stereotypes conditioned expectations of what black performers should do onstage and continued to shape the way the revues were presented and understood. Referencing the Great Migration and relying on the old minstrel categories of Jim Crow and Zip Coon, black-cast musical revues included the North as well as the South in their plots and songs, using southern stereotypes in some numbers to highlight the big-city sophistication of others. *Plantation Revue*, which opened in 1922, featured as its dominant scenic element an intermittently glowing watermelon slice suspended over center stage. *Strut Miss Lizzie*, created by black performers Henry Creamer and Turner Layton, opened with a scene of a young black man returning to take his “mammy” back north with him and included the songs “Dear Old Southland” and “Way down Yonder in New Orleans” (attempting to set themselves apart from white-revue creators like Leslie, Creamer and Layton billed the latter as “a southern song without a mammy, a mule, or a moon”). *Bottomland* (1927) depicted a southern black woman from a black slum (Bottomland) who migrates to New York City, a plot recycled two years later in *Bamboola*. This migration device both commented on current events and allowed shows to include both the rural South and the urban North, covering the poles of black experience and culture that white audiences expected to see. *Blackbirds of 1928* typified this strategy, opening with “southern” songs (and featuring its “Plantation Orchestra”) but quickly moving on to more urbane numbers. For white producers and audiences, the revues’ popularity cemented the theatrical association of the South and authentic African American character.

Black-cast dramas like *Porgy* followed the black musical revues to Broadway, albeit in smaller numbers, and the two genres were linked not only by the skin color of their casts but by a particular brand of intratheatrical reference. In both white- and black-cast musical revues, songs and sketches often parodied or referred in some way to other Broadway shows and stars. Black-cast revues made joking references to dramas with black characters such as *Porgy, Green Pastures, Lulu Belle*, and *The Emperor Jones*. Such parodies suggest the cultural significance, and acceptance, of the African American presence on Broadway in these years. Audiences must have possessed enough knowledge (from direct experience, newspaper reviews, or word-of-mouth) of the shows being parodied for the parodies to be entertaining. In the case of *Porgy, Blackbirds of 1928* (a Lew Leslie production) ended its first act with,
in the words of one observer, “a jazzification glorification” of the saucer burial scene that mimicked director Rouben Mamoulian’s famous shadow effects and interpolated W. C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues” into the spiritual sung in the play. It was, according to the Chicago Defender, the “one touch of seriousness” in the show, “a thrilling combination of musical and emotional appeal that stirs the audience to vigorous applause” that “no chorus of white voices could possibly duplicate.” The scene also included a song titled “Porgy,” written by the popular songwriters Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh; Ethel Waters later recorded both this song and the interpolated spiritual. And Blackbirds of 1928 was not the only revue paying homage to the play; the New York Sun reported in 1929 that “hardly a Negro revue has appeared which did not contain at least one scene almost obviously lifted from ‘Porgy.’”

Porgy owed its presence on Broadway in part to the black-cast musical revues, which proved that white audiences would pay to see black performers on Broadway, and in part to the Little Theatre movement, which, while amateur in origin, eventually wielded considerable influence on the professional theatre. Both the cultural values and the administrative structures originated by the Little Theatre movement influenced the presentation of Porgy and other black-cast dramas during the 1920s. Beginning around 1912 (in a Progressive-era moment when middle-class men and women were embracing social reform and community activities), educated elites, scornful of the early twentieth century’s popular theatre, set out to create their own. Convincing that theatrical productions should be intellectually edifying, these men and women organized local theatre companies to produce dramas with serious subjects that employed experimental methods of staging (many influenced by the innovations of European art theatre). In addition to founding local amateur theatre companies, Little Theatre adherents worked to establish drama instruction at the high school and college levels, developments that helped to inculcate future audiences with an appreciation for theatre as an intellectually stimulating and morally complex undertaking. The extension of this vision of theatre to the professional level provided an opening for plays like Porgy and In Abraham’s Bosom. At the amateur level, African American elites embraced both the ideas and the venues of the Little Theatre movement as a way to further their endless quest for racial uplift.

For some African Americans, little theatres represented an opportunity to put forward their own theatrical interpretations of African American racial authenticity—without white playwrights or producers—after enduring decades of racist stereotypes on the American stage. W. E. B. Du Bois established one of the first black little theatres, the Krigwa Theatre, in the early
Other black theatres followed during the 1920s and 1930s, including the New Negro Art Theatre, the Harlem Experimental Theatre, the Rose McClendon Players, Cleveland’s Gilpin Players, and Chicago’s Avenue Theatre. In keeping with the Little Theatre movement’s emphasis on training, these black little theatres made it part of their mission to develop black talent in all areas of theatrical production, particularly playwriting. The New Negro Art Theatre offered performances and twice-weekly classes in acting; directing; playwriting; dance; and scenic, costume, and lighting design. Similarly, the Avenue Theatre nurtured and instructed upcoming talent and audiences through play contests and lectures on the arts.

Many of the founders of these black little theatres saw it as their mission to produce the work of African American authors exclusively. Bowing temporarily to the dearth of plays by black playwrights, Regina Andrews recalled of the Harlem Experimental Theatre: “In the beginning we decided we would not limit ourselves to Negro plays until we could produce our own.” Du Bois, not surprisingly, was emphatic and explicit in his vision for black-produced, black-authored plays. In an editorial in The Crisis, he insisted that if a black playwright sold a play to a Broadway producer, “it would not be a Negro play or if it is a Negro play it will not be about the kind of Negro you and I know or want to know.” With his class-based notion of “us” clear, he continued: “If it is a Negro play that will interest us and depict our life, experience and humor, it cannot be sold to the ordinary theatrical producer, but it can be produced in our churches and lodges and halls.” His motto for Krigwa was that it must produce theatre “about us, by us, for us, and near us.”

Existing institutions within the black community supported these fledgling black theatres. New York City’s black little theatres used the auditorium at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library, as well as local churches and the Harlem YMCA, for their performances. The Crisis and Opportunity magazines sponsored national contests for playwrights in an attempt to generate original plays by African American authors for the theatres to stage. Du Bois tirelessly promoted the cause of black theatre in the pages of The Crisis. But beset by chronic logistical and financial obstacles—unlike most white little theatres, which were staffed by well-to-do amateurs, these black theatres were organized by writers and performers holding down day jobs—none lasted for more than a few years.

While many white little theatres also did not survive past the 1920s, the ability of Little Theatre proponents to institutionalize their beliefs and practices in the form of high school and college drama departments gave the...
movement lasting significance.34 For African American playwrights and performers, the development of theatre programs at black colleges was critical for the development of black theatre, and certainly both black theatre and black colleges shared the mission of racial uplift. Some of Krigwa’s original members were alumni of the Howard University Players.35 One black educator viewed drama programs at black colleges as necessary for providing the “scientific training” necessary to advance the careers of African American playwrights and actors. And he predicted that they could also train and uplift a black audience “who will understand and appreciate dramatic expression. It will no longer be necessary to entertain a Negro audience with some appeal to sex or a multitude of sleazy jokes.”36

Porgy itself had a mixed history with the noncommercial Little Theatre movement. During the 1930s, the play was successfully produced at little theatres in Dallas and Cleveland but was derailed en route to a Federal Theatre Project production in Seattle. Those amateur productions suggest the play’s possibilities and problems as a mechanism for racial uplift and interracial cooperation. In Cleveland, the Gilpin Players of the Karamu Theatre, a settlement house–based little theatre that produced numerous plays by black authors, presented Porgy in 1933. The Chicago Defender praised the Karamu production’s amateur cast for performing “in a manner which only finished artists of the drama stage could surpass” and the racial uplift efforts of the director, who, in her work with the Gilpin Players, “is devoting her life to the progress of our group in Cleveland.”37 Dallas’s Oak Cliff Little Theatre, a white organization, presented Porgy in 1934. The sold-out production was codirected by Maxwell Sholes of Oak Cliff and Louis J. Hexter, his black counterpart and founder of the Dallas Negro Little Theater; it drew its black cast members from the “negro professional and business ranks in Dallas.” The music director at the local black high school directed the spiritual singers, and band members from the school appeared as the Jenkins Orphanage Band. A program note titled “Busy Cast” detailed the “gainful occupations” of the cast members, who included numerous teachers, a bookstore clerk, an interior decorator, and an insurance salesman. It is impossible to know if Sholes or Hexter (or both) wanted this information included in the program, or why. Perhaps such details about the cast were meant to counter racist stereotypes of lazy, unemployed African Americans and distance the performers from the characters they portrayed; perhaps the information was meant to demonstrate to the Oak Cliff’s white audiences that the black performers onstage were, like them, members of Dallas’s educated middle class. Regardless of who put the information into the program.
and why, it remains as evidence of the ways that *Porgy*’s black performers, even as amateurs, were functioning as representatives of their race before influential white audiences, making a small but potentially significant contribution to interracial dynamics in a southern city. Even with the production’s demonstrable attempts at interracial cooperation, however, the custom of segregation prevailed in one key respect: seating was segregated, with some performances set aside for whites, who could purchase tickets at the theatre’s box office, and others designated for African Americans, who could purchase their tickets at Dallas’s black YMCA branch. A white Dallas theatre critic was charmed by the production, “one of the most delightfully humorous and pathetic pictures we have witnessed in sometime.” He listed the show’s authentic character “types,” who “might just as well have been taken from almost any other negro section of the deep South,” as “the religious negro woman,” “the big, fat, mammy type,” “the local lazybones,” the “bad nigger,” “the crap-shooting boys,” and “the happy-go-lucky, hard-working fisherman.” And he had particular praise for the black actors who enacted these types; they were “the most malleable material” in the hands of their talented directors and performed “with a natural ease that should be the envy of many a white amateur.”

Two years later, perhaps fearing just this sort of white response, local black performers and activists in Seattle chose protest over cooperation when it came to a planned production of *Porgy* by the city’s “colored” Federal Theatre Project unit. The show was intended to be the unit’s debut production, and the actors who would have likely played its roles registered their protests discreetly in an attempt to preserve the possibility of working with the newly formed unit. Eventually, the King County Colored Progressive Democratic Club and the Seattle Citizens Committee, a black civic group, wrote to the state director of the Federal Theatre Project and argued that the Heywards’ play was “too degrading,” used “the word ‘nigger’ consistently,” and was not “elevating to the race.” They insisted “the play is something that is not really wanted in Seattle or in any other place.” Whether because of these protests or the fact that the Theatre Guild, planning to mount a tour of *Porgy and Bess*, withdrew the rights to the play, Seattle’s Federal Theatre Project never produced *Porgy*.

Like the very different outcomes encompassed by the Dallas and Seattle experiences with *Porgy*, responses by white theatre critics to the play and its African American performers encapsulated the predicament of black performers as agents of racial uplift in this period. On one level, arts pages in white publications reviewed *Porgy* extensively, introducing the basic elements of its story and information about its black performers (sometimes in-
cluding photographs) to legions of white readers who would otherwise know nothing about them. But what kind of visibility was it? Nearly all white critics described *Porgy* to readers in terms of how the play’s characters were at once primitive and representative of the entire African American race. This response came in part because of *Porgy’s* nearly unique status as a Broadway drama of black life, its fifty-member cast, and an episodic structure that presented a series of extraordinary incidents (murder, wake, picnic, hurricane, murder) rather than more intimate, character-developing scenes. Dorothy Heyward herself later noted that in her adaptation, she was “determined to give flow of racial the spot-light” instead of the character Porgy. The show’s performers must have understood their dilemma and tried to ameliorate it, and Dorothy Heyward’s later recollection also noted the “attitude of Negroes to high-hat the parts, or try to play them as respectable [sic] members of society.” But the troublesome critical responses also came, in part, because the Heywards’ play offered an opportunity to express deeply ingrained racist assumptions about African American people and their communities. The language used by many white critics reflected a reliance on familiar, culturally produced stereotypes about African American character and behavior, and the use of such language to describe a respected theatrical production that touted its own authenticity only reinforced those stereotypes further. White critics’ assumptions about the “natural” talent possessed by *Porgy’s* black actors—strewn liberally throughout their reviews—further reinforced the message that readers headed to the Guild Theatre could expect to see a “true” picture of African American life there.

In their focus on “the exotic world where the scenes lie,” reviewers transformed “Catfish Row” into a kind of shorthand encompassing all of its black residents, and those residents represented all African Americans. In fact, the original title for the dramatization of the novel *Porgy* was to be *Catfish Row*, a theatrical columnist explained, “on the ground that the dramatic version deals less with the one personality celebrated by the title of the book than with the group which surrounds him in his picturesque and turbulent neighborhood.” While the Heywards and the Theatre Guild changed the title back to *Porgy*, many reviewers interpreted the production as the story of a group and not a group of individuals. “Catfish Row, en masse, takes its pleasures and endures its pains,” wrote one Boston reviewer, who characterized the community as being marked by “pervading laziness,” while another described its “lurking savagery and dark laughter.” One typical reviewer condescendingly described “the life of the Row . . . with its simplicities of superstition, its breaking into spirituals of joy and sorrow—its every aspect of a race that
never grows up,” and another described the show as “an exposition of group psychology.” A third wrote that *Porgy* succeeded in “conveying to the spectator a sense of life in a community which, for all its ignorance and squalor, lives passionately and as a unit.” The *New York Evening Post* praised the Heywards’ rendering of “the quiet brutality, the superstition, and fierce passion beneath the smoldering languor of a Southern darktown, the psalm-singing, throat-cutting and crap-shooting events which sweep inscrutably over Catfish Row and leave it as unperturbed as its race.”

Some critics used even more pernicious imagery, with language that associated the play’s black subjects with animals or vermin. The set, with its numerous doors and windows, the sizable cast, and Mamoulian’s penchant for constant movement onstage prompted characterizations of the play, such as “a picture of Negro life in Catfish Row, the swarming rabbit warren which the darkies of Charleston have made out of a noble old house,” and “brimming pictures of the lives of the squalid, racy Negroes of Catfish Row.” Another reviewer described “the fluctuant multitude which swarms through the stately mouldering gateway and melts up stairways and through myriad doors in the old warren,” while in other reviews the residents of Catfish Row “swarmed over” the abandoned mansion and “scuttle into their holes” at the arrival of a white man. One white reviewer was bold enough to borrow the authority of some black audience members to lend credibility to his own stereotypes, writing of the wake scenes: “Some colored guests or patrons (they are allowed to sit in the orchestra for this show and did at the opening) declared these two the most honest of all the episodes as reflecting the true characteristics and color of the clam-diggings, stevedoring, catfish-netting, superstitious, superreligious, brawling, crap-shooting, woman-switching ‘niggers.’” Armed with such language and judgments, it was a short step for some to use *Porgy* as an example of innate African American primitivism. One reviewer described the play’s characters as being outside of “the white man’s civilization”: Catfish Row’s “gay, childlike personages are basically denizens of the African bush. Their loves and hates, their delights and terrors are of the jungle.” Others also described Catfish Row as “a piece of primitive life [where] emotion has not been veneered by civilization” and Crown as an example of “the rebellious jungle instinct” characteristic of some African Americans. *Outlook* termed *Porgy* “a clear impression of African Negro life lived as a totally separate, untouched thing within our civilization . . . real darky life, of the most primitive sort,” concluding bluntly: “coming from it, one realizes the thin veneer of civilization that coats many of our lower-class American Negroes.”
Entranced by the play’s “pictorial local color and race revelations,” reviewers tended to dismiss Porgy’s admittedly melodramatic plot as a series of episodes. These dismissals often took the form of a list of plot turns that, when reduced, relied on a familiar shorthand of stereotypes of black behavior. The New York Times, for example, described Porgy as “an ebony carnival of crap-shooting, murders, blaring picnics, comedy bits, passionate spirituals, [and] a hurricane storm.” Another review described the play’s opening scene as consisting of “fights, crap games, liquor, ‘happy dust,’ snatches of song, raucous laughter, gossip, dancing, love, jealousy, superstition . . . [that] all combine to create a marvelous picture of restless, moving, static beings.” (A colleague described the action more succinctly, noting that the play’s plot is set in motion by “the abrupt consequences of gin, craps, and a razor blade.”) Setting scenes, rather than exploring the complexities of individual characters, became an end in itself in Porgy, as the same reviewer concluded: “So successful is the scene atmospherically that no characters are defined, no drama is forced into the foreground.”

Many reviewers (even those who praised director Mamoulian) assumed that “the Guild cast” embodied essential knowledge about “the folk of Catfish Row,” a notion that reinforced the perception that Porgy was more fact than fiction. Perhaps because DuBose Heyward was already known as a white southerner from the publicity surrounding the release of the novel Porgy, few reviewers ascribed Porgy’s authenticity directly to the Heywards. But the presence of black bodies onstage conveyed the play’s authenticity with even greater power. Brooks Atkinson in the New York Times recognized this crucial difference between the novel and the play when he wrote: “On the stage ‘Porgy’ is ruder, deeper, franker, coarser than it is between book covers. For the acting of negroes generally expresses those qualities of elemental human nature.” Atkinson was not the only critic to assume that blacks were “natural” at communicating primitive human qualities. Numerous reviewers asserted that the performers shared intrinsically racial traits with the characters they portrayed and attributed the show’s authenticity to just this congruence. They erased the line between these black actors’ art and their lives with such observations as “the cast talk their own idiom and move to native rhythms”; “the Negro throws himself into his make-belief with all the honest to goodness quality of his real life”; “the Negroes who form the cast of ‘Porgy’ . . . do not act—they just seem to live their parts as if their places of residence were Catfish Row”; and “there is no criticism of the acting called for, because apparently there is no acting.” One preview article ranked racial similarity over regional difference: “Not that there would not be a vast difference be-
tween the negro of New York and those of the Black Border. But their integral characteristics, their humor, their keen artistic sympathy, their musical reactions, their spontaneous laughter and their response to rhythm, would be the same.”44

Other commentators offered assessments of the performers that acknowledged their acting skills but still attributed certain racially derived strengths and weaknesses to their craft. Chief among these was a tendency toward uninhibitedness, in contrast to white actors, who were naturally more repressed. “No wonder these negro men and negro women, given a little teaching, can act,” exclaimed one reviewer. “Their speech, their bodies are by nature expressive means. Upon them the blight of repressions has not descended.” A Detroit critic hailed the *Porgy* cast’s “casual style of acting” and “apparent spontaneity” as “uncommon to the stage,” and in Boston, another noted that the actors’ “native instincts . . . transcended artifice in every detail.” Such descriptions closely echoed DuBose Heyward’s oft-expressed ideas about the qualities that whites should envy, rather than disparage, in African Americans. Such perceived lack of inhibition, however, could also be construed as a lack of control. The *New York Times* opined: “In such acting there is life and spirit; it is lavish, animal, and usually undisciplined. When the course of the drama requires discipline—as for grouping and pacing—the acting becomes subtly uneasy.” *The Nation*’s critic spent most of his review, provocatively titled “Black Ecstasy,” discussing “how fundamentally the character of [the black actor’s] art differs from that of his white fellows.” The black actor may fail with the “subdued traditions” and “intellectualized dialogue” of the Western stage, but “what he cannot say he can with unmatchable eloquence shout, or sing, or dance.” He continued: “Ecstasy seems, indeed, to be his natural state. While our own actors pant after an emotion and must depend for their outburst upon elaborately learned tricks, he, on the contrary, is good only when some utter abandonment is to be portrayed.”45

One black commentator had a very different explanation for the link between racial identity and performing skills. Salem Tutt Whitney, writing in his weekly *Chicago Defender* arts column, likened African Americans to other ethnic groups that had suffered discrimination, asking poetically, “What people who have been caught between the millstones of the gods as we have who do not possess emotional depths?” The pragmatic expression of such circumstances, he observed, was a necessary dissemblance, making “acting . . . an essential part of our daily routine.” In a society governed by racist stereotypes, “our white friends have preconceived ideas of what we are, what we can do and what we should do, and if we don’t conform to type, we are very
likely to miss the thing we are after.” Whitney concluded mischievously, driving home his point: “If you have a desire to witness some genuine acting, watch the Colored brother do business with the white brother below the Mason and Dixon line.” In this view, Heyward was, however unwittingly, the “white brother” in such exchanges, not the uniquely qualified white observer of black life that most white reviewers assumed him to be.

The notion that African American performance had inherently racial qualities could also be put to the service of a racial-uplift agenda, as it was in The Messenger’s 1925 issue devoted to the arts. Amid numerous articles by black writers, the issue included two pages of “Comments on the Negro Actor” by white writers. This section consisted of an interview between editor A. Philip Randolph and arts patron Otto Kahn, a letter from playwright Eugene O’Neill, a brief essay by New York American dramatic editor Alan Dale, and a poem by New School for Social Research professor Harry Dana. Kahn saw untapped artistic power in African Americans who had been “denied for many generations freedom and opportunity” and characterized the “artistic manifestations” of black performers as having “a sweep, a zest, a swing, a genuineness . . . a quality which eloquently speaks and faithfully portrays the soul of a race.” O’Neill channeled Heyward when he exclaimed that “every white who has sense ought to envy you” and echoed Du Bois when he exhorted: “There ought to be a Negro play written by a Negro that no white could ever have conceived or executed. . . . Yours, your own, an expression of what is deep in you, is you, by you!!” Dale argued that black performers, whose talents were wasted in musical revues, needed theatrical vehicles that could showcase their “quiet intensity, a sort of suppressed fervor, a wistfulness, and a pellucid charm.” Dana’s poem, “The Negro Actor,” flipped the Social Darwinist idea of a racially based hierarchy of intellect on its head, beginning with a stanza about the “constrained” nature of Scandinavian theatre and proceeding southward through increasingly extroverted nationalities to end with a stanza on the “Negro actor,” who has “natural movements of flexible limbs” and a “voice pouring rich from relaxed throat.” But Kahn, O’Neill, and Dale all lamented the tendency they saw among the black performers who had made it to Broadway to allow themselves to become “an imitation of second-rate white standards” (Kahn), to learn “too much rubbish in the conventional ‘white’ school of acting” (O’Neill), or “to assume the characteristics of the other race, and to sink his own” (Dale). In this, they sounded remarkably like Dorothy Heyward in her concern that the Porgy players not “high hat” their roles. Like DuBose Heyward, who feared the effects of economic success and middle-class reform on the southern Afri-
can Americans on whom he fixed his gaze, these sympathetic (not to mention highly influential) white members of the theatrical profession defined African American success in terms of a racialized authenticity, leaving precious little room for black performers who attempted to navigate the norms of their white-dominated profession in a different way.

Black newspapers offered steady coverage of the professionalism and craft of black actors in all their roles, from neighborhood theatres and Broadway to national and international tours. This coverage included not just reviews but news, features, reprints of especially favorable reviews from major white newspapers, and correspondence. Taken together, it reinforced the idea that African American performers were worthy of celebration for their talent and accomplishments but also valuable emissaries to the white world. For Porgy, black newspapers noted in print the show’s every theatrical engagement and change in touring schedule, alerting their readership (which often extended beyond the newspaper’s own city) to opportunities to see the black-cast show and covering as news this extensive employment for professional African American actors. (The black press was eternally optimistic about the employment prospects of black performers.)

Many small news items and photographs about the charitable activities and honors of the play’s stars also made the arts pages. One article, covering a 1931 Porgy revival in Los Angeles, was typical, asserting both the professional status and skill of black performers and their role as ambassadors to the white world when given the opportunity, commenting proudly that “artists who hold top rank in the theater of America, making their bow for the first time in featured roles before Caucasian audiences, have proven a revelation.”

Black-press arts coverage also exposed readers to the aspirations and challenges of performers who received no such biographical coverage in the mainstream white press. A Chicago Defender profile of Porgy star Frank Wilson recounted the classic story of an actor who got his big break as an understudy called to step into the spotlight (for an absent Julius Bledsoe in In Abraham's Bosom) and chronicled his experience writing and producing plays. But it also suggested the precarious professional fortunes of African American actors, noting that despite his recent theatrical success, Wilson “still clings to his postman’s job,” a 5:00 A.M. to 2:00 P.M. shift delivering mail in Harlem. Exhaustion took second place to his writer’s art, however, since Wilson maintained that the job “gives him a chance to get inside the lives of his people.”

The New York Amsterdam News published a series of letters from Wilson, who reported in while Porgy was on tour. Wilson’s letters reflected the pride and familiarity that marked arts coverage in black news-
papers; the community of professional black performers was small, and the black press served largely as its cheerleading squad. In some letters, Wilson traced the trajectory of his career, acknowledging the friends, ministers, co-workers, drama teachers, and fellow performers who had helped him along the way. From London, he described the enthusiasm of British theatergoers and the mixed verdicts of British critics on *Porgy*, and he joked about his difficulty with currency exchange. He also sounded familiar black-press themes about the role of black performers as offstage ambassadors, advising those thinking of coming to London to save money and “carry your liquor like a gentleman.” Of a half dozen other African American performers also in London at that time, Wilson wrote, “These gentlemen are here with their families, and are not only making good on the stage, but also creating a splendid impression for the race by their conduct and behavior off as well as on.”

Eva Jessye (who would become chorus director for *Porgy and Bess* in 1935) provided a similar backstage view of the show and its performers when she described her visit to a performance of *Porgy* for the *Afro-American*. Her account portrayed each of the principals hard at work: for Georgette Harvey, “every rehearsal is a performance,” Percy Verwayne “impresses the onlooker as having spent many hours in private rehearsal,” and Jack Carter “is unreasonably impatient with his blunders.” Jessye did not blur the lines between the performers and their roles, assume that they brought any essential racial qualities to their performances, or suggest that they came by their talent by any means other than hard work. Instead, she found “the individual players as interesting in themselves as in the parts they are allotted” and predicted “the opening of ‘Porgy’ will reveal Negro actors of distinction and ability.”

Reviews of *Porgy* by African American critics fell squarely within the context established by this kind of arts coverage—laudatory, yet with an eye toward the practicalities of employment and racial representation, and frequently in implied dialogue with the coverage of black performers and shows that appeared in mainstream white newspapers. A clear debate about the political implications of *Porgy*’s representation of African Americans, and the ways that white audiences might interpret that representation, took place in these reviews, alongside some alternative readings of the story’s meaning. Most black critics recognized *Porgy* as a mixed blessing, providing unprecedented visibility for black actors but rooted in damaging racial stereotypes. Gwendolyn Bennett used her column in *Opportunity* to reprint excerpts from favorable reviews of *Porgy* that had appeared in mainstream white newspapers, although she refrained from offering her own commentary on the
play. Countee Cullen’s column reviewing *Porgy* also raised the question of the disproportionate number of light-skinned black actors being employed in Broadway shows. The *Chicago Defender*’s Cleveland G. Allen recognized *Porgy*’s importance for black actors but was careful not to impute the racial authenticity the play’s material, describing it as “a Race drama, which depicts one side of life as typical of the customs of lower South Carolina” and “one of the dramas which gives the performers an opportunity to do serious work.” The *Pittsburgh Courier*’s Floyd Calvin was skeptical of *Porgy*’s first scene, which made it seem that the play was “a burlesque on the race for white people to laugh at.” But after a few more scenes, he found himself converted, conceding: “As the play progresses, one can clearly see it as a genuine work of art, depicting a group of people as they really are, with their joys and triumphs . . . and their trials and tribulations.” As if answering the many white critics who saw only a representation of the entire African American race in *Porgy*, Calvin contended of the show’s characters that “one forgets that they are Negroes, but remembers that they are human beings.” Ever mindful of the questions of racial power that grounded the play, he also admitted that “Porgy interested me more as a study in racial relations than as a work of art.” Unlike white reviewers, Calvin viewed the play as an illustration of the effects of southern white racism. He subverted white critics’ assumptions about authentic African American characteristics by asserting, “Although the white man is supposed to be of the ‘superior’ race, the Negro, in his crude, plodding way, is many times his equal and sometimes his superior,” as when Crown demonstrates his courage (a virtue “not alone native to the white man”) in going out into the hurricane to find Clara.54

Whitney, writing in his *Chicago Defender* theatrical column, agreed that the love between Porgy and Bess “dignifies the sordid story and sheds its radiance, like a benediction, over the lives of the unfortunate tenement dwellers.” While the show may have presented “the squalor, poverty and immorality of a tenement district,” it was, to his eyes, “the tragedy of maletic environment” and not representative of the entire race. Calvin also saw the production as a down payment on future African American theatre, an “apprenticeship” for emerging black actors and playwrights “who will at once be practical as well as accurate in dramatizing the better side of our life.” Whitney, too, viewed the production with a sense of optimism. He noted that after years of African Americans “catering to” white theatrical taste, “now in vaudeville and drama they are about ready to allow us to do anything we are big enough to do . . . [and] promotors and producers are now asking for a higher type of Negro drama.” In his view, *Porgy* represented a triumphant
moment after decades of black theatrical striving: “All comes to him who waits and works.”

Other black-press reviews and columns touched directly on African American concerns about *Porgy*’s representation of black people to white audiences. Cullen admitted that he approached a dress rehearsal “in fear and trembling, and uttering many a silent prayer.” Jessye’s review in the *Afro-American* referred to the “talked about, argued about, prophesied about” production and assured readers that she would address “the many questions” about the show. One of those questions was about *Porgy*’s use of the word “nigger.” Jessye deemed it unimportant and optimistically maintained that “words mean only what we allow them to mean. . . . We outgrew that despicable term long ago and shortly it will be discarded altogether.” She found the play to be “a splendid thing for the Negro” with “many things of beauty,” including the love affair between Porgy and Bess and the loyalty of the Catfish Row community. Cullen, too, was “grateful for a play that has sincerely striven to be faithful to the original story.” Jessye saw not stereotypes but a production that “reveals the immeasurable capacity for feelings of the Negro—spontaneous, human, and of the vital quality not found in those of more shallow natures.” Indirectly acknowledging the potentially racist interpretations that white audiences might make of *Porgy*, Jessye argued that “surely the most prejudiced eyes could see” Maria’s “love of fair play and a square chance to the underdog . . . despite her cyclonic buffoonery.”

On more than one occasion, Whitney used his *Defender* column to address both African Americans who were critical of *Porgy* and one white critic who proffered his political analysis of such black criticism. To the former, he pointed out that *Porgy*’s success was a force to be reckoned with: “When a person or thing withstands the acid test of public opinion and survives and still creates as much ‘whoopie’ as does ‘Porgy,’ regardless of what one’s personal opinion may be to the contrary, that thing has merit.” He also argued, more substantively, that “the story is no more characteristic of Race people than of any other people of a like social scale and environment. . . . We cannot blame the other fellow for thinking of us as one class if we think the same about ourselves.” Both echoing Du Bois and anticipating the later arguments that the U.S. State Department would make about the message of *Porgy and Bess*, he continued: “We must learn to look at the slum life of our own people with the same detachment or the same emotional reactions that we would feel or entertain were we looking at a portrayal of the apache life of the Paris slums. . . . We react in pretty much the same manner to influence and environment as any other race of people.” At least two black audience members,
writing to the Defender, agreed with him. C. M. Cunningham felt obliged to “register a comment in favor of the play” to counter the criticisms that had appeared “in the Defender and in other newspapers.” Cunningham argued that Porgy was art, not politics, and should be taken as such: “People are not going to see ‘Porgy’ to learn what progress the Race has made. They are going there to be entertained. Modern art is interested in interpreting actual situations and does not concern itself with creating a moral.” Mrs. Leona M. Brown was even more straightforward in her praise, deeming Porgy “the most interesting play of the year . . . so good that it is positively good for the soul,” with “tense, dramatic moments that were intensified by the marvelous acting of the entire cast.”57

Whitney also used his column to answer directly a column by William H. Houghton, in which the New York Herald Tribune critic attempted to explain why African American audiences were not embracing Porgy. Houghton’s central point was that “‘Porgy’ shows the Negro not as he would like to be, but as he really is,” and he further speculated that black audiences flocked to black-cast musical revues rather than to Porgy because “the Negro is not tough-minded” and preferred the “nearly white” and “engagingly handsome girls” of the revues to Porgy’s realism. Whitney shot back that “a portrait of the Negro race permits of as many views and angles as does that of any other race of people. That we like to see ourselves as we would like to be is common to all people.” He added that of course some African Americans lived in places like Catfish Row, “but there are also places . . . where our people reflect the life of some of the most aristocratic and cultured white districts.” To Houghton’s cataloging of supposed African American racial characteristics (“his irresponsibility, his squalor, his credulous ignorance and his abysmally good nature”), Whitney reiterated: “All of which is very true of some of us, but not of all of us. What race can deny its ignorant, superstitions and irresponsible. There are sections of this country where the white people are abysmally lazy without the neutralizing ingredient of our advertised good nature.”58

Black theatre critics recognized the political implications, both explicit and implicit, in Porgy and in the ideas that white audiences and critics took away from the show. But that was not the message that the Theatre Guild, the nonprofit professional theatre that produced Porgy, hoped to send to reviewers and audiences. In fact, the Guild did everything it could to position the play as an authentic depiction of southern black life and, crucially, to reassure white audiences that the show had no political agenda or message about race relations in America. The Theatre Guild occupied a rarefied

100 • Porgy, 1927
position in New York City’s professional theatre world in the 1920s. Along with the amateur little theatres, a handful of professional theatres in New York City attempted to produce theatre that was intellectually uplifting and challenging, most notably the Theatre Guild and the Provincetown Playhouse. Precursors of the nonprofit regional and Off-Broadway theatre that emerged during the 1960s, these noncommercial theatres did in the 1910s and 1920s what Broadway did not: produced plays by European writers; generally avoided using star performers; employed experimental, often abstract settings and methods of staging; and sold tickets largely through subscriptions, which guaranteed funds for artistically risky productions but required an unusual level of commitment from audiences. They also produced dramatic plays that featured African American characters played by African American actors. The Provincetown Playhouse and the Theatre Guild were the first professional theatres in New York City to stage dramas with all-black casts.

Despite these unique commitments and methods, the Guild and the Provincetown were not entirely separate from the world of the commercial theatre. Newspapers regularly covered both theatres, sometimes with knowing asides about their highbrow subjects but essentially on the same basis as Broadway shows. One critic deemed the Theatre Guild audience “the upper and brainier half of Manhattan’s theatre patrons.” More important, when either the Guild or the Provincetown mounted a successful show, they quickly transferred it to a larger theatre, usually one located in the commercial theatre district, and extended its run as long as ticket sales allowed. And both theatres shared the fate of the larger commercial theatre, which was severely curtailed by the Depression and the rise of film as popular entertainment. Internal dissent and the loss of private funding in the wake of the 1929 stock market crash finished off the Provincetown, and the Guild, while it survived into the 1950s, became more conventional in its offerings.

The Theatre Guild initially signaled how it would position its production of *Porgy* in an article published in the *Theatre Guild Quarterly*, a magazine sent to subscribers. It characterized the show as “a distinct novelty” and an “experiment” for the Guild because it would require an almost entirely African American cast and present “a part of the American scene which is generally unfamiliar to theatregoers.” It noted, with some exaggeration, that “there have been many plays dealing with the social relations between colored and whites, from the standpoint of miscegenation and so forth.” In contrast to those plays—which in 1928 a discerning theatregoer could count on one hand—*Porgy* instead would be “a colorful folk play which gives us
If you are interested in—

An authentic picture of Southern life,
A richly mounted colorful pageant of life among the Charleston negroes,
A play full of the picturesque, humorous and tragic elements of this life,
An exciting story played against a background of simple negro melodies,
Colored life free from any hint of race problems or antipathies,
Un hackneyed spirituals sung as you have heard them in the South without the usual affectations of Northern rendering,
The appearance of a real orphanage band from the Jenkins Orphanage and led by a tiny mite who is already a master of jazz rhythms,

See PORGY

REPUBLIC THEATRE
42nd Street West of Broadway

Matinees Wednesday and Saturday. Mail Orders Promptly Filled
a vivid picture of Negro life in a Southern town, in which the social problems involved are not the raison d'être of the play, or are its actors protagonists for a special theory of the authors.” With this, the Guild not-so-subtly informed its subscribers that Porgy, while featuring black actors, would be different from, and safer than, Eugene O’Neill’s All God’s Chillun Got Wings. The O’Neill play, produced by the Provincetown Playhouse three years before, had been so controversial for its depiction of an interracial marriage that the city of New York attempted to shut down the production.63

While segregation and white supremacy were evident and authentic details of southern life for those who chose to see them, the Theatre Guild managed to provide every possible authentic Charleston detail to its production that suggested charm while avoiding those that implied white domination. By making the Porgy production superficially faithful to its Charleston setting, the Guild linked the play’s fictional characters to real African Americans. And by publicizing these efforts at authenticity in the press as well as through in-house publications like the play’s program and Theatre Guild Quarterly, the Guild created a powerful frame for how audiences and critics understood the play, a frame that blurred distinctions between fiction and documentation and emphasized the distance between audience and characters. The Guild sent set designer Cleon Throckmorton to Charleston for research, followed by director Mamoulian. (The two were nothing if not thorough: they returned with plans to adapt an actual Charleston building for the stage and an array of forty-nine street sounds to use in the production.) Program notes and press accounts described these trips, and Throckmorton’s set was so impressive that it elicited its own ovation when the curtain rose on opening night.64 The Guild also brought an actual “colored orphan band” from Charleston to New York City to participate in the production. Despite the expense involved, the young musicians appeared onstage for only one scene, which suggested that the Guild recognized their true value to the production: what could be more authentic than actual African Americans from Charleston? In a gesture that both signaled the band’s provenance and reinforced the class divide between the characters onstage and the ticket holders in the audience, a program note instructed those who

(opposite)
The Theatre Guild promoted Porgy in very specific terms as an “authentic” portrayal of southern African American life, infused with music and divested of politics. In doing so, it helped to establish in the minds of audience members and theater critics what they would see and what it signified.

Porgy, 1927 • 103
wanted to donate to the orphanage to contact the Theatre Guild office.\textsuperscript{65} The program also reprinted lyrics to some of the spirituals sung during the show and corroborated their origin by thanking the Charleston-based Society for the Preservation of Spirituals for its assistance. Establishing a properly anthropological stance for the audience, program notes explained that a “conventional negro dialect” had been substituted for the more authentic but more “obscure” Gullah and helpfully informed audience members “the word ‘Buckra’ means a white man, and ‘Shouting’ means the bodily rhythms that accompany the music.”\textsuperscript{66}

In stage directions as well as plot, the Heywards highlighted both the actual fact of Catfish Row (“the action of the play takes place in Charleston, S.C., at the present time”) and its distant, impenetrable character. Their extensive description of Catfish Row in the play’s opening pages (also reprinted as part of a New York Times article) emphasizes the building’s physical decay and directs the actors to set the scene by speaking Gullah, a language foreign to the audience’s ears. The Gullah, “like the laughter and movement, the twanging of a guitar from an upper window, the dancing of an urchin with a loose, shuffling step, it is a part of the picture of Catfish Row as it really is—an alien scene, a people as little known to most Americans as the people of the Congo.”\textsuperscript{67} In the original stage instructions, the actors gradually modulated out of the pure Gullah into a southern black–dialect English, heavily inflected with Gullah. This device proved baffling to New York preview audiences, and the pure Gullah was quickly dropped.\textsuperscript{68}

While the authenticity of the play’s black actors became paramount with the theatrical adaptation of Porgy, DuBose Heyward continued to write non-fiction essays about the sources of his authentic racial knowledge and his interest in using African Americans as fictional subjects. (His wife and co-author, Dorothy Heyward, wrote one as well.) These narratives hid in plain sight the kind of racial politics that the Heywards and the Theatre Guild insisted were not part of Porgy at all. Two of these narratives situating the Charleston origins of the Porgy story described encounters between African American men and white law enforcement. In the first, which would become the most widely repeated version of how he came to conceive the play’s title character, Heyward reads a brief newspaper police report about a crippled African American man’s attempted murder of an African American woman, his attempt to elude police in his goat-drawn cart, and his eventual arrest. This essay was published as the introduction to the print version of the play and described the play’s genesis, starting with Heyward’s poetic descriptions of the scenes of black life that had “the power to stir me suddenly and
inexplicably to tears or laughter.” It included the story of Samuel Smalls, the man featured in the newspaper clipping, whose violent episode of “passion, hate, despair” upended Heyward’s assumption that black life “could never lift above the dead level of the commonplace” and awakened him to the possibility of tragedy in the lives of the African Americans around him. Motivated by his “profound respect for the authentic in folklore,” Heyward wanted to acknowledge his source and convey the minimal details that he knew of Smalls’s life, since “the romantically inclined have forgotten that there was a beggar named Smalls, and speak of him only as Porgy.” But Heyward was also claiming credit for his artistic creation, reminding readers that Porgy was “a creature of my imagination, who synthesized for me a number of divergent impressions and emotions” and who was, ultimately, “a white man’s conception.”

Heyward’s other, and far less frequently repeated, nonfiction explanation for how he came to write *Porgy* was a stark account of how a black man met his tragic fate at the hands of the Charleston police. Published in the *Theatre Guild Quarterly* (and reprinted in the *Chicago Defender* under the amusingly incorrect byline of “Du Bois Heyward”), Heyward’s article described his childhood fascination with African American workers, both urban and rural. The urban he saw working on Charleston’s waterfront and overheard singing in the city’s black churches; the rural, “the people who had been with my family in the plantation days before the Civil War,” he saw when they made “pilgrimages from the country to see us” bearing eggs, chickens, and stories, to which the young Heyward would listen “by the hour.” Heyward’s atmospheric memories of what he saw and heard of African Americans were in keeping with his previous writing, both nonfiction and fiction. The detail of the country visitors offered both a window into his notion of a harmonious interracial kinship rooted in work relations—and even previous ownership—and an inadvertent admission that his family, possessed during his childhood of greater amounts of lineage than cash, received what was essentially charity (although the Heywards likely did not perceive the generosity of their social inferiors in that light). Even more surprising, however, was Heyward’s vivid description of “the first thing that made me feel the urge to write about Negroes.” On his way to work one morning, he was surprised by the sight of “a large, splendidly set-up Negro racing directly toward me.” Then a white police officer in hot pursuit “aimed coolly and carefully and fired. The man lurched forward and died almost at my feet.” Heyward was haunted by the scene, which “kept crowding in between me and the pleasant, lazy routine of business and off-hour frivolity.” Unable to shake the memory, he took a vaca-
tion from work and composed the poem “Gamesters, All!,” then he resolved that he “would some day give [himself] to writing” and that his “first work would be about the Southern slum Negro.” Heyward’s only explanation for this episode of officially sanctioned white violence was that there had been “some small robberies from freight cars on the waterfront tracks.”

Both of Heyward’s essays offer the mix of nostalgia, atmospheric detail, and unquestioned racial hierarchy that characterized the novel and play versions of *Porgy*. An article written by his wife sounded similar notes. The very same weekend as Heyward’s Theatre Guild essay was reprinted in the *Defender*, the *New York Times* published Dorothy Heyward’s piece titled “‘Porgy’s’ Native Tongue” in its Sunday arts section. Heyward described the origins, vocabulary, and syntax of Gullah, a creolized language used by African Americans in Low Country South Carolina, and its use in *Porgy*. To illustrate her account of how strange and alien Gullah sounded to untrained ears, she described, at some length, her initial encounters and miscommunications with Maria, her in-laws’ African American housekeeper. Intended as an amusing and affectionate story, the account also illustrated that Heyward and her husband “knew” the African Americans who inspired their fictional characters in the context of an employer–servant relationship where they were always the employers. (The anecdote, while intended to be charmingly self-deprecating, also suggested that Dorothy Heyward lacked the insight into African Americans that white critics so readily ascribed to her husband.) The article served as yet another device that publicized and framed *Porgy* for potential audiences and reinforced the notion that the play documented rather than invented its African American characters.

The Guild’s efforts to sound the same notes of nostalgia and atmosphere to situate *Porgy* as an authentic, apolitical depiction of black southern life succeeded in spectacular fashion. Theatre critics, much like the literary critics who responded to Heyward’s novel two years previously, lauded the production and its creators for the insight it provided into the genuine emotions and experiences of a group of African Americans in Charleston, South Carolina. Many readily conceded that the play was hardly a masterpiece of dramatic story or structure but insisted that its authentic rendering of a thrillingly exotic yet recognizably American atmosphere trumped its literary shortcomings. The *Brooklyn Eagle* epitomized this stance when its reviewer concluded of *Porgy*: “It is not concentrated drama, nor efficient nor tight and tidy and trim. But it gives a picture and has a fine, ardent, simple air of truth.” Critics articulated their belief in the production’s truth around a variety of issues, including the visual spectacle of Catfish Row itself,
Mamoulian’s staging, and the inexperience and indiscipline of the show’s African American performers. In short, there was very little, onstage or off, that critics did not use to construct their case for the play’s authentic depiction of African American life.

As the first three-dimensional realization of Heyward’s vision, the stage set for *Porgy* proved highly influential on subsequent productions of the opera *Porgy and Bess*. Heyward had set the story in an actual Charleston building, and the play’s stage directions were highly specific. They described how “the walls rise around a court, except a part of the rear wall of the old house, which breaks to leave a section of lower wall pierced at its centre by a massive wrought-iron gate of great beauty which hangs unsteadily between brick pillars surmounted by pineapples carved of Italian marble.” They also took care to describe the windows, all of which were to be “equipped with dilapidated slat shutters, some of which are open, others closed, but with the slats turned so that anyone inside could look out without being seen.” Throckmorton’s set included the shutters and windows, which gave the set vertical dimension and allowed for frequent stage business of actors moving their heads in and out of them. The windows became an iconic aspect of the show’s visual identity; the Theatre Guild used a drawing of black bodies leaning out of shuttered windows on the cover of its *Porgy* program, and productions of the opera were promoted with similar images for decades to come. Many reviewers noted the set’s literal Charlestonian authenticity, and a few even commented on its theatrical impact and symbolic power. “Porgy’s habitat, the fine old aristocratic courtyard gone to ruin, stands at once as setting and symbol,” wrote one New York reviewer. “It is the ideal background for racial self-consciousness and suspicion which translates itself into drama by the slamming open and shut of curious shutters and by sudden calm and ignorance when a white stranger strays in to search for a negro.” Another described both the action and the atmosphere that the setting facilitated, “the hives of colored life, teeming, rampant and picturesque, with the moribund old home sagging, dropping its plasters, aging, decaying, rotting. . . . There were the ‘apartments’ with the busy negroes and the cachinnatory negresses, mobbing the courtyard, leaning out of the windows, jostling each other.” To others, the set’s symbolism was less energized; it was rather a place “where dilapidation, streak by streak, has smeared itself upon dignity.” Throckmorton’s set was an integral part of the audience’s experience of *Porgy* as a theatrical production and a key symbolic element in the way audiences understood the play’s larger meanings.

The theatrical staging of *Porgy* also occasioned commentary on the play’s
racial authenticity, from critics and from the director himself. When the Russian-born Mamoulian was dispatched to Charleston to absorb local atmosphere, he commented on his trip with an immigrant’s instinct for claiming white identity, telling the *New York Herald Tribune* that he found African Americans in Charleston “quite different in speech, temperament and appearance from our negroes.” He was particularly adept at organizing crowd scenes, a necessity given the show’s cast of fifty. He orchestrated such scenes rhythmically, establishing a beat and setting each character onstage to a task performed on that beat; as characters joined the action onstage, the tempo gradually mounted. “In the depiction of mass emotion, and the manipulation of the mob, the production is superlative,” applauded one reviewer, while another thought that the technique “throbs and creates a natural rhythm that promotes the dramatic scenes.” For some reviewers, however, reliance on the stereotype of the inherently lazy African American caused them to assert that Mamoulian betrayed his lack of authentic knowledge through the show’s pacing. *New Republic* critic Stark Young found the direction too brisk and efficient, lacking “the rich languor of physical rhythm or voice or emotion that is natural among Negroes.” *Dial*’s reviewer praised one scene for its pacing but claimed it was achieved by the actors in spite of Mamoulian’s direction, insisting “it had its own rhythm, an inherent, not an applied one.” Another columnist gave him credit only by way of his African American cast, informing readers that “Mr. Mamoulian’s entire knowledge of the folk of Catfish Row came through his experience with the Guild cast.”

Such views of “inherent” black talent (and knowledge of Catfish Row) buttressed perceptions of the play as authentic while also diminishing the performers’ previous theatrical training and experience (largely in black theatre and vaudeville). One review described the *Porgy* cast as “this wild, untrained, tatterdemalion horde of players” and another as “a troupe seized from the dusky depths of the vagrant Negro theatre.” “Harlem was dragged with a net, and all possible and impossible persons were brought in,” reported one Boston newspaper, which also repeated the Guild’s conviction “that good [i.e., white] actors who knew nothing of negroes could not do so well as less experienced negro actors who did.” Many white critics expressed surprise at the talent assembled onstage and assumed that they had received extraordinary coaching from director Mamoulian. *Variety* was typical when its reviewer observed that “the acting is a thing of wonder. Where the Guild dug up so many colored legitimate actors, psalm-warblers and character-types is hard to imagine. And their training and directing must have been a
most intricate and tortured job.” The Guild partially sustained that misconception with a program note describing how it took six months to assemble the cast, including “many of the smaller part players [who] had never been on the stage before.” While that fact was fairly innocuous, a theatrical column item on the unreliability of the black cast members was not, telling readers that “the Guild has had its secret troubles managing so light-hearted a troupe, even on the home grounds. . . . Some of them do find it just a little hard to remember to come to the theatre at all.” Lawrence Langer, a Theatre Guild manager, confirmed the existence of these prejudices about black performers in his account of how the Guild approached “a number of well-known directors” with offers to direct Porgy. They all declined, apprehensive about working with an all-black cast because of the “many tales (mostly untrue) of the irresponsibility of Negro actors” then circulating in Broadway circles. The Guild itself harbored certain prejudices about black performers, or at least a canny understanding of the prevailing employment market; in 1928 the nationally syndicated theater columnist Burns Mantle reported that some members of Porgy’s cast were on the verge of a strike over the issue of equal pay for the Guild’s African American and white performers.75

A few white reviewers argued that the show’s black performers were inauthentic because they were from New York City rather than from the South, reinforcing the idea that black authenticity was exclusively southern and erasing the performers’ considerable theatrical skill. Dial’s reviewer was not alone in noting that director Mamoulian was a recent immigrant from Russia, which he viewed as an asset: “I would rather have a negro play in the hands of a Little Russian or of a Scandinavian who understood folk forms of expression, than in those of a negro who knew nothing but Harlem.” A newspaper columnist took the opposite view: “I’ve a hunch that ‘Porgy,’ at the Guild Theatre, isn’t as worthy an entertainment as the critics pretend. Acted by brown-skinned New Yorkers, staged by a Russian whose mother was an Armenian, it’s almost anything but Southern. Catfish Row seems more like a night club than it seems like Charleston. . . . [Characters] are as good as lost in the Russian-Armenian-One-hundred-and-twenty-fifth-street goings-on.” The New Republic complained that “the whole quality is thinned down from the Southern real thing, in voice, gesture and impulse—the acting brought to Crown, for instance, is only Northern white nervous energy.”76

The numerous critics who compared Porgy and Lulu Belle, a drama that had run for more than 450 performances on Broadway in 1926, also traded in the notion that only a southern variety of blackness was genuine. The play,
produced by the powerful impresario David Belasco and written by Charles MacArthur and Edward Sheldon, told a Carmen-like tale of a blues singer who seduces a barber and then ruins his life. Set in Harlem, Lulu Belle featured a cast of 100 African American and fifteen white actors, with the play’s two leading roles performed by whites in blackface makeup. For some white theatre critics, Porgy’s crowds of black actors and neighborhood setting simply called to mind the previous year’s play. “This production is of the sort that we have received on occasions from Belasco,” noted the Cleveland News, while Alan Dale of the New York City American found Catfish Row to be reminiscent of Belasco’s version of Harlem and concluded of the similarity that “perhaps in the accent only is there a vital difference between Harlem and any town.” To others, however, the Heywards’ play had the clear edge in its use of African American actors. “There isn’t a touch of Belasco in it,” proclaimed the Brooklyn Eagle of Porgy’s crowd scenes, while both the Cleveland Press and the Chicago Tribune deemed Lulu Belle “shoddy” in comparison with Porgy. Alexander Woollcott of the New York World was most pointed, describing Porgy’s opening as a scene that “deliberately goes out after Mr. Belasco’s scalp—and . . . comes home with it. For this scene and all of ‘Porgy’ suggests what, in the same hands, ‘Lulu Belle’ might have been.”

It is difficult to discern whether these critics found Lulu Belle racially inauthentic because it was set in a northern city, or because of its use of blackface makeup on the performers in the leading roles. In either case, Porgy had clearly set a new standard among white theatre critics for the presentation of African American life.

The Heywards and the Theatre Guild made every effort to create a play that in both substance and presentation muted questions about racial inequality, and they repeatedly claimed that Porgy was pure art, untainted by politics. In its avoidance of questions of power, Porgy most clearly demonstrated the limits of Harlem Renaissance-era optimism that the arts would be a vehicle for racial progress. Through the very structure of the play, the producers muted the South’s interracial power relations. The few scenes that brought white men onto the stage were either rendered comic or highlighted the black characters’ superstitions, relegating to subtext the well-warranted fear that caused African Americans to close ranks in the face of white authorities. This was intentional, as DuBose Heyward explained: “In the novel and the play I tried to give the negro of the old Southern slum in his own colorful setting without using the story as a vehicle for propaganda or discussion of the race problem, or for a meretricious type of Negro humor, but as I saw him, solely as a subject for art.” The Theatre Guild, despite its mis-
sion to present theatrically challenging material, carefully adapted and publicized Heyward’s disclaimer in advance of *Porgy*’s opening night. The *Afro-American* newspaper reported the producers’ statement that “the play has no purpose whatever outside of that of every drama—to present a page from the book of human life—a page on which the characters merely happen to be Negroes. There is no intention of making a plea either for the Negro or against him.” A few reviewers expressed relief that an evening at *Porgy* did not subject them to “discussion of the race problem.” *Time* informed readers that *Porgy* “deals with purely Negro problems (as opposed to most plays and books about Negroes, which struggle with race prejudice and intermarriage)”; and *Survey Graphic* agreed that “propaganda is mercifully absent. The problem is not of Negro and whites, but of the Negro and his soul.”78 Most white critics spoke volumes by failing to even acknowledge the dearth of interracial interactions in *Porgy* and the questions of power and injustice that were silenced by their absence.

Even if the Heywards chose to eliminate most suggestions of segregation from their play, it remained the social and legal context in which *Porgy* was performed during the late 1920s. While *Porgy* experienced tremendous critical success and toured to many cities in the United States, none of them were located in the states of the former Confederacy, and the tour traveled only as far south as Baltimore and Washington, D.C. Even in those cities where it did appear, it is unclear how many African Americans actually saw the play in person. Some evidence suggests that the Republic Theater segregated its seating, and its ticket prices were certainly steep. (A balcony seat at the Republic Theatre for *Porgy* cost $2.75, compared to $1.10 to $1.65 at other Broadway theatres.) *Defender* theatrical columnist Salem Tutt Whitney joked about the inexpensive $1.10 he paid for his seat in Chicago, but he noted that even still, “only two or three of the brothers were to be seen.” Segregation in New York City’s theaters certainly had existed earlier in the century, and evidence suggests that if not an official policy, it remained as a custom and mindset infrequently challenged by the presence of significant black audiences. But the popularity of *Porgy* and the black-cast revues began to alter that circumstance. In 1928 Mantle reported on the “whispers—just whispers up to now” among white theatergoers that “the progressive advance of the colored players in the native theater is going to force the issue of a color line being drawn sooner or later.” He further noted that “a sprinkling of colored folk on the orchestra floor” at *Blackbirds of 1928* caused some consternation among the largely white opening-night audience. The National Theatre in Washington, D.C., did in fact segregate its seating for *Porgy* as for
all of its offerings, even going as far as to employ “spotters”—light-skinned African Americans paid to identify other African Americans and remove them from the audience. The National turned away an entire black amateur theatrical troupe when it arrived, prepurchased tickets in hand, to see *Porgy*.79

African Americans had to suffer not only the official and unofficial segregation policies that barred them from seeing *Porgy* but also the scolding of white critics and audience members who defended the play against charges of racial stereotyping. Some aimed their barbs at “Harlem intellectuals,” such as the *New York Evening Post*’s Robert Little, who noted that “as for the Harlem intellectuals, so many plays by whites, for whites, about whites, have put whites in so much worse a light than ‘Porgy’ puts negroes that we can’t listen seriously to any objections to it on that score.” The *Boston Transcript* similarly reprimanded “the colored ‘intellectuals’ who say that ‘Porgy’ debases their people. Into the theater it has carried them; gorgeously.” In Detroit, a reviewer lectured those who had called *Porgy* “a disparagement of the American Negro”: “It is not derogatory to the Negro to declare that his near ancestors were a primitive people. Nor to assert that primitive impulses, necessarily so close to the surface, should occasionally become dominant. Rather is it a splendid story that he should have achieved what amounts to self-civilization so soon and, on the whole, so wondrous well.” He concluded, using the common logic that the play’s characters stood for all African Americans, that “no play that depicts so fine a soul as Porgy can disparage Porgy’s race.”80

The political debate about *Porgy* was particularly heated in Boston, where the city’s censorship board considered banning the production altogether. The *Boston Evening Transcript* ran an article claiming that the impetus for the potential ban came from members of the city’s African American community, who objected to the play’s depiction of the race. The *Transcript* rallied to *Porgy*’s cause, arguing that the notorious *Lulu Belle* (“a speculation in black-and-tan smut”) had been deservedly banned in Boston the previous year but that *Porgy* was of a higher artistic caliber. The article quoted at length the praise showered upon the play and its performers by prominent New York City theatre reviewers and wondered how anyone could object to a play that drew such critical admiration. To the *Transcript*, the censorship board made a legitimate moral judgment against *Lulu Belle*’s sexual suggestiveness, while the argument against *Porgy* was dubious, comparable to previous Bostonian protests against *Birth of a Nation* and *The Playboy of the Western World*, and illegitimate because “it proceeds from an offended racial element, eager to
impose its will upon the community at large.” The Transcript author (presumably the newspaper’s theatre columnist) bolstered his case by citing African Americans who agreed with him that Porgy was unobjectionable. In the initial article, he quoted “one of their number, who wishes to go nameless” who characterized Porgy as “the first good job the American theater has ever done with the Negro.” A week later, he included a brief query in his column from black correspondent Eleanor Trent Wallace, who reported that she had “made numerous inquiries among my people and have not, to date, found one inclined against” the play and wondered just which “colored people of Boston” were opposing the production. The city lifted the ban in time for the curtain to rise at the Hollis Theatre on 10 April, requiring simply the “omission here and there where the darkey folk of Catfish Row make innocently free with the name of Jesus,” cuts which the Theatre Guild was willing to make. No official mention was ever made of African American protests against the show’s content, and even if such protests had existed, African Americans exerted little political clout in 1920s Boston. One scholar speculates that Lulu Belle succumbed to the censor’s ax not simply because of its risqué elements but because its plot included a miscegenation theme, while Porgy’s suggestions of sexuality were safely intraracial.81

In the letters section of a second Boston newspaper, the Herald, white audience members got into the debate about Porgy as well, although after the show had opened and not in direct response to the possible ban. Their arguments employed the familiar frameworks through which most critics understood the show, touting the personal experience of whites who “knew” African Americans and thus felt authorized to comment on the play’s representations of them, parsing the distinctions between art and realism, and judging whether others had a legitimate right to protest the show. John Sanders, who enjoyed the play as a dramatic entertainment, found himself worrying about the political implications of its representation (“will the public . . . regard it as being distinctly of the theatre or will they interpret it as being an exact replica or criterion of negro life?”) and conveying the opinions of African Americans, who “are unanimous in their disapproval of the play and . . . resent the efforts of certain white dramatists to portray and promulgate all that is sordid, base and degrading in the Negro race.” Sanders used his own experience with African Americans as the final justification for his opinion, closing his letter with the declaration: “I know the negro personally, all classes and types, from the most humble and lowly to the most intelligent and prosperous ones, and I have never seen any such conditions as is portrayed by Dorothy and Dubose Heyward in ‘Porgy’” and insisting that
“the whole thing is a gross misrepresentation of negro life and should not be taken seriously.” A week later, the Herald published two letters responding to Sanders. In the first, Caroline S. Lockwood claimed to know African Americans, too, in both the North and the South, and opened her letter by chiding “how self-conscious the negro in the North has become and what a large and unsteady chip he wears on his shoulder.” A transplanted southerner, she vouched for Heyward’s knowledge and sincerity and laid out her own claim to authentic knowledge, having “lived all my unmarried life on a cotton plantation surrounded by my father’s 200 negro tenants and spending days at a time without sight of a white face except those of my family.” Her credentials thus established, Lockwood managed to argue the question from both sides, insisting that Heyward had accurately portrayed the “loyalty and devotion . . . patience under suffering, wisdom and philosophy . . . lack of self-control, superstition, a love of drink and gambling and a naïve ignorance of our accepted moral code”—all characteristics of African Americans that she had personally observed during her life in the South. Yet she also insisted that “every one must realize that Crown is never for a moment supposed to be representative of his people, any more than Bess is a typical negress” and argued that Heyward’s characters were types familiar from “any sort of play of New York high or low life.” Heyward had merely chosen a different backdrop for his story. Two days later, Marette Wilson Lanrey weighed in; she, too, was a transplanted southerner, having “lived practically all my life in Charleston.” She knew Porgy not as a type but as an individual, and she described him in vivid detail. “Many times I have seen this negro cripple in his goat-drawn box on wheels,” she wrote, “begging on King street, silent, sulky of countenance, glancing at passers-by through half-closed lids, or dozing through the heat of noon.” “Repulsive” was her one-word judgment of Porgy the man, yet she also maintained that she was “sure the Heywards did not intend their book should be taken as a criterion of negro life, but as a character study,” and asked, “Why should the negro take offence?” Elaborating her belief that African Americans had no right to protest Porgy, a character she herself had deemed “repulsive,” Lanrey argued that “there are many plays that are base, sordid and degrading, but they are not resented by the white race, for they know the plays are offered as entertainment and not as slurs at any race or group of people.”

Theater critics and audiences understood that Porgy contained political implications and arguments, despite the disavowals of the Heywards and the Theatre Guild. But what might Porgy, and the response to it, have looked like if the play included authentic southern details about white supremacy?
and the violence necessary to enforce it? It probably would have looked quite a bit like *In Abraham's Bosom*, a black-cast drama about the South that preceded *Porgy* on Broadway by a year. The first successful drama to feature a cast where black actors outnumbered white debuted in December 1926 at the Provincetown Theatre. Authored by white University of North Carolina professor Paul Green, *In Abraham's Bosom*—subtitled “The Biography of a Negro in Seven Scenes”—presented the story of Abraham McCranie and his ill-fated struggle to uplift his fellow plantation workers through education. Green’s play did not romanticize its characters, instead portraying a grim world that brutally thwarted black aspirations. While *Porgy* avoided any displays of violence perpetrated by whites on African Americans, *In Abraham's Bosom* was permeated with it, from the whipping that mixed-race protagonist Abraham receives from his white plantation-owner father in the first scene to the play’s final moments, when a white mob shoots Abraham in retaliation for his having killed his white half brother. There is also frequent violence among the play’s black characters, as when Abraham, finally allowed to open his school, is enraged by his students’ apathy and beats one of them severely.

In many significant ways, *In Abraham's Bosom* was a dress rehearsal for the critical response to *Porgy*. The *New York Evening World* was typical when it gushed that *In Abraham's Bosom* “teems with understanding of its people and theme—Prof. Green knows his North Carolinians intimately where and how they live.”83 This assumed authenticity by white arbiters, combined with the production’s self-consciously didactic air, gave the play’s characterizations and images particular force as a representation of African American life. With *In Abraham's Bosom* (and later *Porgy*), the ethic of the Little Theatre movement helped pave the way for dramatic black subjects and black performers on the professional stage while simultaneously bolstering long-held stereotypes of African American character and behavior in a forum that was not easily dismissed. The notion that theatre should be instructive and morally uplifting as well as—or even rather than—entertaining only reinforced the weight of white critics’ interpretations. If “highbrow” or serious theatre like *In Abraham's Bosom* was meant to instruct, was it not in fact teaching audiences that African Americans were lazy, violent, and doomed to failure? Just as they would with *Porgy*, critics in the black press subordinated their concerns over *In Abraham's Bosom*’s content and voiced their optimism and pride about the opportunities it afforded its African American cast.84

*In Abraham's Bosom* might have remained a footnote in New York City
theatrical history had it not been for the Pulitzer Prize committee of 1926. The cash-strapped Provincetown had mounted the play with a mere $1,500, planning an initial run of only a few weeks. Winning the Pulitzer Prize resuscitated the show’s commercial prospects, and the Provincetown quickly reopened it in a larger uptown theatre. One member of the 1926 Pulitzer jury explained that they chose In Abraham’s Bosom “because this play came up out of the soil of the South, and with a passionate sincerity tried to say something important about the Negro problem.”85 The prize certified the play’s political message and reputation as a “problem” play, an association echoed throughout its reviews. Many critics praised the subject of In Abraham’s Bosom but faulted the play as “preachy,” “repetitious,” “too long, too deliberate,” “not so hot with purpose as heavy with it,” and possessing “woefully little theatrical sense.” Another deemed it “a document, not a play.” One white reviewer cautioned “it is not a piece for the tired business man,” and another observed the boredom of “the numerous gumchewers” in the audience. Another advised that the show’s excellent cast “will not entertain you a great deal in this play of Mr. Green’s but you will not be seeking entertainment if you travel to the Provincetown to see it.”86

As with Porgy, white critics convinced themselves and their readers that In Abraham’s Bosom presented a true depiction of African American life by assuming that because the performers were black, their performances were natural and automatically authentic. The New York Times described the actors, all of whom resided in New York City, as “putting on the stage the phases of their own life in the turpentine country of North Carolina.”87 After “proving” that the play was authentic by citing its white southern author and African American cast, white reviewers frequently proceeded to praise the play’s scenes that centered on behaviors that indicated loss of control and unbridled emotion, and specifically included religious fervor, superstition, and spontaneous musical expression. The subheadline of the New York Times review summarized these stereotypes: “Range of Paul Green’s Drama Runs from Infectious Gayety of Negro Race to Religious Ecstasy.”88 Black reviewers saw no such racial authenticity and instead highlighted the visibility and possibilities the production provided for professional black actors. The Amsterdam News provided a detailed history of the Provincetown Playhouse’s previous productions featuring black actors (The Emperor Jones, All God’s Chillun Got Wings, and The Dreamy Kid) and recounted the career highlights of Julius Bledsoe, Rose McClendon, and Abbie Mitchell.89 The New York Age criticized the plot but recognized that “while it is written from the white southerner’s point of view, i.e., that the Negroes themselves fight
to keep each other down and are satisfied with their lot in the South, the play has intense dramatic appeal,” adding that “it does afford a splendid opportunity to bring the versatile Mr. Bledsoe to the attention of the theatrical public, and may be a stepping stone to greater things for all the members of the cast.”

The relative success of *In Abraham's Bosom* (123 performances during the 1926–27 theatrical season), despite its uneven reviews, established that black-cast dramas could succeed artistically and commercially with predominantly white audiences. It also established that “highbrow” theatre, with its intellectual aspirations, both provided opportunities for African American actors and reinforced racist stereotypes in an insidious new way. With the twin imprimaturs of the Pulitzer Prize and Broadway (the tour promoter’s brochure consisted largely of quotes from New York critics), *In Abraham's Bosom* went on to tour other cities in the Northeast and Midwest during the 1927–28 season. The tour created more work and exposure for the African American cast and helped to cultivate the audience that would attend the national tour of *Porgy* the following season. The *New York Age* was correct in its prediction, and the cast of *In Abraham's Bosom* also gained reputations among Broadway critics, directors, and producers; several went on to play roles in *Porgy*.

If *In Abraham's Bosom* looked more grim than *Porgy* (and played to less enthusiastic acclaim), it also sounded very different from the Heywards’ play. The Guild subtracted racial politics in its effort to distance *Porgy* from plays like *In Abraham's Bosom*, but it also made the shrewd choice to add a significant amount of black music in the form of spirituals. These spirituals proved to be a key element of the theatrical experience of *Porgy*, beloved by critics and emphasized by the Guild, which reprinted lyrics to many of the spirituals used in the play, both in the program and in a separate book of sheet music that audiences could purchase. Cast members sang the spirituals—which DuBose Heyward characterized as being “as much a part of the daily life of the negro as breathing”—during several scenes and as interludes between scenes. When Paul Robeson joined the production in March 1928 in the role of Crown, new spiritual solos were added for the character in order to take advantage of Robeson’s talents. In a “foreword” to the sheet-music collection, the publishers described spirituals as “the melodic expression of the joys and sorrows of the American negro race” and emphasized the authenticity of the musical arrangements, created “to retain the homely simplicity, soul and character of the original rendition.” On paper, without musical accompaniment, the spirituals’ dialect verses must have read like a foreign language to the largely white, northern *Porgy* audience, only reinforcing the
image of the play’s characters as “a people as little known to most Americans as the people of the Congo.”

Most critics were enchanted by the spirituals as entertainment that energized the play and as a gateway into authentic black emotion. They “convey[ed] to the mind of the white person the feelings, the very soul of the black man,” wrote one critic, while to another they expressed “the spontaneous outpouring of the utterly unsophisticated heart.” To a third, they were an essential ingredient of racial communication and “fulfil[led] all that emotional necessity for which Negro speech is inadequate.” Their performance alone was “worth twice the price of a seat at the Guild Theatre,” wrote one critic, while another, referring to the popular black musical revues, wondered “how other play producers could have so missed the spirit of these songs as to present them as cute or even comical.” In contrast, Countee Cullen gently chastised Porgy’s overuse of spirituals: “We are a singing people, no doubt, and that side of our nature has been given wide publicity, but I wonder if we just naturally must sing all the time.” The New Yorker made a similarly sarcastic aside, observing that Heyward’s “colored folk fall into singing spirituals with a frequency which might be discouraging to a tone-deaf negro trying to make good in a small way.”

One audience member thought that the spirituals had hoodwinked critics into praising an otherwise mediocre show. In a letter to the editor, she wrote: “I saw the play the other evening, and never before did I read such over-praise and wrought-up gush as the New York critics indulged in. Didn’t the poor fellows know that the success of the entire performance was due to the spiritual singers? Did that ever fail?” She concluded that Porgy was “first class hokum.”

A nine-week tour to London gave Porgy exposure outside of the United States, bolstered by the international editions of the novel that were published around the same time. In France, the novel was serialized in a magazine, and it was a best seller among English-language readers in Egypt as well. Responses to the play in overseas publications traced similar tracks as those in the United States, championing the play’s authentic depiction of African American life and affirming DuBose Heyward as an authority on the subject of race relations in the United States. As in the United States, there was even a dissenting voice from an African American living in Europe, whose challenge to British coverage of Porgy appeared in the Amsterdam News, completing a transatlantic dialogue over the play’s representation of its African American characters.

Porgy’s notoriety prompted the British print media, like reviewers in the United States, to call upon DuBose Heyward for his expertise and insight.
into African Americans. The London Star solicited him to write 800 words on the English reception of Porgy, or, if that held little attraction, “something interesting on racial prejudices as they exist in America.” Heyward chose the latter topic. The resulting essay defended southern segregation, chastised the hypocrisy of northern race relations, and advanced his notion that most African Americans, despite the recent out-migration, belonged in the South. Heyward argued that, until the recent migration, white northerners had been happy to preach racial equality without the burden of having to enact it with a large black population in their midst. Since “Northern white men are no more anxious to fill their schools, colleges, churches, and theatres with [African Americans] than are Southerners,” the result was an individualized, de facto form of exclusion that brought only “cruel disillusionment to the Negro.” White southerners, like their British colonial counterparts in Heyward’s analogy, instead had the benefit of “clean-cut and definite” laws enforcing racial segregation, leading to a “free and unembarrassed relationship” between the races where “the Negro knows exactly what to expect.” Addressing the massive black migration out of the South, Heyward predicted disappointment for educated African Americans who expected to find “social and political equality with the white race” in their new northern homes, but he nonetheless concluded: “I believe that the negro of education and ambition is happier in the North.” (Even with this concession, Heyward hardly promoted racial integration; he suggested that the northern African American “is going to solve his own problem by making for himself a city within the white metropolis as he has done in the Harlem district of New York.”) Black workers, however—“the still primitive type of Negro—the farm or plantation hand, the carpenter, the mason, the stevedore”—belonged in the South because of “heredity, temperament, and long association,” not to mention remaining free from competition with “white organized labor.” British readers thus had the benefit of Heyward’s oft-expressed premodern idyll that southern African Americans “belong to the fields rather than to the machines.”

In an interview with the London Observer, Heyward struck a similarly tangled defense of southern racial attitudes and policies, insisting that “the general feeling that the South is antagonistic to the negroes . . . is quite untrue.” He managed both to deny white-supremacist violence (“It is a fact that in South Carolina where I was born there has never been a case of lynching in its history”) and imply its presence (“I am afraid [negroes] are in for a sad time of it until they really find their place in the community, and one of the mistakes was to enfranchise them without adopting the protective measures that have since been passed.”). Yet he had to abandon facts in order to
do both: by 1919 the NAACP had documented 119 lynchings of black men in the state of South Carolina, and there were no “protective measures” in the statute books at the state or federal levels.97

London welcomed the Porgy cast with what appeared to be wholehearted enthusiasm. The opening-night performance received twelve curtain calls, and the show continued to play to “crowded houses.” Frank Wilson reported experiencing greater acclaim and attention than he had ever received from audiences at home, from being mobbed by fans when leaving the theatre to having “received more letters, autographed more photos, and made more friends than [he] ever dreamed of.” Yet the welcome was not completely enthusiastic. The Chicago Defender reprinted a brief article from the London Evening Standard, which reported on racial discrimination against African Americans visiting London; this included the Porgy cast, which reportedly “found difficulty in obtaining rooms in any hotel.”98 Critical reactions, too, mixed praise with an endorsement of the idea that the play’s characters were a separate and alien people. Some critics saw Porgy as a positive step forward from the racist caricatures of previous popular culture imported from America, when “clowning, playing the banjo, dancing and comic rolling of eyes was the accepted repertoire of colored actors.” As with the vogue for all things African American in U.S. cities during the 1920s, “English appreciation of negro achievements has reached a point where the ‘cult of the coloured’ has become fashionable.” Another London critic described Porgy as “all of the Southern Negro which the whimperings of Mr. Al Jolson and the mummeries of Topsy and Eva have not taught us to expect.” Like their American counterparts, London’s critics described the play as authentically rendering an alien culture; one likened it to an example familiar to English audiences when he wrote: “It is, so far as one can judge who has not been there, a true picture of life in South Carolina; it carries authenticity on its face after the manner of the plays of Mr. Sean O’Casey.” The Heywards “have seen the black race, not as the poor relation of the white, but as a people rich in its own delights. . . . They have visualised the Negro as richer for his lack of complication.” The London Daily Express deemed Porgy “a page torn out of life” and urged audiences to “study the colored people’s simple, childish ways, take part in their joys, sympathize with their deep sorrows, laugh at their ideas of marriage and divorce.” The Daily Telegraph saw in the play a “glimpse of another world of sound, color and primitive emotions,” while a provincial newspaper hailed Heyward as “The Prophet of the Negroes.”99

Hannen Swaffer, the London Daily Express’s drama critic, was sufficiently interested in Porgy’s author, subject, and cast to pen a lengthy feature article
about them. He saw a parallel not with O’Casey’s Irish peasants but with “a sordid tale of cockney life” and doubted that “a London that always turns away from sordid English stories [would] find a spell in the petty tragedy of Southern Negroes.” The article described the varying professional backgrounds of the play’s “Harlem” actors and devoted a section of the article (titled “Real Life on the Stage”) to a detailed recounting of their backstage behavior during the show:

The moment the curtain falls on a moving scene in “Porgy,” the Negro players take up their lives naturally. In one corner you see a couple making no attempt to hide the fact that they are making love. In the center of the stage, perhaps dodging the scene shifters, is a group practicing variations of the latest dance. . . . They all laugh half the time or they are plunged into the profoundest gloom. . . . Then, suddenly the bell rings, and, in a second, the actors are on the stage behaving just as naturally as actors and actresses as, a few seconds before, they were just ordinary human beings, living their loves and little hatreds. Only a man like Mamoulian could have managed a crowd like that.

Recognizing that what he found high-spirited and charming might also be read as a judgment on the professionalism of black actors, Swaffer added: “I hesitate to say all this because I notice that Negroes are becoming more and more self-conscious. Their emergence from Submergedom makes them irritated about every word you print.” Such an aside echoed almost exactly the defensive postures of white critics and audience members in the United States who were quick to instruct African Americans as to why they should not object to Porgy.

Even across the Atlantic, however, the American black press was ready to challenge Swaffer’s mocking tone. Irving H. Browning (identified by the Amsterdam News as a “European correspondent” when they reprinted this exchange) wrote to Swaffer to protest an earlier article on the Porgy cast. Browning began, “It always puzzles me to know why, in speaking of Negroes, or ‘blacks,’ as you call them, you always sort of make fun of the things they do,” and he refuted Swaffer’s characterization of the cast members who promenaded on Easter Sunday on board their ship en route to London as somehow imitating whites. “Perhaps you do not know that Negroes dress up just as other people do, and parade up and down any of the principal streets most anywhere in the world,” Browning continued, and he concluded with the hope that Swaffer would “wake up and realize that the Negro is an important person well worth considering in a serious way, and is not to be
taken as a joke all the time, as you and a few others take him to be.” In reply, Swaffer protested that everything he wrote was “meant in the way of sympathy,” and he urged his readers to see Porgy, declaring it to be “more human than all the dress-coated Negroes who sing syncopated tunes at 500 pounds a week.” But, unable to resist a final dig at his would-be black critics, he added: “It is much nearer to the heart of things than any of those Negroes who are feted by present-day society. They will not like ‘Porgy.’ It will remind them of a generation back.”

Porgy’s London run also drew attention from newspapers in France, Germany, Austria, and South Africa. Foreign critics of the play brought their own distinctly national perspectives to bear, finding links, however tenuous, between their own locale and the play. A South African critic claimed that the play’s “voice is that of aboriginal Africa, oppressed, bewildered, but yet endowed with no mean gifts which one day will be rightly prized as a worthy contribution to the sum total of progress and civilisation.” A French reviewer dwelt approvingly on the French Huguenot forbears of both Heyward and the South Carolina colony. Like American reviewers, some foreign critics offered information about Heyward’s background as context for the play. Here and there, though, some details became mangled in translation: the play was set in Charleston, Virginia; Heyward and his wife founded their own publishing firm; and, most outlandishly, Porgy’s success “made Harlem fashionable” and prompted a group of black actors to establish their own Broadway theatre company, which failed.

Of greater significance, however, was the degree to which foreign reviewers, like their American counterparts, saw Porgy’s characters as authentic representatives of their entire race and credited Heyward’s Charleston roots for his success in depicting this milieu. Even a few examples suggest the extent to which non-U.S. reviews promulgated the idea that Porgy presented a true picture of an entire race that was childlike, poor, and sometimes violent. One French reviewer described the play as “a piece in which you can so clearly feel all that is still primitive in these populations who live in the middle of a culture of European origin which cannot assimilate them.” Another wrote of the Porgy character: “Like all negroes, he is a gambler,” and characterized Catfish Row as an “exotic scene, all sunny and blooming with a language that is at once childlike and picturesque.” A third described the play as “realist drama, frightening in its primitive savageness, and which depicts Black life in Charleston, South Carolina,” and noted “the childlike naivety of its characters.” A South African critic similarly described African Americans as among “the child races plunged into an alien oppressive world.”
Vienna’s *Neue Freie Presse* provided the most complete catalog of African American racial characteristics on display in *Porgy*, whose characters were “in many ways childlike, light hearted, superstitious, different and contrasting from the conforming moral codes of whites, but with a sunny disposition and good humor, deeply religious and musically inclined.” Faith in the truth of racial stereotypes, and in the idea that *Porgy* was an authentic representation of African American life, clearly did not stop at the water’s edge in the United States.102

*Porgy* took its African American cast around the United States and around the world, but what did this unprecedented exposure in a serious drama actually accomplish? From the perspective of one *Chicago Defender* arts columnist, the verdict was mixed. Salem Tutt Whitney, himself a stage and film performer, wrote often about *Porgy* in his column, commentary that, like coverage throughout the black press, consistently addressed two key issues: the value of the professional exposure *Porgy* provided to its black performers and the nature and implications of the play’s representation of African Americans to largely white audiences. While Whitney supported *Porgy* in the face of black criticism when it debuted in 1927, two 1929 columns indicate how, even in the wake of the show’s tremendous popularity, both issues remained thorny for him. In September, Whitney’s column contended with the question of professional exposure for black performers. He described several white theatrical producers who remained skeptical that they could find enough black talent to fill “another show like ‘Porgy’” and their insistence that *Porgy*’s performers were “exceptions.” Whitney used his column inches to rail against the outdated notion of black accomplishment as exceptional: “Our white friends can’t yet realize that we are really advancing along all lines. Some can’t realize it, others are not willing to concede it, and others refuse to investigate. When they meet an educated, talented, refined Colored American they try to account for it by lulling themselves into the belief that such a person is only an ‘exception.’ In the days when Frederick Douglass was holding up our invisible banner, the ‘exceptions’ were not very common, but now the ‘exceptions’ are becoming the general rule.”

A few months earlier, Whitney had taken on the question of how *Porgy* represented African Americans to white audiences. In that column, his vehicle was an exchange with “a young writer, white, [who] takes our actors to task for appearing in such plays as ‘Harlem,’ ‘Porgy’ and others of like type that have been presented and which are so misrepresentative of the Race.” Whitney responded to such a challenge by insisting, as he had before about *Porgy*: “For the life of me, I can’t believe that there is a single white theater-
goer or a reader who does not know that such plays as ‘Harlem’ and ‘Porgy’ are not representative of the entire Colored people. If there are any such people their ignorance is as deplorable as the plays and stories.” But that answer was not quite sufficient, and his column delved into the question of the visibility and political work of black performers and the realities of a white-dominated entertainment marketplace. Perhaps, as he hoped, white audiences and critics did not take the stage depictions of black life as the whole truth, but neither did they seem interested in a more nuanced view. According to Whitney, “Just now white promoters and the white public refuses to consider or to patronize plays dealing with the cultural side of our life.” And he reported firsthand how black performers did the best they could under the circumstances: “I have talked with several of the players who have been cast in shows depicting only the mean, vulgar and humorous sides of our life and they unanimously deplore the fact. Yet they feel that our white public will stand to be educated. That they, the players, are really stooping so that they may conquer the prejudiced tastes of their white patrons.” He defended these performers as not “lacking in race pride,” but he still concluded his assessment of their continued work in racist vehicles with the question, “Are they justified in so doing?”

“Are they justified?” was a question that would echo on the arts pages of the black press into the 1930s and beyond, as the Porgy story was transformed into its third, and most famous, incarnation. For as the Theatre Guild basked in Porgy’s popularity, George Gershwin was preparing to compose a work that would, with the collaboration of Heyward and Gershwin’s brother Ira, become the opera Porgy and Bess. While Porgy was finding success as a novel and a play during the 1920s, the growing number of African American singers performing spirituals and Western classical music in formal concert settings helped to pave the way for Porgy and Bess’s 1935 debut. The popularity of the spirituals among white audiences helped to create an audience for an opera based on black folk music, and the presence of black singers in Carnegie Hall made the prospect of blacks performing opera for white audiences less improbable than it would have been a decade earlier. In the 1920s, African American artists and intellectuals seeking uplift through the arts found an unlikely vehicle written by a white poet from Charleston. In the 1930s, they found George Gershwin, whose prodigious talent and ambition to drive his reputation beyond Tin Pan Alley would give life to the time-bound tale of Catfish Row throughout the remainder of the twentieth century.
INTERLUDE
Charleston, 1920–1940

In 1927, the year that Porgy the play took audiences in New York and around the country by storm, whites outnumbered blacks in the population of South Carolina for the first time in more than a century. Some whites who noticed this demographic shift were frankly relieved. A handbook published by the state’s Department of Agriculture declared that the large black migration portended “new freedom for South Carolina . . . the removal of the always vague but always present shadow. South Carolina has become at last a white majority state.”¹ At the same time, Charleston’s elite white families, most of whom were descended from slave owners, were well under way in their campaign to preserve the city’s historical character and encourage tourism to the region. Joining a set of social clubs with overlapping memberships, they preserved eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings, promoted artists who depicted a particularly nostalgic type of local scene, wrote poetry, and collected examples of African American folk music. The proponents of these undertakings were notable for their determination to romanticize Low Country white supremacy, both past and present, by cloaking it in the more-refined expressions of white paternalism.² DuBose Heyward gave the archetypal African American characters who peopled his fiction a degree of depth; his peers hewed more closely to a set of carefully inscribed types, which one scholar has defined as “the domestic servant, the field hand, the street huckster, and the ‘old time’ ex-slave.” Born into the city’s rarefied white social circles and a charter member of these clubs, Heyward became the Charleston Renaissance’s national ambassador when his novel, play, and, later, opera put the city on the cultural map. In the same years that Porgy and Porgy and Bess
Charleston artist Alfred Hutty created this etching of Cabbage Row (the local name for the buildings on which Heyward based his descriptions of Catfish Row) in 1928. It reflects the romanticized view of the city that boosted tourism at the same time that Heyward’s popular novel and play elevated Charleston in national cultural visibility. (Alfred Hutty [American, 1877–1954], Cabbage Row, 1928, etching on paper; © Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association, 1955.007.0046)
became a national phenomenon, Charleston successfully transformed itself from a regional center into a national tourist destination.

African American migration out of South Carolina and the creation of an idealized, genteel image for the city of Charleston were not unrelated occurrences. Surrounded by a black population on the move—into Charleston from the South Carolina countryside, out of South Carolina and Charleston to northern cities—Heyward and his elite peers responded to the passing of their cherished way of life by attempting to suspend it in time. Just as Heyward did in *Porgy*, the white Charlestonians spearheading the city’s various movements in preservation and the arts ignored the city’s black middle class in favor of their preferred rural and working-class African American stock figures, or types, whose Gullah cultural practices and apparent docility in the face of white power appealed to their sense of history and social order. In doing so, they missed a thriving segment of Charleston’s African American life: the city’s educated, professional black residents who stayed and worked and campaigned for equality. These middle-class African Americans were themselves main characters in compelling but largely untold dramas of attempted social change right in Charleston. (Even in *Mamba’s Daughters*, the Heyward novel that limned a more complex black community, the protagonist must leave Charleston to pursue advancement, and it ends badly for her.)

For the city’s white boosters, the way that *Porgy* and *Porgy and Bess* amplified their vision of the city to a national audience was a stroke of good fortune. Precisely because of their Heyward-aided success in promoting their narrative of Charleston, it is necessary to explore in some depth the more complicated stories behind their vision in order to understand what Heyward and his peers saw, and did not see, in their native city.

Mainstream Charleston embraced Heyward’s ever more famous literary creation, if coverage in the city’s *News and Courier* newspaper is any indication. (We do not know what Charleston’s black newspaper, *The Messenger*, might have had to say about Heyward’s work, as it was never preserved on microfilm.) When the novel became a play and the city’s so-called Cabbage Row was actualized on a New York City stage as Catfish Row, the newspaper covered the production with an enthusiastic pride of ownership. Like the black press, the *News and Courier* trumpeted Heyward’s work by reprinting excerpts from positive reviews and press coverage from New York literary and theatrical critics. Charleston’s elites may have prided themselves on their city’s distinctive charms, but they had an eye on New York City’s cultural arbiters as well. The paper also ran articles that celebrated the authentic local details that were used in the production, including a playful explo-
ration of the proper form for shooting dice and the exact pitch of the staged version of the bells of St. Michael’s Church, a local landmark. In a lengthy article on the opening of the play *Porgy* in 1927, the *News and Courier*’s reporter provided a behind-the-scenes account of the attempt by the Heywards, director Rouben Mamoulian, and set designer Cleon Throckmorton to “transfer to the stage the spirit of the Charleston negro section.” The *News and Courier* reveled in the show’s authentic Charleston touches, such as the replica of the building that inspired Catfish Row; the show’s inclusion of “typical Charleston negro characters, stevedores, fishermen, street-venders”; and the use of “a number of characteristic Charleston spirituals . . . collected in South Carolina by Mr. Heyward for this production.” The actual African American lives that enabled such “typical Charleston negro characters” and that informed the “characteristic Charleston spirituals” were left unexplained, but the *News and Courier* put a different set of African Americans under closer scrutiny. Many column inches were filled with Mamoulian’s extensive anecdotes about the difficulty of finding and working with the show’s black cast, repeating such details as their inadequate training for dramatic acting, the necessity of “breaking” them of their bad theatrical habits, missed auditions, and their initially inattentive attitude toward the rehearsal process. While white Charlestonians could not fit New York’s African Americans into the familiar working-class “types” by which they categorized their city’s black citizens, the *News and Courier*’s coverage still managed to thoroughly undercut the professional status of *Porgy*’s black cast. Heyward’s fiction presented a nostalgic vision of a city of benevolent whites and colorful African Americans, and the *News and Courier*’s coverage of that fiction’s success in the wider world reflected this elite white vision of Charleston back to its local readers.

The success of *Porgy* and *Porgy and Bess* did more than simply bestow celebrity on native son Heyward. It also brought a strange, distorting brand of celebrity to the city of Charleston itself, transforming actual people and places into Heyward-altered replicas of themselves. Interest in the connection that these people and places had to the *Porgy* story begat an existence where the story became central to their identities. Heyward was not wrong to worry that a mere three years after his novel’s publication, people had already “forgotten that there was a beggar named Smalls, and speak of him only as Porgy.” A Charleston newspaper’s account of a death of a local fixture, a strolling peddler of honey named Ralph Bennett, noted that “Bennett was more than a character on the streets of Charleston for under the name of ‘Peter’ he figures in ‘Porgy,’ the play written by DuBose and Dorothy Hey-
ward of this city, and now being presented in New York.” The article even reprinted the character’s sing-song sales chant dialogue from the play. And thanks to Porgy’s success, a real-estate deal that would otherwise have attracted fleeting local attention garnered coverage in several New York City newspapers when numbers 89 and 91 Church Street, known locally as Cabbage Row, were slated for redevelopment into artists’ studios. Cabbage Row, as references in innumerable interviews and articles had revealed, was Heyward’s brick-and-mortar inspiration for the Catfish Row of his novel and play. A New York City landscape architect, charmed by Charleston and committed to the preservation of its architecture, purchased the property, which had been “vacant for some time,” with plans to renovate it into “apartments for use as studios by artists and literary folk.”

Cabbage Row’s vacancy was likely due to a petition brought to the Charleston City Council in 1922 by indignant neighbors, who demanded the immediate eviction of all of the African American tenants there who, they claimed, were involved in a range of illegal and unsavory activities, “including the prostitution of black women to white sailors and civilians, knife and gun fights, deplorable sanitary conditions, and the continual usage of ‘the most vile, filthy, and offensive language.’” The raw material for Heyward’s novel was apparently rather too raw for some Charlestonians.

A New York journalist’s account of her search for Catfish Row exemplified the new tourist narratives that the Porgy story was creating in Charleston, narratives that reinforced many of the paternalistic, nostalgic attitudes toward African Americans and their culture that Heyward’s writing had done so much to propagate. When, after a day’s fruitless searching, this New Yorker finally found Cabbage Row with the help of a local, she discovered that “[g]one were . . . the colorful, noisy, loyal and lawless Gullah negroes, whose life had been portrayed in a book they could not read, on a stage they did not even know existed.” As a consequence of Charleston’s historic preservation efforts, the city’s waterfront buildings had new worth for those who did not find its working-class black residents as charming as Heyward had. Cabbage Row’s black tenants were gone “because the property had grown too valuable, they were living in other quarters much the same, but not to be gaped at by Northern tourists.” If actual working African Americans were not available to be gaped at, Cabbage Row was a more-than-acceptable proxy. As tourists continued to inquire about its whereabouts, locals learned to point them in the right direction. Heyward had, in the words of one Chamber of Commerce official, “put Charleston on the map,” and his biography and the fiction he created mingled in tourist narratives as in so many
other articles about *Porgy* and its origins. The *New York Post* feature on the search for Catfish Row did just that, describing Heyward’s membership in “the tradition of the socially correct of the city,” which was, among other things, “a tradition . . . that caused old families to care for their negroes, to seek them out in Catfish Row when needed and to put in good words for them with the magistrates when they were arrested.” Catfish Row had become a real place in her mind and its criminally inclined residents the recipients of the noblesse oblige of elite white families. (The author’s interest in black criminality did not stop there; she also described Cabbage Row as “the worst tenement in town. The police were always in front of it, and when they wanted one of its residents to cart off to the jailhouse, they poked their heads through the doorway and shouted a name.”)

Heyward, ever the sentimentalist, expressed some dismay at the changes in his beloved city but also understood his role in the transformation and saw it as a form of progress. “If Charleston must become a tourists’ city,” he concluded optimistically, “at least it is bringing the nicest kind of tourists to its doors. The people who come to see Catfish Row are those who love the things old Charleston is supposed to stand for.” Like so many others, Heyward loved the structural embodiment of “old Charleston” in the form of its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings. In that, Heyward could see another benefit in the gentrification of downtown Charleston: “From a squalid, colorful, smelly and noisy negro retreat, Cabbage Row has become a chaste, extremely well restored example of Colonial architecture.”

The transformation of Cabbage Row was emblematic of a larger transformation in downtown Charleston, one driven by a group of elite white residents determined to preserve the city’s architectural heritage. While Heyward saw the early twentieth century, when Charleston’s downtown waterfront neighborhood mixed elite whites and working-class blacks, as a “Golden Age,” his peers in the city’s Society for the Preservation of Old Dwellings most certainly did not. These Charlestonians used their considerable social, political, and economic clout to preserve the architecture and cultural memories of their own vision of the city and its Low Country surroundings, a vision that idealized the city’s colonial prominence, affluence, and social hierarchies. Their motivation was rooted in strong connections to ancestry, unease with the changes sweeping through American culture during the early twentieth century, and a desire to reinvigorate the city’s stagnant economy. They saw themselves as preserving a better, more genteel Charleston, characterized by the rural values and racial hierarchies of their plantation forebears. Their vision of Charleston excluded real African Americans.
in favor of simplified types, and it managed to look past the city’s white working class as well. The city touted itself to tourists as being “untouched by present day influences” and an “antidote to frenzied twentieth-century realism.” Wildly successful in attracting tourists in the 1920s and 1930s (by 1939, 300,000 visitors to Charleston had generated an estimated $3 million in revenue), the intellectual and physical legacies of these efforts by white preservationists continue to shape Charleston’s tourism industry to this day.7

While Heyward’s literary output made him the most famous of Charleston’s artists in the 1920s and 1930s, there were other writers, visual artists, and amateur folklorists who contributed to the vision of Charleston as a city of historic houses, genteel hospitality, and picturesque African Americans. The South Carolina Poetry Society and the Society for the Preservation of Spirituals were, like the Society for the Preservation of Old Dwellings, invitation-only organizations made up of white Charlestonians from established local families who came together in a concerted effort to preserve and publicize the Charleston of their imaginations. Elizabeth O’Neill Verner and Alice Ravenel Huger Smith were the two most prominent visual artists who helped to create the selectively nostalgic image of Charleston that sold so briskly to tourists and wealthy northern art collectors. Smith’s series of “rice paintings” of 1850s plantation scenes presented slavery as a benign institution, while Verner sprinkled her Charleston street scenes with African American workers such as street vendors, domestic servants, and female flower sellers (the same characters who peopled Heyward’s prose). But Verner included these workers as decoration rather than character study; in 1929 she made her artistic priorities clear when she wrote that “the negro is Nature’s child; one paints him as readily and fittingly into the landscape as a tree or marsh.” (Similarly, the Charleston News and Courier, describing the play Porgy, characterized the city’s visible black workforce of street vendors and stevedores as “typical Charleston negro characters” who were “winding in and out of the play almost as part of the scenery.”) Heyward hired Verner to create etchings for a special illustrated “Charleston edition” of the novel Porgy, published in 1928.8

Heyward was prominent among these preservationists—their poet laureate and chief publicist. In 1939, with his reputation as an authentic chronicler of South Carolina well established and Charleston’s status as a travel destination thriving, he penned an article for National Geographic magazine that linked the city’s nascent present-day industrial development to its history and beckoned tourists with descriptions of the city’s architecture, gardens, and relaxed, culturally rich lifestyle; he touted the latter as “an antidote for
the jangled nerves of today.” The article expressed the themes common to
the work of Heyward and other Charleston artists and preservationists of the
1920s and 1930s: nostalgia for an imagined colonial and antebellum past, a
desire to infuse the present with the trappings of that past, and a view of
African Americans chiefly as contributors to the city’s traditional aesthetic
charm. Heyward’s account of the city’s history reflected those themes; after
a quick nod toward failed attempts by France and Spain to colonize the re-

gion, he described the successful English settlement, which of course began
with the importation of enslaved Africans. This constitutes his only men-
tion of slavery in South Carolina’s history, but if slavery was not a subject
worth dwelling on, it was still a source of perverse pride. Heyward specu-
lated that these original slaves, brought from the Caribbean, were “doubt-
less the pick of [English Governor Sir John Yeaman’s] plantations” and “the
vanguard of the vast immigration which was destined to build up a civiliz-
ation in the sweat of its brow, to color the lives and influence the destinies
of its masters.” To Heyward, Charleston was historically a “melting pot” of
white ethnic migrants (“French Huguenots, Irish, Scotch, Germans, Dutch,
Quakers, Swiss, Acadians and Jews”) and thus inherently democratic, de-
spite the colony’s aristocratic founding. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century
episodes in Charleston’s “extremes of good and evil fortune,” including war-
time travails during both the American Revolution and the Civil War and
natural disasters, were further evidence of the city’s mixture of mettle and
grace. The period after the Civil War (or, as Heyward termed it, “the War for
Southern Independence”) was a time of defeat and decline for Charleston; it
appears in Heyward’s article only briefly, and then in the context of the city’s
architecture. He mused that the city’s eighteenth-century architecture, so
prized in the twentieth century, escaped being replaced by the aesthetic vul-
garities of the Victorian period because of postwar economic devastation—
“Poverty may well have been the ally of good taste”—and thus defines the
worthy parts of the city as only the downtown where no “new” buildings
were constructed.9

Poverty was also, to Heyward, the ally of Charleston’s present-day “atmo-
sphere and light-hearted charm,” which he attributed largely to the city’s poor
and working-class black residents. He extolled the city’s African Americans
as a source of entertainment for white residents and tourists alike and char-
acterized slavery and the exploitive working conditions imposed by white
supremacy as “the gift of labor” that these Africans had brought to Charles-
ton, along with “gifts of laughter and song.” His examples of the charming
African American culture to be found around every Charleston corner in-

132 • Charleston, 1920–1940
cluded street performances by the Jenkins Orphanage Band, “black urchins [who] will solicit a nickle to dance and sing,” the chants of black street vendors, and, of course, spirituals heard through open church windows. These were all images and sounds that abounded in Heyward’s fiction, and all were presented in *National Geographic* unremarked by Heyward as instances of African Americans seeking economic survival and a degree of autonomy in a city that granted them a bare minimum of either.10

If Heyward’s article left the more complicated reality of African American work and life in Charleston in the 1930s untouched, it was due in part to his own worldview and in part to explicit instructions from the *National Geographic* editor who commissioned the piece. While flattering Heyward for his “epochal stories” about black characters, the editor requested that the proposed article “briefly note the transition from the old days to the present business activities of the community, not bearing too heavily on the colored brethren.”11 The magazine’s national readership, like the national audiences for Heyward’s novel and play, sought to avoid the reality of “the colored brethren” in Depression-era Charleston; it was not a subject likely to lure tourists. But it was part of the complicated reality of black social, economic, and political life in the city that Heyward had done so much to publicize, and even in his *National Geographic* article, he managed to spare one sentence for Charleston’s nonhistoric but still segregated housing, noting that “quietly, in its own way, the city has been working at its slum problem, and has just thrown open to occupancy the two prim little villages, one for whites and one for Negroes, that have been constructed with Government grants.”12

As Heyward’s aside suggested, one effect of the architectural preservation movement was to drive African Americans from the downtown neighborhoods in which they had once lived. In the late 1930s, New Deal projects replaced one black neighborhood, adjacent to the historic district, with an all-white public housing complex and relocated African Americans to public housing projects constructed far from the downtown area. In 1940 the Society for the Preservation of Old Dwellings even went so far as to pressure a white landlord to rent to whites rather than allow his Archdale Street building to become a “negro tenement.” As imagined types, Charleston’s African American residents served the preservationists, artists, and tourism promoters well. As flesh-and-blood individuals, many of them in fact disrupted the image that the preservationists and artists had in mind for Charleston’s downtown.13

During the 1920s, however, African Americans did not just leave downtown Charleston; they left South Carolina altogether. They had been leaving
for many years, in fact, bound for the twin hopes of less segregation and more economic opportunity. Between 1900 and 1930, more than 300,000 African Americans departed the state, transforming its population from majority black to majority white. They had no shortage of reasons to go. Just as U.S. industry began to mobilize for World War I, that conflict stemmed the tide of European immigrant labor that might have performed the new factory work; many black southerners seized the moment and headed north. Most left behind the profoundly exploitive economic conditions of sharecropping, and all fled the rigid oppression of segregation, a complete system of white supremacy that had been ruthlessly enforced by actual and implied violence since the Reconstruction era. In South Carolina, the 1916 lynching of Anthony Crawford, a black landowner in Abbeville, served as a powerful reminder of the swiftness with which white-supremacist violence would respond to black economic advancement. (Crawford’s was merely the most famous of an estimated twenty-nine lynchings that took place in South Carolina between 1915 and 1947.) The Ku Klux Klan reemerged as a powerful force in the state after World War I, and in the same period, South Carolina’s cotton economy suffered the double blow of reduced postwar demand and the arrival of the boll weevil. None of these factors improved the economic prospects of African American sharecroppers. (White South Carolinians were on the move during the 1920s as well, out of agricultural labor and into the new textile mills springing up throughout the state and the region.)

A few white South Carolinians applauded the black migration; one newspaper editorialist declared that the dispersal of African Americans throughout the country would solve the South’s race problems. But many white landowners were less than pleased as they found themselves without enough labor to harvest their crops. The state passed a series of laws restricting the activities of the labor agents who recruited African Americans for northern factory jobs and in 1922 quadrupled the fee that such agents had to pay to do business in South Carolina. Most black migrants took advantage of cheap railroad fares to escape by train, prompting some white officials to monitor train stations and arrest groups of two or more for “conspiracy” to go to the North. (Many African Americans also left Charleston by boat, including Mamie Garvin Fields and her mother, who left for a brief sojourn in New Jersey, and, more dramatically, Ruth Anderson, who in 1913 left by boat from Charleston in order to evade white surveillance of the train station in her hometown of Summerville. The lighthearted Gershwin brothers song “There’s a Boat That’s Leaving Soon for New York” in fact contained a core of Charleston authenticity.) What finally slowed the migration, how-
ever, was the onset of the Great Depression, which foreclosed the possibility of a job elsewhere.\textsuperscript{16}

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the collapse of the rice industry and a generally depressed economy in Charleston and the Low Country meant that those areas had the state’s highest out-migration of African Americans. The city’s black population actually increased between 1910 and 1920, likely due to an influx of rural residents moving into cities (like Columbia and Charleston) for better educational opportunities and day-laborer jobs. The boll weevil infestation that crippled cotton production had a ripple effect on the statewide economy, and Charleston was not immune. The black population of the city dropped by 15 percent between 1920 and 1930.\textsuperscript{17} As elsewhere in South Carolina and the entire South, African Americans in Charleston confronted not just a depressed economy but also the reality of white violence directed at them. For Charleston, a city relatively unscathed by white-supremacist violence, the shocking trigger came on 10 May 1919, when an interracial poolroom brawl escalated into murder and riot. George Holloday and Jacob Cohen, two white sailors stationed at the city’s busy navy yard, shot and killed the unarmed Isaac Doctor, an African American. News of the incident quickly spread among white servicemen on leave in Charleston, who raided two local shooting galleries for weapons and went on a rampage through the city, assaulting and shooting black citizens at will. Two more African Americans were killed and as many as forty were wounded. When Charleston police could not control the white mob, they called on the U.S. Navy for assistance, and at midnight a contingent of Marines arrived in the city. Charleston’s mayor urged the navy to compensate a black store owner for his losses, and a local coroner’s jury ruled that the white sailors were at fault and African Americans had acted in self-defense. The mayor insisted that “the negroes of Charleston must be protected.” A South Carolina congressman contended that the riot was caused by the influence of communist outsiders, particularly W. E. B. Du Bois, on local black leaders. Charleston was not the only American city to experience white violence against African Americans that year—the summer of 1919 witnessed far more fatal race riots in Chicago; St. Louis; Washington, D.C.; and many smaller cities—but in Charleston, it served as a sobering reminder that African Americans could not take their physical safety for granted, even in one of the South’s most cosmopolitan cities.\textsuperscript{18}

The Great Migration out of the South set new political possibilities in motion for African Americans, who could vote unimpeded in their new northern homes. Back in South Carolina, one possible result of the migration was
that the depleted African American population experienced less violence directed at them; no longer a majority presence, they presented less of a threat to whites and were even more desperately needed as laborers. Among those who remained, pockets of courageous and persistent activism signaled that new political possibilities existed even in the grip of Jim Crow. In Charleston, African Americans established a local chapter of the NAACP and spearheaded efforts to equalize teacher salaries and make higher-wage jobs at the navy yard available to black workers. Such challenges to segregation also challenged the Charleston Renaissance artistic output that myopically depicted African Americans as hardworking, content, and reminiscent of the nineteenth century in their aspirations and demeanors.

A local NAACP chapter was able to take root (and persist) in Charleston precisely because the city was home to a concentration of educated African Americans with stable trades and professions. Twenty-nine of them established the city’s chapter on 27 February 1917; this founding group included four doctors, three dressmakers, two real estate salesmen, two carpenters, a dentist, an electrician, a hairdresser, a school principal, a teacher, an insurance salesman, and a lawyer. Edwin A. Harleston was the chapter’s energetic first president, a perfect example of the kind of educated, activist black Charlestonian that Heyward and other white elites generally wrote out of their vision of genteel Charleston. In Harleston’s case, they also excluded him from their efforts to promote local artists. Harleston was an award-winning painter who had trained at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts but, like many painters who could not make a living from their art, worked at another occupation—in his case, managing the family’s funeral home. In 1926, when the director of the Charleston Museum attempted to mount a show of Harleston’s work, powerful white interests who did not wish to promote his vision of the city thwarted her efforts.

The NAACP chapter’s first campaign, just months after its founding, was to lobby local civil service officials to hire African American women at the city’s Navy Yard Clothing Factory. They succeeded in gaining 250 jobs for black women there at far higher wages than the domestic service jobs in which African American women labored almost exclusively. That same spring of 1917, Du Bois visited Charleston. Like so many others, he was charmed by Charleston’s premodern pace and atmosphere. “There is a subtle flavor of Old World things, a little hush in the whirl of American doing,” he wrote in The Crisis. Yet he also recognized, as the city’s white tourism boosters did not, how integral the city’s African American citizens were to its identity, riffing on the boosters’ own rhetoric to characterize Charleston as a
“little Old Lady (her cheek teasingly tinged to every tantalizing shade of the darker blood). . . while long verandas of her soul stretch down backward into slavery.” Du Bois expressed, in both public and private, that Charleston’s black leadership needed to become more assertive in their demands for equal treatment. In *The Crisis*, he highlighted the city’s policy of using white teachers to teach black children in the city’s segregated public schools and urged that the city’s African Americans “should awake and stop it.” Taken on a tour of the city by African American community leaders during that 1917 visit, he chided them for showing him only landmarks built by whites, many of which they could not even enter because of segregation. Faced with a dearth of local African American institutions, he urged them to do better—a lesson that Mamie Garvin Fields, for one, “never forgot.”

By 1918 the branch’s membership had begun to expand beyond its middle-class founders, as the new black female Navy Yard workers, domestic workers, and laborers joined. The branch’s second major campaign, following up on Du Bois’s call for action, was to challenge the exclusion of black teachers from the city’s public school system. Of Charleston’s three public schools for black children, only one, the Shaw Memorial School, employed two black teachers, and that was only because of the requirement of the school’s founding benefactor, Bostonian Robert Gould Shaw, that the school have “some” African American teachers. Otherwise, the city reserved all of the teaching positions for whites, many of whom held their black pupils in contempt.23 When the city responded with only vague future promises to a petition asking that it employ black teachers in black schools, the Charleston NAACP branch enlisted the help of the branch in Columbia, and together they turned to the state legislature. Arguing the logic of segregation (white teachers for white students, black teachers for black students), they gained enough support to force the city of Charleston to reverse its policy in 1919 rather than face a state law requiring it to do so. This successful effort was a watershed moment for local black activism: Charleston’s NAACP branch membership swelled to 1,300, and the campaign’s community meetings and petition drives (which ultimately secured the signatures of 25,000 African Americans) generated a new sense of connectedness among the city’s African Americans. The Charleston NAACP began encouraging its members to register to vote, and the numbers of registered black voters began to tick ever so slightly upward. This surge of activism was short-lived; by 1929, the Charleston branch was, in the words of its president, “very much dormant” and certainly hindered by the mass migration of its potential members out of the city and state. In addition, as its original members aged, no forceful
new leaders emerged from the next generation. Other NAACP branches in South Carolina, notably in Columbia, the state’s capitol, remained more active through the 1930s.24

As visible black activism in Charleston declined, the city’s white elites maintained a stance of racial paternalism with clearly defined limits. A particularly vivid example of this “we know best” attitude came in 1919 during the campaign to hire black teachers for black students: some white Charlestonians felt perfectly free to argue that only “mulattos” wanted black teachers for their children while insisting that “the cooks and laundresses . . . didn’t want their children taught by Negro teachers.”25 Another example came that same year when, in response to the riot, the city’s white elites established the Charleston Interracial Committee (a local branch of the nationwide Commission on Interracial Cooperation, or CIC) to promote understanding between the races. The committee’s chief activity was to sponsor an annual “Race Relations Sunday,” held during the week of Abraham Lincoln’s birthday, that alternated between a white and a black church and featured a white speaker in the black church and a black speaker in the white church. The CIC also convinced the Charleston School Board to establish a night school for African American teenagers (although they failed in their efforts to sponsor an essay contest on “Negro progress since the Civil War” in which black and white public school students would have competed against each other), and the efforts of African American member Susan Dart Butler led to the establishment of a city public library system, funded by the Julius Rosenwald Foundation. The organization’s membership was mixed but firmly under the leadership of its white members (which included Heyward), which meant that there were definite limits to what it would even attempt to accomplish. Meetings were segregated, with whites seated on one side of the room and African Americans on the other; and in 1932, when James Andrew Simmons, one of the city’s African American school principals, used his speaking opportunity on Race Relations Sunday to protest segregation and appalling conditions in black schools, Charleston’s white school board forced him to resign.26

Perhaps the best expression of the limits of white paternalism in Charleston appeared in a 1930 News and Courier editorial, which laid them out with startling precision. Supporting the NAACP’s antilynching campaign, a stand not likely to be voiced by whites in less cosmopolitan areas of the South, the paper asserted on its readers’ behalf: “The News and Courier and its followers want, in self defense, to make Negroes industrious and productive; they want to protect Negroes’ property and their persons; they want to oppose beating,
killing and cheating colored people; they want to improve their health and give them some education.” It was white noblesse oblige, with a clear-eyed acknowledgment of self-preservation: stem the most violent abuses (carried out not by News and Courier readers but by “a powerful mob element”) and offer modest improvements in health and education, all in the service of “self defense.” But any consideration for the state’s African American residents ended there, as the editorial concluded that its readers “do not propose to invite Negroes to take part in Government, and when anyone asks this, the South is going to oppose a solid and unyielding front. The question whether we are right or wrong in this attitude, whether or not it is savage or civilized, we decline to discuss.”

White paternalism was equally as evident in the realm of culture as in politics. The Society for the Preservation of Spirituals (SPS) was founded in 1922 by a small group of Charleston elites, among them DuBose Heyward. They sought to preserve the music of the Low Country African Americans who had worked on their family’s plantations and cared for them as children, the very same “old time darkeys” who were, during the 1920s, migrating out of the countryside—and out of the state—in ever-growing numbers. SPS members visited black churches in Charleston and the Low Country to collect examples of spirituals, and they also recorded the cries of street peddlers in Charleston (and sold them to tourists and through a national distributor). Beginning in 1927, the society began making charitable donations to benefit Low Country African Americans, establishing a relief committee from among its members to determine the recipients. Their criteria for donating money, food, clothing, firewood, medicine, and other supplies targeted former slaves or servants of prominent white families, individuals who were, in the adjectives found in case files, “loyal,” “hard work[ing],” “faithful,” and “uncomplaining.”

Just as it had definite ideas about the characteristics of the deserving African American poor, the SPS promoted a specific vision of the spirituals and what they represented. Describing what motivated the group’s members, SPS president Alfred Huger explained: “We love these wonderful primitive songs which come from the soul of an alien race.” The SPS’s activities, and their vision of the spirituals, grew more public during the 1920s, as members began performing spirituals in concert with period costumes, sets, and printed programs; and by the 1930s, the group was touring and performing on the radio both regionally and nationally. In early 1935, the SPS performed in costume at the White House for an audience that included President and Mrs. Roosevelt. During their concerts, members did their best approxima-
tion of the African American performance style they had heard in the original church settings and offered their commentary on the spirituals’ origins and meaning. Not surprisingly, the SPS members did not interpret the songs as expressing a longing for freedom, nor did they believe the songs referred to antebellum slavery; rather, the SPS maintained, they were black equivalents to white camp-meeting songs. The spirituals might come from “an alien race,” but the SPS members believed that its requirement that members be “Charleston people who were born and reared on plantations nearby or who were reared under plantation traditions” ensured that the group “all know and understand the negro character, probably as well as any white man ever does.” In 1931 the society organized a collection of essays, poems, illustrations, and spirituals titled *The Carolina Low-Country*, published by Macmillan Company. Macmillan presumably distributed the book to a national audience, hoping to capitalize on the popularity of African American spirituals during the 1920s and early 1930s and further promoting the SPS’s particularly white-paternalist view of African American spirituals.29

Heyward contributed an essay titled “The Negro in the Low-Country” to the volume. It contained many of his usual themes, put to the service of explaining the SPS’s work and worldview and providing his own version of historical context for it. The essay also reflected the willful blind spot that Heyward and his peers had about the efforts undertaken all around them by African Americans fighting for equal rights. Only by ignoring such activism and diversity among the region’s black citizens could he argue that the region’s race relations were driven not by white supremacy but by the intrinsically accepting nature of African Americans. Heyward’s view of slavery in this essay was resolutely positive and deeply askew. He presents the Africans who were forcibly brought to the New World “not as a human chattel to be bought and sold, but as immigrant[s] arriving out of an old world to take [their] place in a new and strange one.” Claiming exceptionalism for South Carolina’s version of the peculiar institution, he asserted that “it is likely that here in the Carolina Low-Country . . . the rural Negro experienced a higher state of physical and moral well being than at any other period in his history.”30 In explaining this remarkable “well being” among South Carolina slaves, he steered his argument toward the idea that African Americans, as a race, possessed a set of intrinsic character traits. His belief in the existence of such a “race personality” enabled Heyward to view slavery as a benign institution. He explained that “the Negro . . . is possessed of a genius for forming happy human relationships, for inspiring affection, for instinctively divining the mood of one with whom he comes in contact, and of accommodating
his own mood to that of the other. He was temperamentally ideally suited to make his own way in a state of slavery.”

Heyward’s distorted version of the Low Country’s racial past slid neatly into his equally distorted view of the region’s present. In Heyward’s world, past interracial harmony prevailed over more-divisive “modern” ideas—his veiled reference to the black activism stirring around the country. He described the master-slave relationship as “something beautiful and tender and enriching to both black and white,” which had bound blacks and whites “together in affection and mutual understanding throughout the vicissitudes of two and a half centuries.” This view also proved useful for justifying the SPS’s work as a matter of cooperation rather than co-optation. From his standpoint, the absence of “racial self-consciousness” and “modern attitudes” meant that, “in the hands of the white people of the Low-Country, the task of salvaging the spirituals of the Negroes from a mutual past becomes not an unwarranted audacity, not a gesture of patronizing superiority, but a natural and harmonious collaboration wrought in affection and with a deep sense of reverence.”

While Heyward acknowledged the black migration out of the South then taking place, he avoided naming its sources (white supremacy in economic, social, and political realms) and instead mourned the passing of “the old, uncomplicated pattern of life” among African Americans. He framed the migration not in terms of the migrants’ control over their lives and labor but in terms of that pesky and inevitable modernity, “the forces of advancement” that would irresistibly lure African Americans “from our fields, fired with ambition,” and leave them “fed to the machines of our glittering new civilization.” For the African American with the audacity to leave, Heyward wondered whether “he will be much happier when the last of the bonds are severed and finally and triumphantly he has conformed to the stereotyped pattern of American success.” While deeply flawed in his analysis throughout the essay, Heyward was right about one thing. He predicted that “the plantation Negro, too, will pass” and remain in the rural South only to serve as “authentic Southern atmosphere” for tourists.

Heyward and his peers did as much as anyone to render Charleston’s African Americans fodder for tourists by carefully crafting and promoting a vision of the city and region that eliminated all traces of white supremacy, black activism, and diversity within an African American community forged by slavery, emancipation, and segregation. What they left out was as critical as what they shaped for white consumption. Yet it is also important to understand that Heyward and his peers held no monopoly on sentimental...
attachment to Charleston. Septima Poinsette Clark, an African American educator who lost her public-school teaching job in Charleston because of her political activism, could still profess her desire to “live out my last days” in the city and ask: “How can anyone born and brought up in Charleston not love that wonderful old city, how can anyone who has been brought up with the smell of the Low Country in his nostrils ever stay away from it long?” Clark’s commitment to Charleston and the Low Country transcended mere nostalgia, however, and took the form of a lifelong commitment to racial uplift and the struggle to claim full citizenship for African Americans who had been so thoroughly denied equal opportunities. Clark saw her efforts as serving the entire region; she admitted that while “during virtually [her] whole adult life” she had been “fighting the dominant citizenship of [the] Low Country,” she believed that she was also “fighting for them as well as for the less privileged and the silent.” Her reform vision was truly and unexpectedly expansive, including even Heyward and the other Charleston elites so active in promoting a very different vision of Charleston to itself and the wider world. The activist Clark, born and raised in Charleston, was, in the spirit of genuine interracialism, “convinced that the advancement of our lowly ones to the opportunities of first class citizenship also will lift to a better life those who now enjoy a higher status.” Her story, and the story of Charleston’s African American community, would continue on in ways that Heyward, his wife Dorothy, and others would remain reluctant to acknowledge.
In 1934 George Gershwin visited DuBose Heyward in South Carolina and spent five weeks with him at Heyward’s summer home on Folly Island, off the coast of Charleston. The purpose of the trip was to give Gershwin a chance to listen to the authentic Low Country African American folk music on which he planned to draw as he composed his first opera, based on Heyward’s novel and play. When the opera debuted in October 1935 (and for many years after), this trip served as a powerful credential, one that authorized Gershwin as expert in the kind of black musical sound that he was trying to convey in *Porgy and Bess*. If the black performers in *Porgy* the play bore the burden of proving racial authenticity to critics and audiences, with *Porgy and Bess*, that burden fell to Gershwin. And Gershwin, a successful composer of popular music, had for many years felt driven to compose a piece that would be both musically rigorous and widely accessible. His celebrity unleashed a rush of expectation in the months and weeks leading up to the opera’s debut.¹ When the curtain rose on *Porgy and Bess* on 10 October 1935 at New York City’s Alvin Theatre, an audience filled with celebrities, critics, and well-wishers settled in for a much-anticipated evening watching the text of a familiar play set to the music of a celebrated composer. The play they knew well; it was really the composer’s work that they were there to witness and judge. Brooks Atkinson, the city’s leading drama critic, put it best when he declared: “Although Mr. Heyward is the author of the libretto and shares with Ira Gershwin the credit for the lyrics . . . the evening is unmistakably George Gershwin’s personal holiday.”²

But Gershwin was not the only celebrity in this story. In the pages of African American newspapers, many black performers of whom whites were only
George Gershwin & Du Bose Heyward's

PORGY and BESS

Souvenir Program ~
dimly aware were also bona fide celebrities. The black press often adopted the role of cheerleader for those African American performers who broke through to mainstream success with white critics and audiences. *Porgy and Bess* gave them a great deal to cheer about. If *Porgy and Bess* was a triumph for Gershwin, it was also a victory for the seventy black singers who performed in it, the first large group of African Americans to perform opera professionally for predominantly white audiences. To many commentators, *Porgy and Bess* was a milestone in American culture, a musically accessible and unmistakably “native” opera that could hold its own alongside European compositions. Largely because of Gershwin’s reputation for popular music, critics reached this judgment not after a period of thoughtful consideration but on the spot. Reviews in mainstream publications from the period carry a palpable sense of moment; critics are not just reviewing the show in front of them but are assessing its place in the American cultural canon. These three interdependent milestones—Gershwin’s success as a serious composer, unprecedented opportunity for African American opera performers, and the creation of a successful American opera—all rested on the assumption that authentic African American musical sound was central to American music.

Both Gershwin and black musicians and intellectuals sought to elevate their work above the realm of popular culture in order to achieve respectability and recognition for mastering complex and serious forms of music. With *Porgy and Bess*, these two sets of aspirations toward the cultural respectability of the opera house and concert hall converged. Gershwin believed that “music lives only when it is in serious form,” and he was intent on elevating his musical reputation by composing a serious work of lasting value. With his confident eye fixed firmly on posterity, he selected what he considered a genuinely American story that, not coincidentally, was suited to the use of a distinctive and popular form of music. By choosing *Porgy* as the source for his first significant effort at composing a native opera, Gershwin chose not only Heyward’s story but also the musical forms of blues and spiri-

(opp) *Porgy and Bess* was immortalized by illustrator Al Hirschfeld, who, for nearly eight decades, caricatured every major production and star on Broadway. His 1942 rendering of the *Porgy and Bess* cast for a souvenir program both draws on the visual language of blackface minstrelsy (the wide-open mouths and exaggerated white lips against coal-black skin) yet offers a detailed, sensitive portrait of the characters of Porgy and Bess themselves. (© The Al Hirschfeld Foundation, www.AlHirschfeldFoundation.org. Al Hirschfeld is represented by the Margo Feiden Galleries, Ltd., New York.)
tuals, the latter already closely associated with the story because they were performed during the play eight years earlier. For black performers and intellectuals attempting to drag white perceptions of African American performance away from the persistent and damaging legacy of blackface minstrelsy, the spirituals were a site of cultural struggle, both practical and aesthetic, and a site of commercial success. The spirituals represented both a serious black contribution to American culture in a white society long insistent on mocking and perverting African American performance and, when presented in recital programs, a method of demonstrating black accomplishment in Western classical music. The concert hall and opera house respectability of the spirituals and *Porgy and Bess* marked yet another chapter in the long struggle of African American intellectuals to use the performing arts as an avenue for improving the social status and cultural standing of the entire race.

If *Porgy and Bess* was a significant moment in that struggle, it was hardly an unmitigated triumph. Critical responses to the opera revealed markedly different notions of what constituted authentic black musical sound and who was qualified to convey it. Whereas in 1927 white critics responded to *Porgy* by speculating about the racial authenticity of the material and the “natural” abilities of the black performers, with *Porgy and Bess*, critical speculation about authenticity and “natural” talent shifted to black musical sound and Gershwin’s ability to express it. For African Americans who put their stock in the arts as an avenue for racial uplift, *Porgy and Bess* proved to be a heavily encumbered step forward. Leading white critics recognized African American music as integral to their notions of national music and black musicians as trained professionals with a legitimate right to be on the opera stage. But these two results came in response to Gershwin’s version of black musical authenticity. Not surprisingly, black music critics challenged his success at conveying authentic black sound in his folk opera to virtually the same extent that white critics embraced it. And black critics continued to focus on the question of racial stereotyping in *Porgy and Bess*. One black-press strategy for combating the work’s stereotypical portrayals of African American characters was to emphasize the education and middle-class backgrounds of the performers, highlighting the distance between them and the roles they played. Black critics also engaged in more straightforward debates about *Porgy and Bess’s* possible impact on racial advancement. Two months after the opera’s debut, Floyd Calvin, writing in the arts pages of the *Chicago Defender*, identified five Broadway productions, including *Porgy and Bess*, that starred African Americans and hailed both the number of shows and variety of roles as setting “a record for prosperity as well as depression times.” He de-
clared optimistically of this mid-1930s moment: “At last the old ‘Black-face’ stereotype has been broken. White people now pay to see Negroes be themselves, and rate them on the faithful interpretation of character rather than on the faithful portrayal of preconceived prejudiced notions.” Not everyone was applauding, though. By January 1936, a reviewer for the *Amsterdam News* was having a change of heart. Viewing *Porgy and Bess* for the second time left him not cheering the demise of blackface stereotypes but rather “torn between the spell-binding artistry and the ability of Negroes to survive the stereotype.” The production presented “an abundance of good performances,” yet those stellar stage portrayals ultimately did not mitigate the fact that Gershwin’s opera did “harm to the advance of the Negro. He continues to be shackled by what the whites think Negroes are like.” Such misgivings were well-founded. Black performers could control their own performances, but they could not control or transcend the responses of white audiences, for whom *Porgy and Bess* reinforced the generations of racist stage stereotypes that had planted prejudiced views of African Americans in the first place.⁵

*Porgy and Bess*, though it debuted in 1935, was in fact a product of both its own time and the preceding decade. Its text sprang from a critically acclaimed play and novel from the 1920s, its composer gained celebrity for his popular songwriting during that decade, and music from African American folk sources—particularly the sacred songs known as spirituals—gained a new place in scholarly regard and elite concert halls during the 1920s. Yet the opera’s critical reception reflected distinctly 1930s concerns about native music and the decade’s documentary impulse toward cultural productions that celebrated working people from all walks of American life. During years of devastating economic depression, working people and labor unions assumed a more prominent role in American society, and American culture—from music to theatre to public art—reflected perspectives and topics by and about working people to an unprecedented degree.⁶ In such a climate, reinforced by Gershwin’s insistence that he sought to compose a work “that would appeal to the many rather than to the cultured few,” many critics hailed *Porgy and Bess* as a harbinger of a uniquely American and democratic form of opera.⁷

*Porgy and Bess*’s critical reception was also a product of ideas about race and national music that long predated the Great Depression. In 1893 Czech composer Antonín Dvořák, temporarily in the United States to lead the National Conservatory, first heard African American folk songs thanks to his student, black composer Harry T. Burleigh. Dvořák famously decreed that “the future music of this country must be founded upon what are called the
Negro melodies.” Two years later, in an essay in *Harper’s* magazine, Dvořák elaborated his point about American national music, arguing that it mattered little whether “plantation and slave songs” were “the work of white men” like Stephen Foster or “imported from Africa.” “The germs” for American national music, the renowned European composer concluded, “lie hidden among all the races that are commingled in this great country.” Dvořák thus endorsed for serious composition what had long been a commonplace practice in American popular music: the habit of white composers and minstrel performers adopting and adapting black musical sound. In 1903, writing in *The Souls of Black Folk*, a work about African American history, identity, and culture, W. E. B. Du Bois argued passionately for the “sorrow songs” of African Americans as “the sole American music . . . the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.” Unlike Dvořák, Du Bois was manifestly not referring to the songs of Stephen Foster. Instead, he promoted the sorrow songs as an authentic African American cultural form in contrast to the decades of musical appropriation perpetrated by white performers and songwriters from the days of minstrelsy to Tin Pan Alley.

Three decades after Dvořák and Du Bois identified black sound as the key ingredient of authentic American music, the white critical establishment’s reaction to *Porgy and Bess* proved that Dvořák’s more expansive criteria for “Negro melodies” had so far prevailed over Du Bois’s hope that at least one African American contribution to national culture would be uniquely credited to the race. White commentators eagerly embraced Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* as the nation’s first native opera, while black critics were left to wrestle with the problem of a work that presented unprecedented opportunities and access for black performers while continuing to submerge African American composers’ own contributions beneath the work of yet another famous white borrower. *Porgy and Bess* marked a bittersweet transition for African Americans. By insisting on black performers, Gershwin helped to banish for good the already dying (but not yet fully dead) practice of whites adopting blackface makeup to play and sing black roles. This was no small accomplishment in light of the fact that only a few years earlier, New York City audiences had come very close to seeing Al Jolson starring in a blackface musical version of Heyward’s play. But Gershwin’s critical success bolstered the “black voice” phenomenon of white musicians (such as singer Sophie Tucker) adopting black sound while eschewing black makeup. With *Porgy and Bess*, Gershwin’s “black voice” moved beyond popular music and into opera, that most rarefied of cultural precincts to which black performers and composers had long sought, and were routinely denied, access by white
America’s musical establishment. With *Porgy and Bess*, the performers, at least, were at last granted access, although at the price of reinforcing a widespread white belief that Gershwin’s music embodied authentic black musical sound.

Some music critics responded to *Porgy and Bess* in 1935 by arguing that, regardless of its musical merits, the work was not an opera, “folk” or otherwise. Critics and scholars in the decades since have continued to argue the point, or at least to reference this debate as central to understanding *Porgy and Bess*’s debut. But continued disputes over whether Gershwin’s composition is most accurately characterized as a work of opera or of musical theatre obscures a more important historical insight about its debut. A variety of constituencies—Gershwin himself, conservatory-trained African American singers with severely limited performance opportunities, black intellectuals and community leaders who promoted participation in the performing arts as a key avenue of racial uplift, and a critical establishment yearning for an example of democratic, national music in a time of social upheaval—all had an investment in defining *Porgy and Bess* as an opera, particularly as an opera that drew its inspiration from authentic sources of black folk music. Debates over the proper term for *Porgy and Bess*’s musical form also ignore the long and complex African American cultural history that preceded it and shaped responses to it among black critics and performers. *Porgy and Bess* was a work very much of its moment, but the investments that these varied constituencies had in it endured for decades to come. For Gershwin and subsequent generations of white music critics, *Porgy and Bess* remained a national symbol and proof of multicultural aspirations fulfilled. For African American performers and cultural critics, *Porgy and Bess* continued to be a mixed blessing, providing opportunities and access for black performers while stimulating ongoing debates about racial authenticity and the political consequences of cultural representation.

While the outsized critical reaction to *Porgy and Bess* might suggest otherwise, George Gershwin did not single-handedly popularize African American folk music for white audiences during the 1930s. In 1934 the Philadelphia Orchestra and its famed conductor Leopold Stokowski premiered African American composer William Dawson’s *Negro Folk Symphony*, and the New York Philharmonic included African American composer William Grant Still’s *Afro-American Symphony* on its concert program for the 1935–36 season. Still, a prolific composer whose large body of work reflected a variety of styles and influences, used a blues theme in this symphony, which became
his most performed composition. Huddie Ledbetter, a black folksinger from Mississippi, took New York City by storm early in 1935, performing on the radio, contracting with a publisher for a book about his life, and granting interviews to eager reporters from every major newspaper. National radio networks broadcast concerts by Paul Robeson and the Fisk Jubilee Singers during 1935 and 1936 as well. In the theatre, two productions that emphasized African American religion and made use of black sacred music immediately preceded Porgy and Bess. One was the Pulitzer Prize-winning The Green Pastures, written by white author Marc Connelly and based on white New Orleans writer Roark Bradford’s fictional sketches Ol’ Man Adam an’ His Chillun. The Green Pastures took the religious beliefs of southern African Americans as a subject and interspersed them with folk music interludes supplied by the Hall Johnson Choir. The play consisted of a series of Old Testament stories from a purportedly black perspective, presented as if to a class of black Sunday school students and featuring “De Lawd” as an older black man, a Pharoah’s court resembling a black fraternal lodge, and a fish fry in heaven. The Green Pastures was a phenomenal success in New York City and on an extensive national tour; it ran for a full five years, from 1930 to 1935. The second was Run Little Chillun, a 1933 drama with music written and composed by African American composer Hall Johnson, whose eponymously named choir had appeared on radio and in films as well as in The Green Pastures. Johnson’s show ran for virtually as many performances as Porgy and Bess, and although it received glowing critical notices, it was far from the cultural phenomenon that Porgy and Bess became a mere two years later.14

Porgy and Bess certainly benefited from this mid-1930s interest in black folk music, but it also retained the critical goodwill of the drama from which it was adapted. The Theatre Guild’s production and marketing strategies for the show drew chiefly on the public’s positive memories of the original play and on Gershwin’s fame. Advance press coverage reinforced those associations, as when the New York Post estimated that “no local premiere of a stage spectacle had ever created so much preliminary excitement as this musical setting of Mr. DuBose Heyward’s familiar tale of Negro life in Charlestown’s [sic] Catfish Row.” Three weeks before Porgy and Bess opened in New York, the New York Times arts section previewed the “Construction along Catfish Row” and peppered its article with comparative references like “the landlords of the original row are engaged just now in rebuilding their famous tenement, redecorating it for the newer year”; “All day long on the empty stage Todd Duncan crawls through Catfish Row as Frank Wilson did eight
years ago”; and “Georgette Harvey is back again, with the blackened corn-cob pipe she used on the Guild Theatre’s stage once before.” One significant link between *Porgy* and *Porgy and Bess* was director Rouben Mamoulian. *Porgy* had launched Mamoulian’s professional directing career, and its success helped propel him to Hollywood. The press heralded his return to direct *Porgy and Bess*, and his dynamic staging was central to the show’s success and to the notion that *Porgy and Bess* constituted a new, democratic, and accessible form of opera. (In addition to Mamoulian, the Guild also hired Alexander Smallens as conductor and music director; Alexander Steinert, a seasoned opera coach, to train the principal singers; and Eva Jessye as choral director and her African American choir to sing in the chorus.) The Guild also made the most of Gershwin’s considerable celebrity and personal passion for the project to promote *Porgy and Bess*. A Guild promotional brochure, illustrated with simple charcoal drawings of heads and torsos leaning out the windows of Catfish Row, announced “George Gershwin’s American Folk Opera.” A Chicago newspaper advertisement reminded readers of both Gershwin’s fame and the material’s history by proclaiming: “All America Is Excited over George Gershwin’s *Porgy & Bess*, Based on the famous play of Negro life . . . sung by a cast of eighty that can stand comparison with any opera company in the world.”

Despite the avalanche of positive publicity that greeted *Porgy and Bess*, the show cost more to produce than the Guild was taking in at the box office. Guild subscribers filled most of the seats during the first five weeks of the show’s run, but ticket agencies “reported only moderate demand” for the tickets (priced from $1.10 to $4.40) available to nonsubscribers. (The reviewer for *Variety*, the entertainment industry trade newspaper, predicted exactly this outcome, observing: “Musical students, novelty seekers, and the opera crowd will seek after it; but word-of-mouth from the lay theatergoer, who finds three solid hours of Gershwin too heavy a dose for one evening, is apt to swerve the masses past the door.”) The large cast and orchestra proved a financial burden. While the Guild and Gershwin insisted that *Porgy and Bess* was an opera, the forty-five members of the orchestra disagreed and demanded a musical-comedy wage scale rather than the lower opera wage scale they were receiving. For many in the cast, the opportunity to perform in *Porgy and Bess* was unprecedented but also proved short-lived. Faced with ticket income that did not meet expenses, the Guild began cutting the cast a mere month into the show’s run. By the time *Porgy and Bess* closed in New York City and moved on to the Guild’s subscription series in Philadelphia, only forty cast members of the original seventy remained. The Guild even
asked the Gershwins and Heywards to cut their stipends to help weather the financial crisis.\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Porgy and Bess} ultimately logged 127 performances in New York City (plus brief tours to the Guild’s subscription series in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and Washington, D.C.), and Gershwin never personally recuperated his own investment in the production.

While critics remembered \textit{Porgy} fondly, their critical reactions to \textit{Porgy and Bess} departed from their responses to the earlier play in one significant respect. Unlike the legions of white writers who assumed the natural performance talent of the \textit{Porgy} players in 1927, critics in 1935 were more likely to recognize the cast’s technical skills and preparation. While some white critics clung to the notion of the performers who were “instinctively musical” or painstakingly coaxed by Mamoulian and Steinert, most acknowledged the principals’ impressive vocal training credentials. More than one review noted that the production staff had “to teach the Harlem Negroes a Southern accent”—a notable departure from reviewers who praised \textit{Porgy} as authentic because “the cast talk their own idiom and move to native rhythms.” Several mainstream publications ran profiles of the \textit{Porgy and Bess} principals, noting that Todd Duncan held a master’s degree from Columbia University and headed the music department at Howard University, while Anne Brown, a Juilliard graduate, was the only African American to win scholarships for both undergraduate and postgraduate work at the prestigious school. Other reviewers noted that Ruby Elzy also studied at Juilliard, Warren Coleman graduated from New England Conservatory of Music, Abbie Mitchell trained with famed vocal teacher Jean de Reszke, and Eddie Matthews was an accomplished recitalist. Critics raved about the “superb cast and chorus” and lavished praise on the principals. A \textit{Theatre Arts Monthly} account of a \textit{Porgy and Bess} rehearsal conveyed the cast’s professionalism and skill, quoting Mamoulian as instructing them to “do the thing that comes to your mind—if I don’t like it, I’ll tell you,” and praising “the capacity of the personnel for absorbing ideas and reproducing them.” And in a reflection of how rare it was to see African American performers on professional stages before white audiences, a few critics noted of the performers that “their work is so fine as to make us wonder if we whites know anything about acting.”\textsuperscript{19}

White music critics, like all Americans, lived and thought within their era’s racial ideas and assumptions, and this shared context shaped their commentary on the opera and its performers in a number of ways. One notable blind spot among them was their inability to recognize or acknowledge the lack of opportunity facing black opera singers, even in the face of obvious evidence of discrimination. Critics who both commented on the limited
stage experience of Duncan, Brown, and other principals and cited their impressive training and recital credentials failed to connect the dots between the two. Instead, finding a more congenial light in which to view those circumstances, they praised the fresh approach this provided the black singers, in contrast to the hardened stage manners of their more-seasoned white counterparts. *Time* insisted that “no hidebound opera company could have done justice to Porgy and Bess” and praised the assembled singers because they “knew no stuffy traditions” and were not “handicapped at the start by having real grand opera ways.” It was only a small step removed from the praise offered by theater critics in 1927, who expressed their delight at the African American performers in the dramatic version of *Porgy* who “do not act—they just seem to live their parts” and whose “native instincts . . . transcended artifice in every detail.” In an indication of just how rare opportunities to sing in a fully staged opera were for the performers who made up the *Porgy and Bess* cast, Gershwin began casting a full sixteen months before the show’s October 1935 debut, and all of the cast members were able to commit to the production whenever it might open. It was little wonder, given the lack of other opportunities, that, in one critic’s estimation, “Minor parts are taken with an artistry seldom seen in such a large cast.” In addition, the only way to provide Anne Brown with some needed theatrical stage experience was to send her all the way to London, where Lew Leslie’s *Blackbirds* musical revue was playing; apparently, no suitable opportunity existed on any American stage.20

African Americans were right to be concerned that white audiences and critics would interpret *Porgy and Bess*’s characters and situations through a prism of deeply entrenched racist stereotypes. Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* decided that “the tattered children of a Charleston byway are still racy and congenial,” another critic deemed the show “rich with primitive emotions,” and a third praised the cast’s portrayals of “the grotesque and pathetic lives” of Catfish Row’s residents. More than one reviewer used the term “rookery” to describe Catfish Row, associating its African American characters with breeding animals. Others reduced the show’s characters to “types,” such as “the languid and lazy roustabouts; the tongue-lashing women folk; the dope-selling smart guy; the longword-slinging lawyer; the song-singing mammy; the sing-song crab seller; the strawberry lady; the police-fearing inhabitants” and “terror-stricken savages.” Racist assumptions also appeared in commentary about whether southern African American characters were suitable subjects for opera. Despite the many operas whose plots featured various European peasant groups, few American critics
took the union of black characters with operatic form for granted, and several found it downright incongruous. Many juxtaposed the supposed “primitive” nature of the fictional material with the sophisticated operatic form in which it was delivered. Some maintained that Gershwin elevated the characters, giving them “new life and importance.” The Chicago Times marveled at a work of operatic grandeur “built upon the squalid life of Charlestown, S.C.’s Negro settlement,” and the Boston American agreed that “Catfish Row and its childlike primitives, colorful subjects of the fine play ‘Porgy’ produced in 1927, grew to momentous stature last night.” Others disagreed, arguing that “the sophisticated atmosphere and idiom of opera scarcely suits the protagonists of ‘Porgy’” and complaining of the libretto: “Its words are still not sufficiently poetic to be either operatic or negroid.”

Critics also drew on assumptions about the “natural” musicality of African Americans in praising Gershwin’s transformation of the Porgy story into opera. Their commentary reflected the influence of decades of blackface-minstrel depictions of uneducated and spontaneous African Americans. If, in one critic’s choice phrase, “The play of ‘Porgy’ was born meat for opera,” many reviewers believed it was because “colored folk in Charleston” are “folks who naturally turn their joys and sorrows into song.” To other critics, supposedly “primitive” African American emotions and conduct also made Porgy a perfect story to tell through music. In both of these assumptions, they took their cue from Gershwin himself, who explained his musical choices in a New York Times piece published shortly after the opera’s debut. His choice of “a tale of Charleston Negroes for a subject” for his folk opera enabled him “to write light as well as serious music and . . . to include humor as well as tragedy—in fact, all of the elements of entertainment for the eye as well as the ear, because the Negroes, as a race, have all these qualities inherent in them. They are ideal for my purpose because they express themselves not only by the spoken word but quite naturally by song and dance.”

The race of the opera’s characters and the influence of African American music on the score were integral to the public understanding of Gershwin’s accomplishment. He had, in the words of one critic, composed “an opera which musically is in the American idiom, lyrically in the American vernacular, and the perfect expression of a folk tale of the American soil.” Many others joined in the acclaim, crediting Gershwin with creating what they considered a first in American musical life: an authentic and native national opera that actively courted popular success. To many, his accomplishment rested as much on his choice of subject as on his musical abilities; the national authenticity of Porgy and Bess’s music was integrally linked to
its racial authenticity. Reflecting the influence of three decades of popular culture and academic folklore, many white critics believed that African American characters and musical styles qualified as uniquely authentic and indigenous sources of American culture. While articulated in different ways, critics who found black characters and music suitably authentic and native all rested their conclusions on the assumption that African Americans were, like Native Americans, fundamentally separate from mainstream white culture and society. (Native Americans had apparently proven to be poor operatic subjects. Gershwin himself told a reporter, “They’ve tried the Indian dozens of times but unfortunately with little success”); and the reporter concurred, “Irreverent opera-goers will always giggle to see fat, formal singers decked with feathers and emitting feeble whoops.” This was, of course, the romanticized view—put forth by DuBose Heyward and many others—of African Americans as pastoral antidotes to modern life, a view amplified through its repetition in a range of popular media. One critic explained that “episodes of Negro life in Charleston” were apt material for opera precisely because they were atypical of modern—and white—American life. “The locale has the tragic implication, types, background, and atmosphere distinct from the standardized habits, philosophy, and character of white America,” he wrote, concluding: “The machine age is sterile in romance. So Catfish Row in the metropolis of South Carolina is just the right scene.” And, of course, there was the “natural passion for rhythm” that African Americans embodied, the most entertaining characteristic that separated the race from the white mainstream. To a Boston reviewer, *Porgy and Bess* was “an effort to transfuse vital, black blood into the somewhat hardened arteries of conventional opera.” One critic maintained that *Porgy and Bess* was at its best “only in those moments when the free, sensuous and rhythmic music of the unself-conscious Negroes was admitted into the score,” and that it became “a little arid and mannered in those passages which were purest opera and not related to the conditions of Negro lives.”

Many critics also celebrated Gershwin’s opera as authentic national music because its popularity embodied a democratic ideal, purposefully accessible to audiences unschooled in opera. Gershwin’s “new attitude toward opera promises to discover a new public for it,” predicted one critic, capturing the optimism of those delighted at the prospect of a populist opera. Gershwin’s musical accomplishment was “about Americans, for Americans, and by Americans sympathetically and completely understood,” an opera, written in English, “whose every word [Americans] are able to follow, and whose comical twists come to them directly in their own tongue.” To those who dis-
dained *Porgy and Bess*’s songs as unsuitable to the operatic genre, one critic retorted that the songs were “as indigenous to America as the rock-bound coast of Maine. In them lie America’s chance to make opera popular.” One critic implied another contrast with traditional European opera by arguing that the very ordinariness of the subject matter made it a fitting subject for American opera; Catfish Row was not “legendary” but simply “illustrative of American life.”

*Porgy and Bess* seemed so accessible to audiences not just because of Gershwin’s music but also because of Mamoulian’s dynamic, decidedly unoperatic staging techniques. Mamoulian had choreographed as much movement as possible into the spirituals-laden *Porgy* in 1927, and Gershwin’s music gave him even more opportunities to put his signature style to work. Involving the chorus in the action whenever possible, he instructed the cast to not “stand around like a chorus—break the formality of it all,” and admonished, “You must regulate your movements by the rhythm and character of the music at the moment.” The opening scene, as the lights rose on Catfish Row, involved an elaborately choreographed mixture of movement and sound effects, cued by the stage manager in the wings. During Porgy’s jaunty “I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin’,” the entire cast timed their actions to the song’s rhythms, shaking feather dusters from windows, sharpening knives, and whisking dust cloths. In an effect widely noted, even empty rocking chairs rocked in time to the song’s beat. His staging “puts the Metropolitan to shame,” chided the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, adding: “This is the manner in which opera in this country should be done—ought to have been done long ago.”

In addition to Mamoulian’s staging, the other obvious difference between *Porgy and Bess* and the usual Metropolitan Opera productions was, of course, the race of the performers. Taken together, such dynamic theatrical techniques and novel performers could introduce opera to audiences that the Met had long ignored. Samuel Chotzinoff of the *New York Post* praised the cast for providing “that semblance of life which is never present at orthodox presentations of opera” and admitted: “Mr. Mamoulian’s direction was less subtle than I hoped it would be, but compared with the direction that obtains at the Metropolitan it was positively Stanislavskian.” *Porgy and Bess*, he punningly concluded, “will lead many innocent persons to believe that opera as a form is not so black as it is usually painted.” The fact that *Porgy and Bess*’s performers had never sung on the Metropolitan’s stage before was a point in their favor with many critics, who lauded their fresh and unstudied performances. Olin Downes of the *Times* observed: “If the Metropolitan chorus could ever put one-half the action in the riot scene in the second act
of ‘Meistersinger’ that the Negro cast put into the fight that followed the crap game it would be not merely refreshing but miraculous.” Others found the presence of actual black singers to be a welcome change from the use of white singers in blackface makeup, who represented the staid tradition from which Gershwin had daringly broken free. One critic chided the Metropolitan for avoiding “the finest source of authentic music in America, the American Negro, a source that musical comedy and the drama have been taking advantage of these many years.” Another got closer to the reason for that avoidance, speculating that Gershwin failed to produce his first opera at that venerable institution because “possibly [he] had wondered whether the Metropolitan could supply him with seventy or so Negro singers for

Serge Soudeikine’s set for the 1935 opera Porgy and Bess, similar to the design used in 1927 for Porgy, established Catfish Row as an outdoor courtyard created by the back of a series of connected buildings with multiple levels and numerous windows. This design enabled directors to stage background activity behind and around the main action on stage as a way to emphasize the Catfish Row community. Set designers tasked with recreating Catfish Row followed this basic template for decades to come. (Vandamm theatrical photographs, 1900–1957; courtesy of the New York Public Library)
his opera, or whether he would be obliged to accept a company of assorted white singing-actors made up and garbed in brown jaeger underwear like the Ethiopians in ‘Aida.’” Gershwin himself dodged the question of segregation, insisting democratically: “The reason I did not submit this work to the usual sponsors of opera in America was that I hoped to have developed something in American music that would appeal to the many rather than to the cultured few.”

The persistent idea that African Americans were “naturally” musical was rooted in the blackface-minstrel form so central to nineteenth-century American popular culture. It was also rooted in the association of African American singers with the concert presentation of spirituals, which dated back to the Reconstruction era and became even more popular with white critics and audiences during the 1920s. While choirs like the Fisk Jubilee Singers had been performing spirituals in concert before white audiences since the late nineteenth century, a group of black male solo singers in the 1920s (including Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson, and Jules Bledsoe) also gained renown and drew large audiences to their recitals in the United States and Europe. These soloists and choirs earned significant visibility, critical acclaim, and financial rewards. Some radio programs in the 1920s and 1930s began to feature quartets such as the Southernaires and choral groups from black colleges. And audiences began hearing spirituals on Broadway stages, as serious interludes in musical revues and as an extremely popular aspect of Porgy. Such varied presentations of the spirituals during the 1920s influenced both white conceptions of authentic black musical sound and black conceptions of racial uplift in ways that set the stage for critical debates over Porgy and Bess when it debuted in 1935.

While the world of professional music remained segregated in many significant respects, the presentation of historically rooted, serious renditions of black folk music provided African American singers with newfound access to previously segregated performance spaces and to white critics who would otherwise never have heard their performances or repertoire. The spirituals enabled African Americans to exert, in at least one arena, a degree of influence over representations of black cultural authenticity. There may have been a dearth of black playwrights, but black singers and arrangers of spirituals could and did put forth their own version of authentic black culture. These concerts shifted white music critics’ notions of authentic black sound away from minstrelsy and claimed for African Americans a place in concert halls performing for white audiences. For black musicians and intellectuals, the spirituals provided an undeniable racial contribution to American cul-

158 • Porgy and Bess, 1935
ture and a way to demonstrate prowess with Western classical music by combining arias and spirituals in the same recital program. Black cultural leaders during the 1920s saw the spirituals in particular, and the performing arts in general, as a potent tool of racial uplift.

African American composer James Weldon Johnson, who compiled, with his brother J. Rosamond Johnson, the two-volume sheet-music collection *The Books of American Negro Spirituals* (1925), was confident that “all the true Spirituals possess dignity.” “Dignity” served as a thinly veiled marker for authenticity and class, since Johnson and others promoted some spirituals and the choirs that performed them in concert halls as authentic in order to counter uses of spiritual-derived songs in minstrel-show parodies or Tin Pan Alley perversions of the form. Johnson lamented: “There are doubtless many persons who have heard these songs sung only on the vaudeville or theatrical stage and have laughed uproariously at them because they were presented in humorous vein. Such people have no conception of the Spirituals. . . . These Spirituals cannot be properly appreciated or understood unless they are clothed in their primitive dignity.” Roland Hayes believed that he “was restoring the music of my race to the serious atmosphere of its origins, and helping to redeem it for the national culture,” since in the years before he began his concert performances, “white singers had often been in the habit of burlesquing the spirituals with rolling eyes and heaving breast and shuffling feet, on the blasphemous assumption that they were singing comic songs.” *Opportunity* used its editorial pages to inveigh against the Tin Pan Alley songwriters who “transformed and degraded” the characteristic melodies and lyrics of the spirituals to create popular blues songs. “One may not object to the dignified transcription of the Spirituals or any folk songs for that matter, into a more complex musical idiom,” an *Opportunity* editorial opined, but the “shabby musical concoctions” with which the word “spiritual” had become associated were unacceptable.32

With the spirituals, black intellectuals and musicians could exert their own influence on cultural representations of African Americans and claim a valuable black contribution to American culture. After nearly a century of popular culture and political ideology presenting African Americans as happy slaves and buffoonish urbanites, the spirituals asserted the depth of black suffering and the dignity with which it had long been borne. Black cultural leaders promoted the spirituals not only through performance but also in print. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois used a few lines of music and lyrics from traditional spirituals to introduce every chapter and devoted a chapter to interpreting them as the quintessential expression of African

*Porgy and Bess*, 1935 • 159
American culture. Numerous books of spirituals were published during the 1920s, the most prominent being the aforementioned *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*. James Weldon Johnson and others used these collections both to make the spirituals widely available and to refute racist theories that black folk and religious music were merely derivative imitations of white folk music. A further indication of the importance of the spirituals as an authentic African American contribution to American culture could be found in the pages of *The Crisis*. The magazine, which regularly featured brief items on concerts, conservatory scholarships, and other musical accomplishments by African Americans, also included items on “plantation songs” sung by white singers and the use of “negro themes” by white classical composers. Clearly, while it vigorously promoted the accomplishments of black musicians, *The Crisis* also valued the racial provenance of the music and the dignified settings in which it was performed.

Gershwin’s decision to incorporate black spirituals into a western operatic setting was not as innovative as some white audiences assumed. For black performers, the realms of classical music and traditional slave songs had been woven together for decades. The Fisk Jubilee Singers began their concertizing in the 1870s, intent on performing European choral music. But white audiences clamored for spirituals, and the Fisk Singers adapted their repertory in response, singing spirituals yet maintaining the performance style of European choral music. For black singers and composers, this interdependent relationship between Western classical music and spirituals continued through the 1920s and 1930s. *Opportunity* magazine sponsored contests in musical composition where the categories included a mix of forms—sonata for piano, vocal composition for solo and chorus, and arrangements of black spirituals and folk songs. Virtually all black singers, like Hayes, programmed their concerts and recitals to include spirituals, which attracted white audiences, and also included arias and classical art songs.

As the Fisk Jubilee Singers and other black singers discovered, expectations of black authenticity helped to determine the availability of professional performing opportunities; how they performed the spirituals mattered a great deal to critics and audiences. The desire of black singers to prove their abilities at performing Western art songs and operatic arias sometimes came into conflict with white expectations of black musical authenticity. Many white listeners presumed that authentic African American spirituals and folk songs would exhibit unrestrained emotionalism, in contrast to the more sterile and controlled sound of Western art music. Such expectations were akin to Heyward’s admiration for what he saw as the passionate, straight-
forward, unreformed existence of the Low Country African Americans he fictionalized in *Porgy*: if African Americans were so culturally different from white Americans, they certainly should not sound like them on a concert stage. Hayes, who established his reputation as a recital singer in Europe and in the United States beginning in 1918, always included both European art songs and African American spirituals in his concert programs. Robeson, whose first New York City recitals took place in 1925, chose to present an all-spirituals program. Carl Van Vechten, a prominent white patron of black artists in the 1920s, energetically championed Robeson’s all-spirituals recital as more authentic than Hayes’s concerts, disdaining “the pseudo-refinement of the typical concert singer” in favor of “the evangelical, *true Negro* rendering of Paul Robeson and [accompanist] Lawrence Brown.”

Lawrence Tibbett, America’s most renowned white operatic baritone during the 1920s and 1930s, thought that the preference of African Americans for European music was a damaging turn of events. Tibbett championed blues music and complained in 1935 that African Americans refused to sing “in their native dialect,” insisting that “culture is robbing them of their most lovable characteristic . . . their native music in the native manner.” By contrast, George Gershwin seemed to hold no such attitude, as Western classical music rather than a spiritual helped Todd Duncan win the part of Porgy, and Gershwin privately described Duncan as “the closest thing to a colored Lawrence Tibbett [he had] ever heard.” Gershwin had been auditioning black nightclub singers, who tended to choose songs like “Old Man River” and “Glory Road.” When Duncan sang a seventeenth-century Italian aria, Gershwin, who had long considered Robeson for the role, quickly asked Duncan, “Will you be my Porgy?” The fame that Duncan derived from *Porgy and Bess* enabled him to stage solo concerts, which followed the established recital formula among the era’s black singers of mixing classical compositions and spirituals, with a predictable twist. Duncan’s concert programs “ranged from an Italian and French group through a German group to English songs, spirituals, and finally, songs from ‘Porgy and Bess.’” Duncan’s encore number was “I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin.”

African American critics and performers also debated these questions of performance style and the spirituals, both among themselves and in answer to influential white cultural figures. A 1933 editorial in *The Crisis* by Du Bois titled “Our Music” took aim at attitudes like that of Tibbett and Van Vechten and defended the right of African Americans to perform in the styles and venues of Western classical music. Du Bois quoted a passage from *New York Times* music critic Downes, who found a Carnegie Hall Fisk Singers concert
sterile when compared to the spirituals he heard onstage during Porgy and Green Pastures and at Harlem religious revivals, places where the singers “sing in the sacred spirit and uncorrupted manner of their race.” What Downes really meant, Du Bois insisted, was that “any attempt to sing Italian music or German music [by black singers], in some inexplicable manner, leads them off their preserves and is not ‘natural.’” He asserted: “The Negro chorus has a right to sing music of any sort it likes and to be judged by its accomplishment rather than by what foolish critics think it ought to be doing.”41 Opportunity also editorialized in favor of the right and ability of black musicians to perform Western classical music in defiance of white expectations. A 1932 editorial lauded a series of radio performances by the Fisk choir, arguing that not only were the concerts outstanding entertainment, they also “demonstrated to the radio audience that Negro singers could achieve a mastery of musical forms other than the Spirituals and folk music of their race.” The radio concerts also provided a standard against which to judge (and discredit) the “Negroid melodies which currently pass for folk music over the radio and on the stage.”42

Opportunity columnist Countee Cullen also used his column to prod at the white tendency to associate black performers exclusively with the spirituals. He acknowledged “the beauty of Negro spirituals” and the skill of those black singers who performed them, but he admitted that he “resented the natural inclination of most white people to demand spirituals the moment it is known that a Negro is about to sing.” He suspected that such requests “seemed to savor of the feeling that we could do this and this alone.” To illustrate that black performers possessed musical range, Cullen described a concert at a black high school where students sang an antebellum folk song, a spiritual, and, finally, “the Miserere from Trovatore better than [he] had ever heard it sung on any stage by anybody.”43 Black performers and audiences also took part in these debates over spirituals, Western classical music, and expectations of authentic black sound. During the winter of 1927, Robeson performed in Kansas City as part of a concert tour of the Midwest. While the concert was well attended by both blacks and whites, a dispute erupted in the local black newspaper, the Kansas City Call, over his repertoire. A local music teacher wrote to express her “humiliation” that Robeson sang only “slave songs” and eschewed the classical selections that would have demonstrated more advanced “musical technique.” A debate in the Call’s letters pages ensued; others criticized Robeson for “commercializing our backwardness,” but the majority argued that it was time for African Americans to promote their own artistic heritage. A few years later, Robeson told a
Massachusetts newspaper: “Some people expect me to take up Italian opera. In fact, in Philadelphia the people of my own race won’t come to hear me sing because I limit my programs to the Negro folk songs. They would pay to hear me sing opera but not the simple things.” Hayes believed that such a response by black audiences was a legacy of discrimination, observing: “My people have been very shy about singing their crude little songs before white folks. They thought they would be laughed at—and they were! And so they came to despise their own heritage.” The concerts of Hayes and Robeson had a powerful impact on black audiences. A black scholar recalls that, as a child in Macon, Georgia, attending a recital by Hayes, he “listened to the tenor sing art songs in French and Italian and German,” and while he “could not understand a single word he was singing . . . [he] knew an event of social and artistic importance was taking place and [he] was part of it.”

These many black music lovers cared so intensely about black concert artists’ repertoire because they saw such musical choices as having political and social implications. Black publications, proficient at celebrating the race’s successful performers, also understood that black audiences were an essential force if African American culture was to succeed at promoting African American rights. Du Bois saw the link, using an editorial in The Crisis to admonish the black community for not financially supporting its artists—borrowing rather than buying books, paying artists a pittance for their work, criticizing musicians who refused to play without pay—and predicting that such parsimony “is warning away exactly the type of men who would do more than any others to establish the right of the black race to universal recognition.” In addition to urging black audiences to support the arts, the black press also, on occasion, instructed black audiences on proper conduct. If “all true spirituals have dignity,” then black audiences, equally on display to the white world, required dignity as well. In 1916 Du Bois chastised black theatre audiences for their “loud ejaculations and guffaws of laughter” at inappropriate moments. Attributing such behavior to “ignorance” and “thoughtlessness,” he argued that the budding black theatre and its actors needed support, and “there is no truer encouragement than an intelligent appreciation.” A 1922 report titled “The Negro in Drama” in The Crisis described a white reporter’s visit to a show by Harlem’s Lafayette Players. He reported that “the audience (all black) was remarkable chiefly for its air of very pleasing refinement” and subsequently speculated “the audience, black outwardly, seemed white inwardly, and . . . responded appreciatively to nobility of phrase and sentiment.” Even in the black press, a respectful African American audience was safely deemed to be more characteristically “white” than “black.”
While black arts critic Theophilus Lewis blamed black actors and their material for not attracting the “respectable classes,” *The Messenger* instead reproached those “respectable classes” for not appreciating black theatre. An editorial that asked “Do Negroes Want High Class Anything?” began by noting that “the manners of the colored theatre goers generally are the worst in the United States.” It went on to charge that “blues singers whose offerings range between the racially derogatory or the vulgar” drew larger black audiences than a black-cast Broadway musical revue and asserted that “the culture of the large number of so-called educated Negroes is very superficial . . . which is reflected in a pretense of loving the opera, drama and fine art, when in reality it bores them and is as pearls cast before swine.”

Beyond direct editorials, these magazines contained a variety of messages encouraging readers to support “highbrow” arts. Advertisements for Black Swan Records, which appeared regularly in *The Crisis* during the 1920s, used class-based appeals to promote certain kinds of black music to the journal’s readers. These full-page advertisements prescribed the kinds of music readers should purchase and often explained why in terms that appealed directly to the readers’ own class aspirations and sense of responsibility for racial uplift. One ad, headlined “Colored People Don’t Want Classic Music!,” purported to echo record dealers’ complaints. The ad exhorted: “If you—the person reading this advertisement—earnestly want to Do Something for Negro Music, Go to your Record Dealer and ask for the Better Class of Records by Colored Artists. If there is a Demand he will Keep Them.” The list of “Better Class” records included arias, sacred songs, and ballads. Black Swan’s featured offerings always included at least some operatic selections; one month, they featured records by Antoinette Garnes, “The Only Colored Member of the Chicago Grand Opera Company.” Another ad touted the opportunity to “Encourage Negro Singers, Musicians, and Composers” through the purchase of the company’s records. Black Swan promised that it would “give opportunities to our own singers such as they can get from no other companies” and that “every record you buy means encouragement to some Negro singer and some Negro musician to continue their work and develop their talent,” as well as providing other middle-class jobs, such as clerk and stenographer, at the Black Swan company.

Other features in *The Crisis* promoted the arts in a variety of ways. Ads for conservatories of music appeared among those for other black colleges in *The Crisis* School Directory. The Touissant Conservatory of Art and Music claimed: “One of the Surest Ways to Succeed in Life Is to Take a Course” in art or music and promised reasonable terms. The Tuskegee Institute School
of Music declared “Music Your Opportunity” and cited an increased demand for school music teachers, choir teachers, organists, piano teachers, and concert artists. In an occupational summary of employed African Americans in 1930, *The Crisis* demonstrated the significance of the arts as a source of middle-class occupations. Of the 100,000 employed blacks in professional occupations (2.5 percent of all employed African Americans), musicians and teachers of music ranked third, at 10,583; actors ranked fifth, at 4,130. *The Crisis* also occasionally carried Artists’ Directories among its advertisements, which listed the names, contact information, and repertoire of black singers and instrumentalists, and the magazine’s free Information Service provided additional information about the listed artists.48

These various representations of the arts in the pages of black magazines in the first two decades of the twentieth century encouraged readers to adopt the cultural markers of middle-class status through records, cultural education, and properly behaved attendance at cultural events. They also reinforced the status of black performers and artists as middle-class professionals. The more mass-circulation black newspaper the *New York Amsterdam News* went even further, presenting black performers as middle-class role models in a feature designed to encourage black home ownership. In an October 1927 issue, a note on the arts page directed readers to the Long Island section of the paper for “another side of the colored performer.” Addressing the black performers among the *News*’s readers, the editors advised “the performer, earning much more in a shorter period than many of his brothers in other walks of life, should look to the future” and explained “the advisability of our people on the stage securing their own homes before prices became prohibitive.” *Amsterdam News* readers could see photos of half a dozen homes owned by African American singers, vaudevillians, and musical revue performers, with captions promoting the joys of home ownership; one caption proclaimed that Mamie Smith “Saved Her Money and When She Decided to Live in New York She Purchased a Home. Recently She Heard the Call to the Suburbs and Bought the Above House on 158th Street in Jamaica, Where She Resides.” This promotion by the *Amsterdam News* reflected the growth of black middle-class populations in a few Queens neighborhoods during the 1920s and 1930s, as not just performers but civil servants, professionals, and skilled workers moved out of Manhattan and established residential enclaves with their own social and cultural institutions. The newspaper’s boosterism also addressed the plain fact that the majority of black New Yorkers were not likely to own homes in Queens or anywhere else in the five boroughs. New York City showed notably lower rates of black homeownership than other
large northern cities: only 5.6 percent of African Americans in New York owned homes in 1930, and the Depression dropped that figure to 4.1 percent by 1940. Only a small black elite was in a position to accumulate the tangible assets that undergirded genuine economic stability, and the Amsterdam News used the handful of performers who fell into that category to put a celebrity face on the racial progress to be gained through home ownership.

These nearly two decades of black-press messages linking respectability with the performing arts are an essential context for understanding the black press’s response to Porgy and Bess in 1935. While African American publications celebrated the Porgy and Bess cast’s talent as performers, they also highlighted their middle-class respectability as individuals. Unlike white critics who enthused over the cast’s “natural” affinity for the opera’s characters, features and editorials in some black newspapers emphasized the middle-class status of the Porgy and Bess performers and the social, educational, and linguistic distance that separated them from the characters they portrayed onstage. A caption beneath photos of Brown and Duncan in the Amsterdam News implied the distance with the praise, “Each has been proclaimed as a performer of the first rank. At that, they do some neat dressing down on ‘Catfish Row,’ don’t they?” A profile of Brown that ran in both the Amsterdam News and the New York Age characterized her as an “intensely fascinating, cultured and well poised young woman,” whose father and husband were both physicians. The profile noted her middle-class Baltimore upbringing and Juilliard training, aided by not one but two scholarships, and reassured readers: “It is her dramatic talent alone which enables her to give such a convincing portrayal of ‘Bess,’ ” since “there is nothing whatever in Miss Brown’s own social background or experience which would be of aid to her in interpreting this role.” The piece concluded with a reminder of Brown’s distance from the character she portrayed, noting that it was “more remarkable still . . . that she can speak and sing in the dialect of the Negroes of ‘Catfish Row’ as though she had lived among these people all her life.” In the Chicago Defender, readers learned that Brown aspired to sing grand opera, “has dabbled in art and play-writing,” and, in her spare time, “ransacked her father’s medical library learning about microbes.” Chicago Defender articles about Ruby Elzy, the daughter of a Mississippi washerwoman, emphasized her extensive musical education at Ohio State University and in New York City and characterized her as “the first college girl of the younger generation to hold a title role on the ‘white way.’”

Of all the signifiers of buffoonish black inferiority in American popular culture, exaggerated southern dialect and mangled English usage were the
most prevalent and powerful. Blackface minstrel performances, vaudeville, dialect stories, and even early Hollywood films all signaled the lack of education and “civilization” of black characters through language. To a black middle class struggling to prove its worth, these were indeed fighting words, and black press coverage of Porgy and Bess made sure to distinguish between the performers’ language and that of the opera’s characters. The New York Age’s profile of Anne Brown informed readers that “all of the children, as well as Dr. and Mrs. Brown, speak with perfect English diction” and ascribed her ability to sing “spirituals and folk songs in dialect” to professional training, equating it with her skill at enunciating “German lieder and French chansons and arias.” The Afro-American was also sufficiently concerned about separating the Porgy and Bess performers from their characters on the question of dialect that it ran an editorial titled “Porgy’s Dialect.” The editorial noted that “one of the difficulties to be overcome” in the staging of Porgy and Bess “was the fact that the cast of seventy-five New Yorkers had to be taught the Southern dialect.” It continued, as if addressing a skeptical white reader, “No, all colored people do not have a drawl, clip their final ‘g’s and say ‘you all,’” and further mocked the imagined white reader by concluding with the anecdote of a “world-traveler” who “got the greatest shock in his life when he met a colored Frenchman who knew no dialect and no English.” The Chicago Defender reprinted a 1935 article that contained not only Tibbett’s dismay at the reluctance of African American singers to sing in “native dialect” but also the white singer’s “stunned” reaction to hearing the highly educated and formal speech of Todd Duncan, whom Tibbett overheard during a Porgy and Bess rehearsal. In an editorial preface to the reprint, the Defender disavowed Tibbett’s opinion as “the other side of a question that may interest you,” clearly intending to highlight for its readers the white singer’s surprise at the toppling of his racist assumption that Duncan was as uneducated as Porgy.52

The respectability gap between actors’ own backgrounds and the characters they portrayed onstage also surfaced in an article about Brown and her family in the Afro-American. In this instance, the stereotype of black women as sexually available and uninhibited caused both the writer and Brown to distance the actress from one of Bess’s most sexually suggestive scenes. The black middle-class world was not large in the early twentieth century, and it so happened that Afro-American music critic Ralph Matthews grew up next door to the Browns in Baltimore. Matthews used Brown’s father’s discomfort with his daughter’s “hoochie dance” as the title and theme for his profile of the hardworking and respectable middle-class family. Knowing “only too well what a circumspect life” the Brown family led, Matthews asked Anne
how her father felt about the “sensuous dance” she performed nightly onstage with Warren Coleman, who played the character Crown. She replied that her breach of middle-class sexual propriety left her mother, who recognized that she was “only acting,” unperturbed but rendered her father “silent and glum.” (“Papa Brown” did not know it, but Bess’s costuming and staging in the 1935 version were downright chaste compared to what they became in subsequent productions of the opera.) While the rest of the article portrayed a proud middle-class family—with a mother who sacrificed to nurture her daughter’s talent and training and a father with “pockets bulging with newspaper clippings”—it was a clear reminder to readers that the black middle class, no less than their white peers, maintained strict boundaries of gender propriety.53

Brown and Duncan, at least in retrospect, believed that the opportunity provided to black singers far outweighed any concerns about the respectability of the characters they portrayed onstage. Five decades later, both singers remembered significant criticism by a black community that was ashamed of the characters in *Porgy and Bess*. Brown recalled that “my father, who was a doctor, didn’t like it at all. . . . He said it perpetuated the image of blacks as lazy people, singing hymns and taking dope. A lot of the black educators thought it was Uncle Tom.” Brown herself believed “if it brought us forward in American music and in opera roles for black singers, then we should do it.”54 Duncan similarly recounted: “There were many editorials in Negro papers saying that I was letting the race down by crawling around on my knees. They said the opera was demeaning to the Negro . . . showing the worst side of the Negro.” Duncan insisted that Gershwin intended to present “what the unspoiled South Carolina Negro stood for—religiosity, integrity, fundamental truths” and that “the Negro bourgeoisie didn’t see that” because “everything was segregated, there were no civil rights then.” Duncan also recalled teaching colleagues who accused him of “letting Howard University down” by “crawling around like a leech or something on his knees and singing Gershwin music.” Still smarting at the memory, Duncan added: “They vented a lot of wrath on me and Gershwin, and also on Anne Brown. They said Negroes should be ashamed she was playing a prostitute. My answer was, ‘How should Italians feel about Tosca? Are the French ashamed of Carmen?’”55 Even in 1942, Ruby Elzy implied that she heard criticism of the opera when she told a black journalist: “If you want to make me very unhappy, say you don’t like ‘Porgy and Bess.’ I think that all people should be proud of their folk material.”56 Duncan’s recollection of “many editorials” is an exaggeration, or perhaps a conflation of reactions in 1935 with increas-
ingly critical responses that greeted subsequent revivals. But his memories of criticism from family and community members, along with those of Brown and Elzy, suggest the possibility of a fiercer debate about the tension among respectability, racial representation, and racial access than is evident in available sources.

Duncan and Brown’s memories of censure notwithstanding, the more dominant tone in the black press was celebratory, rejoicing in the fact that the *Porgy and Bess* cast’s talent and training were receiving long-overdue acclaim from white critics and audiences. Bringing white critics’ praise to the attention of black press readers was sometimes a necessity, sometimes a choice. In New York City, the Theatre Guild neglected to invite the *Amsterdam News* and the *Age*, the city’s leading African American newspapers, to *Porgy and Bess*’s opening night, so those papers reprinted favorable reviews and articles from mainstream white newspapers to give their readers some instant news of the show before the following week, when their own reviews finally appeared. Black newspapers with national readerships also reprinted favorable coverage. The *Pittsburgh Courier* ran an early article that compiled favorable reviews from major white critics, while the *Afro-American* reprinted a *Time* magazine preview of the opera a week before its opening. In the weeks leading up to and following *Porgy and Bess*’s debut, several black publications included photographs praising cast members for “Taking Broadway by Storm” and column items heralding the new professional opportunities now available to longtime Harlem favorite John Bubbles.57

More than merely noting the performers’ newfound acclaim in the eyes of prestigious white critics, black critics also celebrated their training and contended that it was central to the opera’s musical effectiveness. They extended credit for *Porgy and Bess*’s musical success to the performers and not just to Gershwin. Rebuking the widespread white assumption of natural black talent, they also emphasized the values of hard work and education, central to middle-class ideas about racial uplift. Writing in the *California Eagle*, one reviewer praised the opera for its “rich voices beautifully trained in an unusually difficult score” and noted of the cast, “back of their interpretations one sensed as much of actual head work as of emotional fervor.” The *New York Age*’s critic, observing that the principals included veterans like Abbie Mitchell and Georgette Harvey alongside newcomers like Duncan, Brown, and Elzy, voiced his conclusion that this opera provided a new level of opportunity and accomplishment, noting that “whatever their previous experience might have been, their work in this performance stamps them with an undeniable cachet of capability.” The *New York Harlem News* praised “sing-
ing that ranks with the best of Metropolitan and European opera centers” by principals who “have reached a pinnacle of vocal accomplishment which few colored artists have passed. It was a difficult job and certainly required a great deal of training and effort.” The Chicago Defender’s Rob Roy noted that many Porgy and Bess cast members were veterans of a decade’s worth of Broadway productions and chastised “the determination of white critics to stress heavily the ‘talent’ angle and ignore the perfectly obvious evidences of expert training in stage technique.”

Other black critics argued that the opera’s performers not only equaled but elevated Gershwin’s music and Heyward’s material. The Chicago Defender’s critic declared: “It was not Gershwin’s music that sold me the show on its opening night here or when I saw it in New York. Rather, the acting of the show’s stars.” He singled out dramatic episodes, such as the “soul-stirring” moment when “Abbie Mitchell screams fear that her husband has been lost in a rainstorm” and the scene “when Bubbles pleads with Bess to follow him to New York’s Harlem,” in which the actor “becomes a Barrymore of drama.” In a similar vein, the Defender critic lauded Duncan’s performance—“When Porgy pleads with Crown to cease attentions to his Bess, he is unbelievably superb, so much so that you lose appreciation for the tone of his song, ‘I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin’”—signaling that he preferred the work’s serious dramatic moments and viewed the more popular tune’s “tone” as an offensively jaunty commentary on black poverty. The New York Age’s critic similarly praised Duncan’s performance, noting that “the most striking number assigned to him, ‘I got plenty of nothin’, received all of its value through his rendition.” Ralph Matthews of the Afro-American was lukewarm about Gershwin’s score but found the opera to be “beautifully portrayed and sympathetically interpreted” nonetheless, and he found that the love duets between Porgy and Bess “call upon all the technical training of both artists to get the best out of the intricate score of Gershwin.” Despite his dim view of the opera (the review was titled “‘Porgy and Bess’ Is a Show Window Woman: Has Form and Beauty but Is Only a Dummy”), the Pittsburgh Courier’s critic avowed: “Your soul is touched by the performers themselves.” He praised Duncan and Brown for “an amazingly realistic performance in a series of scenes which might have been plucked from ‘Rose Marie.’ Their singing and acting are startling in their excellence.” (Rose Marie was a popular 1924 operetta about star-crossed lovers in rural Quebec.) And the New York Harlem News singled out “John W. Bubbles, who made his role of ‘Sportin’ Life’ an artistic and vivid interpretation of a part which could easily have been mediocre.”

Even as it celebrated the new opportunities and visibility achieved by
the *Porgy and Bess* performers, the black press also recorded their inevitable brushes with segregation, particularly during the 1942–44 revival of the opera that toured widely across the United States. The *Porgy and Bess* cast both suffered from and fought back against segregation’s myriad injustices, and for some local activists, the show’s fame served as a catalyst for their continued efforts to desegregate public spaces in their communities. Warren Coleman, who played Crown, capitalized on *Porgy and Bess*’s publicity to draw attention to the difficulties facing African American actors. He reminded a white interviewer that, despite the acclaim he was receiving for his work in *Porgy and Bess*, “The theatre has been a precarious place for the Negro in the past. Plays for Negroes have been few, and the Negro actor has not had enough steady employment to give him the opportunity to grow.” Coleman added, echoing many black arts proponents before and after him: “Unfortunately, few of the literary figures which my race has produced have gone in for the drama. We have had splendid poets and fine novelists. We must have great playwrights, too — then the Negro will take his proper place in the theatre.”

A white liberal newspaper columnist in Pittsburgh similarly used the arrival of *Porgy and Bess*, and the “men and women of notable attainments” who made up its cast, to decry “the scant opportunities Pittsburgh affords to its Negro population, to indulge what is a racial sensitivity to the emotional arts.” She argued for increased funding for YWCA recreation programs so that black youth inspired by *Porgy and Bess* could pursue artistic training. She marveled that, “discouraged as they have been in their efforts to improve themselves along artistic lines, they have been able to develop, among themselves, such a high order of talent along the very lines cut off from them by racial prejudice,” and she extolled the cast as examples of members of their race who, given an opportunity, pulled themselves up by their own vocal cords and furnished “a thrilling example of what may be done in the face of odds.”

*Porgy and Bess* enabled a bigger blow aimed at the edifice of segregation in the spring of 1936, when the opera toured to Washington, D.C., and the cast refused to perform at the segregated National Theatre. Despite pressure, they held firm, and Duncan recalled writing letters on the matter “to anybody who was anybody, from Eleanor Roosevelt to Ralph Bunche, on down.” It is unclear whether the cast’s refusal to perform at the National preceded, followed, or was coincident with the efforts of three Howard University professors (Bunche, Sterling Brown, and Alpheus Hunton), who met with the National’s manager to demand that African Americans be allowed to attend any performance of the opera and to sit anywhere they purchased a ticket. After the manager responded to the distinguished trio with a mix
of condescension and tepid offers of compromise, they explained that they represented not just black Washingtonians but also “150,000 union workers . . . [who] have declared their opposition to the continued discrimination that is practiced in the capital and have offered us their solid support in any movement to wipe out this injustice.” The specter of a union boycott swayed the National’s manager, who relented and allowed black patrons to sit in any seat at any performance, but only during the run of *Porgy and Bess*. Despite this limited change in policy, the *Defender* rejoiced: “Jim crowism in the nation’s capital may yet be wiped out!” At the very least, the African American amateur theatre group members turned away from the touring production of *Porgy* eight years earlier at the National would have their chance to see *Porgy and Bess*.63 The *Defender* saw this as only the first step: “Now that this victory has been won in the theatre, it will be well for the Race to begin breaking down the barriers in the restaurants and hotels here to the end that all citizens of the United States may enjoy every comfort they can afford.” But within a month of the exception made for the *Porgy and Bess* run, the National had reverted to its segregationist policies.64

As the *Defender’s* stance suggested, the battle against segregation did not end with a single campaign against the National Theatre. The black press covered numerous instances of discrimination and activism that occurred around *Porgy and Bess* in cities across the country. Touring, which brought African American performers into regular contact with the de facto segregation policies of many urban transit systems, hotels, and restaurants, offered innumerable instances when black performers were denied services that their white colleagues received as a matter of course. Such incidents, while never planned, could not have taken black performers entirely by surprise. In Indianapolis, cab drivers refused to take *Porgy and Bess* cast members from the train station to their hotel, and the *Defender*, in reporting the incident, noted the disconnect between such racist treatment “from the less democratic whites” and the capacity crowds and critical raves that the show otherwise received. In Pittsburgh, Elzy, Katherine Ayer, and Ethel Wise experienced a classic example of what black performers regularly encountered on the road. They arrived at the Keystone Hotel, having made their reservations by wire from the tour’s previous stop in Toronto, only to be told that there was no room available for them; meanwhile, the four white company members who arrived with them were given their room keys. And it was not only on tour that black performers experienced segregation in their professional lives. Brown, attempting to schedule a solo concert in her hometown of Baltimore, was turned down by three theaters once their managements learned that she was
African American. Like Duncan and other cast members who challenged segregation at the National Theatre, these performers did not passively accept discrimination. Elzy, Ayer, and Wise threatened a lawsuit, and Brown put her celebrity in service to the National Urban League’s wartime campaign to challenge discrimination in war-industry hiring and employment.\(^{65}\) African Americans in Jackson, Mississippi, mounted an unexpected challenge to segregation in 1943, when the opera was scheduled to be performed in the city’s auditorium. Sponsored by the Harmonia Club, a local African American musical organization, *Porgy and Bess* spurred active advance ticket sales. Willing to accept the local custom of seating blacks and whites in separate sections for the performance, black residents were stunned when the city’s mayor decreed that only whites could sit on the main floor of the city’s auditorium. This attempt to intensify existing segregation spurred a defiant response: they boycotted the production and returned advance tickets for refunds. The show went on before an almost entirely white audience.\(^{66}\) All of these incidents suggest the ways that *Porgy and Bess*’s performers, by virtue of their visibility in a well-publicized production, became participants in a few of the many local civil rights struggles that took place in every region of the United States during the 1930s and 1940s. Their ability to use their leverage varied from success in Washington, D.C., to finding themselves performing in spite of black protests in Jackson, Mississippi, where they were far more isolated in their ability to successfully challenge local segregation. Such encounters were a harbinger of the even more high-profile role in civil rights politics that later would emerge for the *Porgy and Bess* performers.

Critical responses to *Porgy and Bess* focused largely on whether Gershwin had successfully captured what critics considered authentic black musical sound. A number of factors contributed to the context in which critics made their judgments about the composer’s accomplishment. Gershwin himself claimed success because he used “the inflections of Negro speech” and wrote original spirituals rather than borrowing existing ones.\(^{67}\) Heyward wrote a first-person account of Gershwin’s 1934 trip to Charleston that was published in *Stage* magazine and widely quoted in subsequent newspaper articles about *Porgy and Bess*. On the face of it, the story of the New Yorker’s visit to the Low Country was a charming human-interest story about a celebrity songwriter. But it also functioned as a key cultural credential for Gershwin, a narrative that proved his firsthand exposure to the South’s African American music and musicians. Since the days of blackface minstrelsy, white musicians had deployed stories of their encounters with authentic black music as proof—readily accepted by white audiences and critics—of the legiti-
macy of their versions of that music. While white critics marveled at how a white, Jewish man could so convincingly express black music, black critics recognized that Gershwin’s race had distressing implications in a cultural marketplace that systematically excluded black composers. Segregated into the pages of black publications, the dissenting voices of African American critics went unread by most whites but took their place in a long tradition of black debate about race and cultural representation. However, at least one white newspaper columnist noted, and just as quickly dismissed, black press criticism of *Porgy and Bess*. In the *New York Journal American*, Robert Garland observed that “Negro musicians are not what you might call enthusiastic about the score George Gershwin composed for this—the first American folk opera” and quoted negative comments from Duke Ellington, Hall Johnson, and Ralph Matthews. He concluded flippantly: “‘Porgy and Bess,’ it seems, was concocted for the white folks. Old Massa Garland adores it!”

A preponderance of white critics agreed that Gershwin succeeded in delivering authentic black sound to Theatre Guild audiences. They lauded his “instinctive appreciation of the melodic glides and nuances of Negro song” and the “artistic integrity” that enabled him to compose spirituals that, “though entirely his own, are as moving and as characteristic as any of the genuine folk expressions of the Negro.” Gershwin “employs the Negro idiom naturally and easily,” proclaimed one critic. “His score unquestionably has an authentic ring.” Other critics also praised Gershwin as more authentic than many white composers because he “carefully avoids the usual hackneyed Hallelujah type of Negro spiritual,” “comes closer to catching musically the spirit of the Afro-American than anything else ever composed by a white man,” and was “‘showing up’ such sentimental tuneful as the hallelujah chorus from ‘Hit the Deck’ and ‘Old Man River.’” Some critics saw fit to characterize black music, and black people, in the course of their praise. Gershwin, accordingly, “catches the moods of the race admirably,” which included the “sensual, sentimental rhythm and fervor of Negro song”; “the naïve and complete spirit of the superstitions that are in vogue with the colored folk”; “the superstition, terrors, ecstasies, sordidness, sublime faith and rhythm of the negro”; and “that essential negro state which they describe as ‘happy.’” Employing an unfortunate metaphor, one critic insisted that Gershwin “has been able to make a slave of the whimsies and scales of the Negro race.”

Some commentators on *Porgy and Bess* readily accepted the notion that Gershwin, as a Jewish immigrant who was also part of a “race” outside the white American mainstream, had a unique ability to understand and com-
municate the essence of African American musical sound. Isaac Goldberg explicitly celebrated *Porgy and Bess* as a symbolic melting pot and gleefully enumerated the production’s racial makeup: “A Russian and Armenian had, respectively, prepared the scenery and the production; two Nordics, man and wife, had provided the novel and play upon which the libretto was based; two Jews, brothers, had joined talents for lyrics and music, the labor of George being, naturally, the most considerable single expenditure of energy that had been brought to bear upon the venture. A cast of Negro singers and actors had interpreted this collaborative inspiration.” Goldberg ventured an explanation for this “American symbol” in a possible racial affinity between Jews and African Americans, speculating that “perhaps, underneath the jazz rhythms and the general unconventionality of musical process lies the common history of an oppressed minority, and an ultimately Oriental origin.” A critic in *The New Republic* also “orientalized” Gershwin’s ethnic identity, noting: “Some of my Jewish friends have spoken to me of how many Jewish composers have been drawn to the music of the Negro. Is it some Orientalism, or some sadness, common to both, they ask, or what is it?” The critic concluded that Gershwin’s music in *Porgy and Bess* was “more true to the Oriental than it is to the Negro.” Many others merely noted Gershwin’s ethnic identity; the composer was “of Hebraic descent” in the *New York Age*, while the *New York American*’s critic alluded to the Jewish relationship to black sound by promising readers that they would enjoy *Porgy and Bess* “and not find it too full of that old-fashioned Afro-Synagogual idiom known as jass.” Duncan, recalling fifty years later the first time he heard “Summertime” in the *Porgy and Bess* score, reported: “I literally wept for what this Jew was able to express for the Negro.”

While some critics believed that Gershwin’s Jewish identity gave him an unusual, and possibly racial, understanding of African American life and sound, many others were doubtless more convinced by Gershwin’s well-publicized trip to South Carolina in the summer of 1934. DuBose Heyward’s identity as a white Charlestonian with firsthand knowledge of his subjects had been thoroughly publicized by publisher George H. Doran Company in 1925 and the Theatre Guild in 1927, thus cementing the racial authenticity of the original Porgy story in the minds of most white critics and audiences. In contrast, Gershwin’s authority to compose in African American musical style, and his knowledge of the authentic sources of that style, remained in doubt. In a distinct echo of the many authenticating devices the Theatre Guild used to link *Porgy* to its Charleston setting in 1927, the Guild and Gershwin actively publicized his trip to Charleston, and the press eagerly re-
counted the tale. (The story outlived Gershwin himself, retold frequently in the programs and publicity materials that accompanied the 1952–56 world-wide *Porgy and Bess* tour.)

The strategy of associating white musicians with African American sources, particularly African American folk sources in the South, long pre-dated Gershwin. (And, as Heyward himself proved, it was not limited to musicians.) From the earliest days of blackface minstrelsy in the 1830s, white performers demonstrated, or at least claimed, proximity to southern African Americans as proof of their authority and ability to perform what they purported to be authentic black music and dance. In the early twentieth century, folklorists and phonograph companies began to discover the music of the American South and convey it to national and international markets, identifying an authentic black sound that rested more on regional association than on racial identity. White artists like Vernon Dalhart recorded popular songs in African American dialect during the World War I period, claiming in record-company publicity materials that “when you are born and brought up in the South your only trouble is to talk any other way. . . . You know the sure ‘nough Southerner talks almost like a Negro, even when he’s white.”

Classical composer John Powell drew acclaim for his 1916 “Sonata Virginian-esque” (with movements titled “In the Quarters,” “In the Woods,” and “At the Big House”), which, according to one report, incorporated “negro motives and old reel tunes.” James Weldon Johnson’s fictional *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, published in 1912, includes an episode where its African American ragtime-pianist protagonist returns to the South to gather musical material for his compositions, recognizing that such a trip will enhance his marketability in New York City.

Gershwin’s trip lasted for five weeks during July and August 1934. It was motivated in part by the need for face-to-face collaboration with Heyward after months of exchanging drafts of the score and libretto through the mail. It was also motivated by their shared conviction that Gershwin needed to hear local black music performed in churches and nightclubs in order to garner the thematic material he needed to compose the opera. Heyward, the native South Carolinian, not only served as the New Yorker’s guide but also helped to transform the visit into a perfect promotional narrative for *Porgy and Bess*, published in a magazine article about their collaboration. Heyward’s account was widely referenced in other media coverage of the opera’s debut (and, as mentioned, of subsequent productions). Heyward depicted himself and Gershwin as akin to folklore collectors, settling in near James Island, off the Charleston coast, which, “with its large population of prami-
tive Gullah Negroes . . . furnished us with a laboratory in which to test our theories, as well as an inexhaustible source of folk material.”

In just three paragraphs, Heyward established and reinforced Gershwin’s insight into African American music as effortless, natural, and accepted by the Low Country African Americans they encountered. Describing Gershwin’s visit as “more like a homecoming than an exploration,” he suggested that the composer’s affinity for African American sound was long-standing, since “the quality in him which had produced the *Rhapsody in Blue* in the most sophisticated city in America, found its counterpart in the impulse behind the music and bodily rhythms of the simple Negro peasant of the South.” He generously implied that Gershwin was even more in tune with black culture than Heyward himself, crediting the composer with opening his ears to the musical significance of familiar “primitive” sounds he had previously disregarded. He described a scene in which he and Gershwin were listening to “a group of Negro Holy Rollers” engaged in a rhythmic group prayer. “The sound that had arrested him was one to which, through long familiarity, I attached no special importance,” he wrote. “But now, listening to it with him, and noticing his excitement, I began to catch its extraordinary quality.” Heyward also described their visit to an African American church where Gershwin began “shouting” with the congregation “and eventually to their huge delight stole the show from their champion ‘shouter.’” Concluding that Gershwin was “probably the only white man in America who could have done it,” Heyward deftly conferred the blessing of an even more important authority than his own onto Gershwin’s foray into black sound. (It apparently was not always so. Dorothy Heyward, in an unpublished manuscript written after her husband and George Gershwin had died, described an incident years earlier when Gershwin and the Heywards visited a so-called holy-roller church in Hendersonville, North Carolina, where the Heywards were summering. Gershwin, alarmed by the congregants’ frenzied movements and speaking in tongues, dragged the Heywards out, fearing for their safety.)

References to Gershwin’s southern trip in other media accounts and reviews of the opera, many of which no doubt used Heyward’s piece as a primary source, conveyed the composer’s temporary proximity to his musical subjects in more general terms but to a much larger audience than the readers of *Stage* magazine. To varying degrees, they also suggested that the black South was exotic and strange, and that the intrepid Gershwin had succeeded in translating it to northern audiences. Several reported that Gershwin’s goals included “to acquire the proper mood and inspiration,” “to get the proper Negro atmosphere,” and “absorbing local color.” He went there
to “learn at first hand of the habits and customs of the people whose lives are portrayed in the opera” and won over “the Negroes, who are likely to be shy and wary of white people, [and] were his devoted admirers.” In an account that predated Heyward’s, Newsweek reported that Gershwin “made a tour of Negro churches, visited old plantations, and poked about those parts of Charleston in which ‘Porgy’ is laid. All of this was to get the ‘feel’ of Negro emotion, the spirit of their life. . . . From this environment Gershwin will draw material for his opera.” One writer embellished on Heyward’s account by reporting that Gershwin “thoroughly covered the Negro churches and Judy-houses,” and, at the “shouting” session, “before the meeting was over he was providing them perfectly original themes upon which to harmonize.” Another inflated the trip temporally, informing readers that Gershwin “spent two years in Charleston close in contact with its Negro inhabitants” and “lived with the characters he proposed to sing about, so that he could catch and convey to audiences in the North the secrets of their existence.”

If what they read and heard of Gershwin’s efforts convinced virtually all white critics that “George Gershwin knows his negro music,” African American performers and critics rendered a decidedly more mixed verdict. Porgy and Bess cast members J. Rosamond Johnson, Todd Duncan, and Warren Coleman cheered Gershwin’s accomplishment. Coleman mixed racial pride with praise for Gershwin and Heyward’s achievement in having “caught the spirit of the race” in a “serious and dignified approach to the subject,” adding: “I am proud to have had some small part in the creation of the first real American folk opera—an opera dealing with my people.” Duncan portrayed Gershwin as not only a gifted composer but also a skilled accompanist and vocal coach. In the singer’s words, “Gershwin gave me that same confident assurance, so necessary for a public performer,” that the best vocal coaches provide, and his description of Gershwin’s avid participation in Porgy and Bess rehearsals depicted a demanding but enthusiastic collaborator. Duncan also respected Gershwin’s ability to capture black musical sound, describing one passage as having “put down on paper accurately and truthfully something from the depth of the soul of a South Carolina Negro woman who feels the need of help and carries her troubles to her God.” Many years later, Duncan would say of the Gershwin brothers: “The expression of 15 million Negroes was in their voices, in their music.”

Even more laudatory words came from Johnson, himself a composer and compiler of The Books of American Negro Spirituals. At Heyward’s urging, Gershwin had shared some of the score with Johnson while it was still in progress. Perhaps because of his own struggles as a composer attempting
to create new opportunities for African American sounds and singers to be heard, Johnson praised Gershwin’s talent for capturing black sound and his courage in providing unprecedented opportunity to black singers. Onstage after the Boston premiere performance, basking in the sustained applause, Johnson whispered to Gershwin, “George, you’ve done it—you’re the Abraham Lincoln of Negro music.” The remark was repeated in press accounts of *Porgy and Bess.*83 Writing after Gershwin’s death, Johnson credited him with having “clarified and removed all doubt as to the possibility of using American Negro idioms in reaching the heights of serious musical achievement.” Describing Gershwin as a musical heir to Dvořák in his use of African American sources, he also praised *Rhapsody in Blue,* “in which the basic tonality, melodic and rhythmically, is one hundred per cent Negroid,” and the composer’s “thorough research . . . in Negro melodies, rhythms and idioms.” But it was not solely the music that made Gershwin’s opera so significant. *Porgy and Bess* was, in Johnson’s estimation, “a monument to the cultural aims of Negro art” because Gershwin bucked convention and persisted in finding the vocalists who “made history for Negroes in creating these unusually difficult operatic roles.” Writers in the *New York Age* and the *New York Harlem News* were less convinced about the magnitude of Gershwin’s talent, although both credited him with providing crucial opportunities for African American singers and subjects on the opera stage.84

Other black critics vehemently disagreed with Johnson. One, writing in the *Defender,* found Gershwin’s music commendable enough but still flagged “times like the wake scene when you wish J. Rosemond [sic] Johnson and not Gershwin had written the music.” The *Pittsburgh Courier* critic thought that *Porgy and Bess* betrayed *Rhapsody in Blue*’s initial promise and that “Gershwin had never captured as much of that peculiar form and flavor which flows out of the Negro’s soul as had, let us say, Anton Dvořák.” He argued that it was “the richness of the Negro’s musical gift” that enabled Gershwin’s ability “to make the most of the little he has been able to grasp” of African American sound. The door remained open for black composers, and he wondered how Johnson could stand watching as Gershwin was praised while Johnson’s own compositions “in the Negro idiom” were overlooked. The most famous African American critics of *Porgy and Bess*’s music were composers Hall Johnson and Duke Ellington. A reviewer for the left-leaning magazine *New Theatre* approached Ellington to provide a countervailing view to “the cult of critical Negrophiles” who were praising Gershwin’s opera. When asked what was wrong with *Porgy and Bess,* Ellington replied that “it does not use the Negro musical idiom. It was not the music of Catfish Row or any other kind of
Negroes”; and he further criticized Gershwin for failing to use music effectively to establish character or to support the action onstage. While Ellington was widely quoted for years after as having concluded of *Porgy and Bess* that “the times are here to debunk such tripe as Gershwin’s lamp-black Negroisms, and the melodramatic trash of the script of Porgy,” that exact phrase was in fact used by the reviewer and not Ellington.85

Hall Johnson’s critique of *Porgy and Bess* appeared in a long essay in *Opportunity*. Johnson, author and composer of the well-regarded *Run Little Chin-lun* and leader of the Hall Johnson Choir, put forth his own version of black authenticity in subject and sound, one that required African Americans to create as well as perform. Johnson presumably penned his review (which appeared in the January 1936 issue) after having read, no doubt with mounting irritation, the flood of glowing reviews that appeared in the days and weeks immediately following the opera’s October 1935 debut. He insisted that, while Gershwin commanded “a certain Negroid flavor” in his music, *Porgy and Bess* must be judged as “not a Negro opera by Gershwin, but Gershwin’s idea of what a Negro opera should be.” Johnson believed that Gershwin and Mamoulian failed to capture the essence of African American sound and “temperament,” and that the opera’s success rested on the authentic contributions of the cast and the public’s ignorance of the “real” as opposed to the “Broadway Negro style” of music.86

As with other black critics, *Porgy and Bess*’s saving grace for Johnson lay in “the intelligent pliability of the large Negro cast.” Even in “the musical and dramatic moments most alien to the real Negro genre,” the cast “still are able to infuse enough of their own natural racial qualities into the proceedings to invest them with a convincing semblance of plausibility.” Johnson added pointedly: “If these singing actors had been as inexperienced as the composer, *Porgy and Bess* might have turned out to be as stiff and artificial in performance as it is on paper. . . . I think it is a good show for no other reason than that it presents these capable people in an interesting and varied entertainment.” As for Mamoulian’s staging, Johnson characterized it as “turbulent” and wondered, “Will the time ever come when a colored performer on a Broadway stage can be subtle, quiet or even silent,—just for a moment, and still be interesting?” He argued that the director failed to recognize that “the faculty of rapid and complete change of mood has always been [African Americans’] principal artistic charm as well as their surest social salvation.”87

Johnson reserved his greatest criticism for Gershwin himself, who, despite his “nice tunes” and “good intentions,” lacked the “adequate preparation and seasoned experience” necessary to compose a folk opera of African
American life. Unimpressed with the opera’s recitatives and overall structure, Johnson reserved his most withering criticism for the very detail that had so enchanted most white reviewers: Gershwin’s trip to South Carolina. Blasting Gershwin’s pretensions to understanding African American sound, he admonished: “The informing spirit of Negro music is not to be caught and understood merely by listening to the tunes[,] and Mr. Gershwin’s much-publicized visits to Charleston for local color do not amount even to a matriculation in the preparatory-school that he needed for his work. Nothing can be more misleading, especially to an alien musician, than a few visits to Negro revivals and funerals.” Johnson also criticized particular songs as racially inauthentic. “I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin’” was “lacking every true racial quality” and sung in “a style no Negro singer ever uses.” “It Ain’t Necessarily So” was also racially out of character, since Sportin’ Life was unlikely to have been “so entirely liberated from that superstitious awe of Divinity which even the most depraved southern Negro never quite loses.” Leave such songs to “a white revue,” Johnson advised, since “here, in the wrong place and in the wrong hands, it can only suggest a pathetic Gilbert and Sullivan vainly trying to go slumming in a very smudgy coat of burnt-cork.”

Ralph Matthews of the Afro-American similarly argued that Porgy and Bess was not “a typical colored musical production” because it lacked “the deep sonorous incantations so frequently identified with the racial offerings,” the “jubilee spirit of ‘Run, Little Chillun,’” and “the deep soul-stirring songs of ‘The Green Pastures.’” He celebrated the singers’ training and accomplishments yet still maintained that a racially inauthentic vocal performance style marred the work, giving it “a conservatory twang” that resulted “when colored voices singing Dixie jubilees must pitch their voices an octave higher to coordinate with the strains of a symphony orchestra.”

Johnson found a silver lining in Porgy and Bess, however, one that other black commentators had found before in Porgy. With the Theatre Guild’s production, he noted, “producers and audiences alike have admitted (1) the value of Negro dramatic and musical material and (2) the folly of offering it with any other than Negro performers. The next step forward will be the insistence upon authenticity of style.” He concluded his review by calling for “a genuine Negro theatre in which superior training in theatrical technique must be the wise and willing servant of superior familiarity with the new material. Heretofore the reverse has always been true.” Johnson recognized that the talent of African American performers was not enough, given the material available to them; “capable Negro actors, no matter how deeply immersed in the folk-ways and folk-talk of their own people, have been made
to take incorrect direction from clever theatre men who knew everything about everybody but Negroes—or, at best, had only the old spurious stage-imitations as models.” At the very moment when white critics were hailing Gershwin’s operatic version of black folk culture, Johnson feared that African American folk culture itself would die out in the hands of such “clever theatre men.” “Our folk culture is like the growth of some hardy, yet exotic, shrub, whose fragrance never fails to delight discriminating nostrils,” he warned, “but when the leaves are gathered by strange hands they soon wither. . . . Only those who sowed the seed may know the secret at the root.”90

At once recognizing the new door that Gershwin’s opera had opened and endorsing the need to promote African American composers, the New York Amsterdam News ran an editorial three weeks after Porgy and Bess’s debut calling to “Revive Abyssinia!” Abyssinia, a 1906 musical comedy written by African Americans Bert Williams and George Walker, portrayed a culture clash between a caravan of African Americans traveling in Ethiopia and regal, if bemused, natives. The show presented the Ethiopians as intelligent and authoritative while lampooning the African American visitors. The Amsterdam News editorial argued that a revival of the show would demonstrate African American solidarity with the Ethiopians currently struggling to fight off Italian Fascist invaders. The Amsterdam News editorialist further noted that when Abyssinia debuted, white critics “resented the sight of Negroes composing and performing anything so good. Their very slurs were compliments; they said that Negroes were impudently aspiring to produce grand opera. It is a pity that the phrase ‘So what?’ was not in vogue at that time.”91 While not mentioning Porgy and Bess by name, the editorial was clear: the white cultural establishment would now accept “Negroes” in “grand opera,” and African American cultural producers should seize the moment.

While Abyssinia was, sadly, not revived, Porgy and Bess quickly was. George Gershwin died of a brain tumor in 1937 at the age of thirty-eight, but his operatic creation lived on after him. In 1941 Cheryl Crawford, long associated with the Theatre Guild, mounted a revival of Porgy and Bess at the Maplewood Theatre in Maplewood, New Jersey. It was not Broadway, but it was well within reach of New York City critics who hailed the return of Gershwin’s opera. Crawford’s Porgy and Bess, employing largely the same cast as the 1935 version, embarked on a New York City run in January 1942 that lasted for more than 300 performances and a subsequent national tour that lasted three years. True to its roots, Porgy and Bess continued to be both a contested blessing for African Americans and a popular national symbol for many white audiences and critics. Eva Jessye, reprising her role as Porgy and
Bess choral director, reported years later that the cast chose to drown out the word “nigger” when it occurred in the libretto rather than confront Crawford directly over their discomfort at singing it. African American criticism of the show’s stereotypes grew a little louder; in 1944 the New York Amsterdam News ran an article in response to the 1940s touring production castigating Porgy and Bess as “a bias classic.” The show’s very success exacerbated the problem: a mounting number of people were seeing “the spectacular, the exotic and quaint, but childlike characteristics of the Negro,” and, as a result, “all Negroes [are] placed in the mental-socio-economic category into which the ‘classic’ is being relegated.” To make matters worse, the folk opera seemed “slated to live eternally.” How very right that prediction would prove to be. In 1945 the U.S. military tapped a subset of the cast to perform a truncated version of the show for overseas military units through the performances organized by the United Service Organizations (USO). The USO tour proved to be merely a prelude to a far more ambitious government sponsorship of Porgy and Bess, one that would embroil the work and its African American performers in the domestic and international political debates of the Cold War era while continuing to raise questions about authenticity, access, and African American cultural representation.
This page intentionally left blank
Neither the Measure of America Nor That of the Negro

Porgy and Bess, 1952–1956

“Shortly before Christmas of 1954,” the article began, “a Balkans-bound train ground to a stop in the bleak, wind-swept station at Trieste.” Written by journalist Ollie Stewart, who was traveling through Europe with the cast of the American production of Porgy and Bess, the dispatch continued with the story of how cast members leaned out of the train’s windows and saw “armed station guards—tense, unbending and none of them smiling.” Trying to cheer up the “grim faced” guards, the cast began singing Christmas carols—first “Silent Night,” and then “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” By the time they got to “Jingle Bells,” the guards “now openly smiling, were humming the air vigorously in time with the music.” Stewart concluded of the now-charmed guards: “What they saw and felt that night was what millions, before and since have seen and felt for many months in Europe: the tremendous impact of the Porgy and Bess company.”

These generous, spontaneous, and talented performers were on that train in wind-swept Trieste as part of a touring production of Porgy and Bess, directed by Robert Breen and produced by Blevins Davis. The cast included Cab Calloway as Sportin’ Life, opera star William Warfield as Porgy, and, fresh out of Juilliard, soon-to-be opera star Leontyne Price as Bess. It also included a host of black performers at every stage of their careers, from those who had performed in the Blackbirds revues during the 1920s to several, like Price, fresh from music conservatories. On the road for four years, the production bounced between the United States and Europe during 1952 and 1953; toured the United States for most of 1954; and appeared in Europe, South America, and the Middle East during 1955 and 1956. The tour received
Prior to Grand Tour of Europe

AMERICA'S GREATEST MUSICAL
GEORGE GERSHWIN and DUBOSE HEYWARD'S

PORGY AND BESS

WILLIAM WARFIELD
CAB CALLOWAY
Leontyne Price
Urylee Leonardos
Le Vern Hutcherson

NOW THRU
JULY 19th
8:30 every evening
2:30 Sat. mat. only

CHICAGO CIVIC OPERA HOUSE
financial support from the U.S. State Department for some but not all overseas performances, first during the waning days of the Truman administration and later from the Eisenhower administration’s stepped-up efforts to fund cultural propaganda as part of its Cold War diplomacy. Both administrations hoped to use *Porgy and Bess* and its cast to counter Soviet charges that American democracy denied equal rights and opportunities to its African American citizens.

Stewart’s article first appeared in *Theatre Arts* magazine in October 1955, and newspapers across the United States subsequently picked up the story of the caroling cast that warmed Eastern Bloc hearts. Stewart, an African American journalist, narrated *Porgy and Bess*’s triumphant reception in Europe’s major cities, although he spent very little time describing the show itself. The article reflected the many ways that *Porgy and Bess* was not a typical theatrical production. It was an example of the detailed press coverage that the tour received at home—much of it syndicated to publications in every corner of the United States—that invariably emphasized how the performers conducted themselves offstage and paid far less attention to the content of the show itself. It was a tribute to the power of individual performing artists as cross-cultural goodwill ambassadors. And it was a paid job carried out by a working journalist who in reality had a more critical attitude toward *Porgy and Bess* than the article might suggest; in his own column in a black newspaper earlier that same year, Stewart echoed other black critics of the show and wondered why the State Department could not “find a better vehicle for the many talented singers and actors in Porgy and Bess.” This Cold War *Porgy and Bess* was not just any opera; it engendered debate on a range of issues about race, representation, and politics. With the State Department briefing cast members to “keep in mind what you’d like your folks at home to read in the press about what you say” and U.S. newspapers covering the tour’s every move, *Porgy and Bess* was as much an intervention in the domestic politics of race as it was an exercise in creative foreign policy.

Breen’s production of *Porgy and Bess* was pivotal in two senses of the word.

I*From its energetic visual style to its text, the poster for the 1952 Chicago run of Robert Breen’s Porgy and Bess communicated to audiences that this production was no opera but instead “America’s Greatest Musical.” Its cartoon couple look as if they have just danced out of the Savoy Ballroom rather than Catfish Row, with a Bess accompanied by a zoot-suited Sportin’ Life rather than by the eponymous Porgy. (*Porgy and Bess Poster Collection, 1952–1956, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University Libraries)*
It was pivotal as in momentous, because the barrage of publicity that accompanied its four-year tour (along with the wave of popular vocalists and jazz instrumentalists who began recording songs from the show during the same period) transformed *Porgy and Bess* from a reasonably well-known opera into a cultural mainstay. And it was pivotal in the sense of becoming an axis around which both past and future incarnations of the show turned. The ways that Breen positioned the production, and the ways that critics described it, reflected the foundation of earlier productions and earlier conceptions of the politics of African American cultural representation. By 1952, however, *Porgy and Bess* also reflected nascent but growing changes in how the American public understood race. Breen’s *Porgy and Bess* was new in its colorful costumes, sets, and Broadway-musical feel, but it skillfully played on the public’s memories of and fondness for earlier versions. The question of racial “authenticity,” so prominent in the 1920s and 1930s, shifted dramatically in the 1950s; almost no American critics argued that cast members possessed any intrinsic racial qualifications for their roles (although many non-Americans did). Rather, the exigencies of both domestic and international politics prompted an emphasis on the performers as representatives of a different, but no less authentic, type of educated, accomplished, professional African American—in short, precisely the community members that DuBose Heyward had written out of his fictional portrayal of black Charleston.

*Porgy and Bess* in the 1950s is best understood not as a single celebrated production but as a story of three interconnected plays. Each of the three constituted a distinct narrative, but taken together, they created a new and more complex entity than met the eye. The smallest play was Gershwin and Heyward’s opera itself, the story of Catfish Row that played out nightly for ticket-buying audiences on stages across the United States, Europe, and South America from 1952 to 1956. The *Porgy and Bess* cast performed the next-largest play, but offstage and for a larger audience of newspaper and magazine readers on three continents, as their every public appearance was photographed and recounted. The third, and largest, play was the collective African American struggle now commonly termed the civil rights movement, seen by a worldwide public in the form of dramatic events such as the Montgomery bus boycott and the funeral of the lynched teenager Emmett Till. To propagandists at the U.S. State Department’s U.S. Information Service (USIS), the first play represented a past that they wanted both forgotten and remembered; in their formulation, *Porgy and Bess* portrayed an eco-
omic and social oppression of African Americans that was long past, but it also celebrated the glorious cultural accomplishment of American citizen George Gershwin. In the second play, according to these same State Department strategists, the offstage identities of the cast embodied American racial progress and equal opportunity. Much to their chagrin, U.S. government officials had no control over the third play, and they responded to it with a range of propaganda efforts (like the *Porgy and Bess* tour) intended to convince the world that incidents of racial discrimination and violence were exceptional rather than typical.

The tension between powerful, if sometimes unspoken, assumptions about class and race enlivened all three plays. For many black actors and singers in the first half of the twentieth century, their education, professional training, and, in some cases, income defined their offstage identities as middle-class. Yet the stage and screen roles available to them were, with few exceptions, working-class and poor characters. African American actress Hattie McDaniel expressed this disjunction between actor and role most famously when she declared, “I’d rather play a maid and make $700 a week than be a maid and make $7.” But McDaniel, and other black entertainers, existed in public as both working-class characters and middle-class performers (the latter particularly in the pages of the black press, which lionized their professional accomplishments). *Porgy and Bess* was no exception. Onstage, cast members played sympathetic but illiterate laborers, some deeply religious and some dangerously oversexed, passionate but passive in the face of hardship and injustice. Offstage—for both the black press and the State Department—they represented minority aspiration and achievement as articulate, educated, and well-dressed professionals.

Media images of the civil rights movement in this period were similarly focused on the strategies, goals, and public demonstrations of articulate, well-dressed students and professionals seeking to integrate schools, lunch counters, and public transportation. While organized African American movements to secure equal rights dated back to the nineteenth century, during and after World War II, collective action in the form of sit-ins and boycotts combined with a steady progression of school desegregation cases in the federal courts to render the black freedom struggle increasingly public, national, and difficult to ignore. The State Department presented the *Porgy and Bess* cast (and other African American speakers and performers) as exemplars of color-blind opportunity to counter international press coverage of white supremacy in the United States. In the face of rising national
press coverage of the civil rights movement, however, these images of accomplished, educated black performers held an undeniable domestic value as well. *Porgy and Bess* was unique among USIS propaganda efforts in that it reached a wide audience at home as well as abroad. A serendipitous convergence between Breen’s relentless publicity (undertaken to maintain his own renown and ensure future career opportunities for himself and his cast) and the government’s propaganda objectives gave State Department officials far more domestic exposure for their message than they could or would have ever generated on their own.

The dual class identities represented by the *Porgy and Bess* cast elaborated existing discourses about the show and the cast as representatives of purportedly authentic African American culture. The State Department and Breen deliberately avoided presenting the show as authentic in the ways that earlier producers and critics had done and carefully characterized its dramatic content as from another era. But many non-Americans who wrote about the show nonetheless echoed earlier American reviewers who presumed that *Porgy and Bess* reflected a particular version of authentic African American behavior and characteristics. Since it is safe to assume that most of these foreign critics had limited contact with actual African Americans, *Porgy and Bess* could only have ratified notions of authentic racial attributes that they gleaned from other popular cultural productions and performers. It was a cycle similar to that perpetuated by 1920s-era critics who praised *Porgy’s* supposed authenticity using language and stereotypes born of decades of minstrelsy, plantation fantasies, and faux folklore.

Black critics understood that such stereotyped ideas about authentic black behavior and beliefs inhibited the progress of racial equality and had no place in the representation of American culture overseas, despite the talents and accomplishments of the performers playing the roles. And while this unease with the show’s content reflecting negatively on African Americans dated back to its beginnings, during the 1950s, *Porgy and Bess* intersected with the burgeoning civil rights movement, placing the highly visible show and its performers into debates about black identity and the struggle for racial equality in the United States that were part of a larger fabric of social and political change. While the performers did not see themselves as activists, to understand their actions and choices as a form of activism is to recognize both depth and continuity in African American struggles for racial justice and uplift just as such struggles were entering what would become their most visible stage. The goals of the black-freedom struggle—equal access to employment, housing, education, safety, civic participation, and human dig-
nity—were diverse and frequently hiding in plain sight to a national media focused on southern voting rights and the desegregation of public spaces. So, too, were those who played a part in achieving them.

During World War II, the U.S. government began to recognize the ways that domestic racial inequality could jeopardize foreign-policy objectives. First the Roosevelt administration, and then the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, responded with similarly cautious approaches that emphasized cultural programs over substantive legal change. Hardly bold on questions of racial justice to begin with, they had to maneuver carefully around southern congressmen, who wielded considerable legislative power and protested loudly at even the mildest attempts to criticize—let alone reform—segregation. Pressure to achieve racial equality came from within, as well, as African Americans put steady, if quiet, pressure on the federal government throughout the 1940s and 1950s.

As the entry of the United States into World War II drew near, the federal government knew that positive morale on the home front would be indispensable to the overseas war effort and that the support of African Americans was by no means assured.4 And in fact, African American activists seized the moral and strategic openings that the war provided to launch the “Double V” campaign for civil rights, seeking victory over fascism abroad and victory over racism at home. In 1941 labor leader A. Philip Randolph spearheaded a mass “March on Washington” to protest ongoing job discrimination in government agencies and defense industries; to forestall such a public demonstration, President Franklin D. Roosevelt outlawed employment discrimination in the federal government and defense industries and established the Fair Employment Practices Commission to enforce his executive order. In addition to this policy shift, the Roosevelt administration, which had made extensive use of radio to gain public support for its New Deal programs, again turned to the airwaves to shore up African American wartime morale. Federally produced radio broadcasts, such as “Americans All, Immigrants All” in 1938 and 1939 and “Freedom’s People” in 1941 and 1942, emphasized African Americans’ significant contributions to building the American nation and argued for their political, social, and economic rights as full citizens.5

After the war, federal government concern with domestic racial politics only increased. A 1947 report by the President’s Committee on Civil Rights highlighted the foreign-relations consequences of domestic racial discrimination, declaring that “our domestic civil rights shortcomings are a serious...
obstacle” to the United States serving as an “enormous, positive influence for peace and progress throughout the world.” Secretary of State Dean Acheson concurred, writing: “An atmosphere of suspicion and resentment in a country over the way a minority is being treated in the United States is a formidable obstacle to the development of mutual understanding and trust.” The State Department, keenly aware of overseas opinion, carefully monitored how the world press covered incidents of American racial discrimination; as early as 1949, the U.S. embassy in Moscow reported that “the ‘Negro question’” was one of the Soviets’ principal anti-U.S. propaganda themes.6

The State Department responded with one basic Cold War narrative, deployed in a variety of propaganda forms. That narrative entailed acknowledging racial oppression in the American past while emphasizing the significant progress toward full equality brought about by the democratic system.7 C. D. Jackson, a presidential adviser on propaganda who regularly championed support for Porgy and Bess within the Eisenhower administration, articulated this view when he wrote defiantly that “the acceleration of economic, educational, and social opportunity for the negro in the past ten years has been absolutely fantastic. It is time we stop explaining in terms of ‘this dreadful blot on our scutcheon’ and look the whole world in the eye, suggesting that they do at least as well as we have.”8 The production of Porgy and Bess advanced the State Department’s narrative of racial progress brilliantly, but it was not the first or only propaganda effort of this type put forward by the USIS. Voice of America radio broadcasts, articles planted in overseas newspapers by USIS officers, and a barrage of information packets distributed to newspaper editors were all weapons in the Cold War struggle to convince the world that American race relations were not as bad as they seemed.9 One of the most comprehensive USIS efforts to lay out its argument about race came in the form of a pamphlet dating from 1950 or 1951 titled “The Negro in American Life.” Created by the USIS with the help of the NAACP, “The Negro in American Life” presented African American history, including slavery, alongside 1950 census data and photos of integrated classrooms and neighborhoods to demonstrate just how far African Americans had progressed in the free, open, and democratic United States. When the USIS attempted to use the same narrative of past racial sins and current democratic redemption in an exhibit titled “Unfinished Business” at the 1958 World’s Fair in Brussels, southern congressmen yelped in disapproval. Members of the South Carolina congressional delegation were particularly vocal in their criticism of its depiction of southern segregation as a problem to be overcome. Senators Strom Thurmond and Olin Johnston complained,
as did Charleston’s representative L. Mendel Rivers, who railed against the exhibit’s “colossal and unimaginable stupidity” in a letter to the State Department officials responsible for it. The Eisenhower administration quickly yanked “Unfinished Business” from the U.S. pavilion and replaced it with an exhibit on public health.¹⁰

But broadcasts and printed materials alone proved inadequate to address fully the widespread international concern about the gulf between American rhetoric about democracy and its treatment of its African American minority. The State Department recognized the power of face-to-face contact and firsthand testimony to counteract—or, in some cases, to amplify—criticism of American racial inequality, so it organized speaking tours by some African Americans while vigorously obstructing the ability of others (notably Paul Robeson and W. E. B. Du Bois) to have their opinions heard outside of the United States. This belief in African Americans as effective spokespeople, however, only pertained to a handful of carefully selected individuals. Despite pressure from African Americans and requests from some diplomats, the State Department systematically excluded African Americans from all but the lowest levels of employment. While touting the fifty African Americans playing roles in Porgy and Bess as “cultural ambassadors,” the U.S. government at best marginalized, and for the most part completely excluded, black ambassadors and embassy staff.¹¹

The Porgy and Bess cast was not the first group of African Americans to undertake overseas diplomatic tours to espouse American racial progress during the Cold War. White southern opponents of racial equality frequently sought to discredit civil rights activists by painting them as communists, a strategy that succeeded in narrowing the parameters of debate around civil rights during the late 1940s and early 1950s. In such an environment, mainstream civil rights leaders recognized the utility of allying their cause with the Cold War argument that improving race relations advanced U.S. international interests, and the imperative of self-preservation drove them away from even the appearance of communist “infiltration” or influence. The black press also took a resolutely anticommunist stance in the 1950s.¹² Even Randolph, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union leader who demonstrated great militancy in the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s, allied himself with the Truman administration’s anticommunism in an attempt to advance the interests of black working people. In 1948 Randolph testified at a congressional hearing that segregation “is the greatest single propaganda and political weapon in the hands of Russia and international communism today,” and in 1952 he went on a speaking tour (with fellow socialist Nor-
man Thomas) to Japan and Burma, where he denounced Soviet “slavery” and underscored progress in U.S. race relations.13

The State Department sponsored a number of other black speakers who not only communicated the government’s account of American democracy’s steady march toward racial equality but also presented themselves as living proof of the progress they described. One such speaker was Edith Sampson, an attorney and clubwoman from Chicago who used her own life story to illustrate her theme of positive change.14 Narratives of individuals triumphing over social obstacles have a long history in American culture (both before and after the nineteenth century’s famous protagonist Horatio Alger), and this particular Cold War story about race and democracy entailed a basic contradiction. In one sense, tales of individual black achievement in every conceivable field of endeavor were staples of the black press, intended to provide inspiration and example to African Americans who faced discrimination. Sponsored by the U.S. government and delivered to non–African American audiences, however, similar stories took on a more ambiguous quality, particularly since the government promoted them at the same time that it silenced other personal accounts about race in the United States.15 During this same period, the federal government went to great lengths to mute narratives critical of American democracy by prominent African Americans like Robeson, Du Bois, and Josephine Baker by monitoring their activities and confiscating their passports.16 The government’s propaganda narrative about African American achievement was not reserved for overseas audiences alone. When the Truman administration named Sampson to the U.S. delegation to the United Nations, the *New York Herald Tribune* noted that she “served as an answer to Russian propaganda that Negroes in the United States are an oppressed people deprived of opportunity, influence, and position.”17

Ironically, the State Department found some of its best exemplars of individual black achievement in the *Porgy and Bess* cast, a large and relatively anonymous group who served the same purpose collectively that Sampson and others did individually. As artists, they provided the State Department with a public-relations counterweight to Robeson and Baker, who were individual black performers with idiosyncratic personalities and sufficient celebrity to amplify their political opinions. The State Department harassed and discredited Robeson and Baker in nearly equal measure to its promotion of *Porgy and Bess*.18 The number and relative anonymity of the *Porgy and Bess* cast supplied a blank slate upon which many opinions could be projected, as Eisenhower adviser C. D. Jackson recognized when he wrote that “there is
the possibility that one or more of the cast will be a spiritual niece or nephew of Paul Robeson—but so what? He or she will be far outweighed and out-classed by the others.”

The first cultural propaganda efforts of the Cold War era began during the Truman administration, with the 1948 passage of the United States Information and Educational Exchange Act (also known as the Smith-Mundt Act). This bill, a response to perceived Soviet propaganda efforts, was designed to encourage the dissemination of information about the U.S. abroad and to promote international exchanges in the arts, sciences, and education. Around the same time, the State Department also established a Private Enterprise Cooperation Unit to coordinate private-sector efforts at cultural, educational, and business exchange. While the majority of the escalating budgets for these efforts supported information programs like the Voice of America radio broadcasts, some in the State Department observed that the Soviet Union participated in numerous European cultural festivals while the United States was noticeably absent from such occasions. In response, the State Department began to experiment with demonstrating American prowess in highbrow cultural forms by sponsoring two Berlin Cultural Festivals in 1951 and 1952. The 1951 Festival included American productions of Medea and Oklahoma!, the Hall Johnson Choir, and the Juilliard String Quartet. In 1952 the New York City Ballet and Porgy and Bess performed at the festival; Porgy and Bess also received government support to perform in Vienna. That support consisted of $60,000 to cover housing costs and company salaries; the government also underwrote travel expenses (usually on military transport) for the company of eighty and their 50,000 pounds of equipment. The State Department turned to the American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA) and its executive secretary, Robert Breen, to administer these nascent overseas sponsorships of American dance, music, and theatre troupes at the Berlin festivals and beyond. Breen was an energetic theatrical producer and advocate, a former actor and director with the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Theatre who worked in the late 1940s to promote regional repertory and experimental theatres (heirs to the Little Theatre movement) and organized national tours and overseas performances of several productions. Blevins Davis, a wealthy arts patron from Independence, Missouri, and a lifelong friend of the Truman family, served on ANTA’s board of directors.

In 1954 Truman’s successor, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, established the Emergency Fund for International Affairs to underwrite overseas tours by American performing artists and participation by U.S. businesses in inter-
national trade shows. These sponsorships, although modest, were intended to “demonstrate the superiority of the products and cultural values of [the American] system of free enterprise.”23 As one of the first and most generously funded recipients, *Porgy and Bess* ultimately received a total of $707,000 in cash subsidies along with transportation for performances in Zagreb, Belgrade, Alexandria, Cairo, Naples, Milan, Athens, Tel Aviv, Casablanca, and Barcelona in 1954 and performances in Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, Panama, and Mexico in 1955.24 (While *Porgy and Bess*’s Iron Curtain–crossing performances in the Soviet Union, Poland, and Czechoslovakia drew the most public attention, the State Department declined to sponsor them financially, in part because of concerns that the Soviet willingness to host an official U.S. cultural program would require the United States to reciprocate in kind and grant tourist visas to Soviet performers and performing groups.)25 Other early recipients of government funds included the José Limón Dance Troupe, the Symphony of the Air, and the Martha Graham Dance Company.26

*Porgy and Bess*—with its depictions of poverty, violence, loose sexual behavior, and natural disaster among southern African Americans—might not have seemed an ideal choice for overseas propaganda duty in the early 1950s. Breen, who decided to produce *Porgy and Bess* and set about securing the rights in 1951, undoubtedly influenced the decision in his role as executive secretary of ANTA. The State Department was far from unanimous in its choice, however, according to retrospective accounts by State Department employees who describe championing the show in the face of skepticism and opposition. Harvey Kellerman, an American organizer of the Berlin Cultural Festivals, reported of his decision to feature *Porgy and Bess* (which he characterized as “a triumph”): “Well-meaning friends advised against it. So did prominent members of the American black community, who feared that German or even any European audiences were not ready to appreciate the message and that the sordid mystery of Catfish Alley would be taken to portray the normal life of the American black community.”27 In his history of the U.S. Information Agency (the name by which the USIS was known in the United States), former employee Wilson P. Dizard recalled that *Porgy and Bess* initially met with resistance from “staid officialdom” appalled at the idea of funding “a play about Negro slums in Charleston,” which were “an unpleasant reality” rather than distant drama like Medea’s ancient Greece. According to Dizard, opponents argued that *Porgy and Bess*’s violent, sexy content was “all very well for New York or Chicago, but overseas?”28 A 1955 U.S. Information Agency report noted that such pessimistic predictions had failed to account
for “the cast itself [which] when off the stage, deports itself in such a manner as to belie Communist propaganda of racial discrimination and maltreatment of negroes.” But *Porgy and Bess*’s critics would have had to be prescient indeed to account for the crucial role played by the offstage deportment of its performers; no such expectations had been borne by white artists from the troupes like the New York City Ballet, Symphony of the Air, and the cast of *Oklahoma!* on previous State Department–funded cultural tours.

After the *Porgy and Bess* tour demonstrated the propaganda power that African American performers could wield in their public images as well as in their artistry, the State Department sponsored more tours by black musicians and dancers. Such tours continued through 1978, although the rapidly changing state of racial politics at home and geopolitics abroad altered the itineraries and messages of these later efforts from those of the *Porgy and Bess* tour. During the 1950s and 1960s, jazz tours emphasized the music’s universal modernist appeal, while later tours by dance troupes and gospel and R & B singers presented more popular and racially specific forms. In the years immediately after the conclusion of the *Porgy and Bess* tour, major jazz artists—including Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Goodman, Louis Armstrong, Dave Brubeck, and Duke Ellington—toured under State Department auspices, largely to the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, and all with integrated bands (the better to illustrate racial equality in American music). The State Department devised routes that avoided Europe, where many people were already familiar with American jazz, in order to court hearts and minds in regions where nonwhite locals were particularly aware of American racism. Its strategy was to present jazz as an indigenously American contribution to postwar modernism and to equate it with freedom. In this notion, jazz embodied racial progress not simply because of the talent and success of its African American practitioners—as had been the message of *Porgy and Bess*—but also because of the intrinsic nature of the music itself. For the musicians, as with the *Porgy and Bess* cast, the tours presented an opportunity to get paid for their talent, training, and hard work as entertainers. (For the headliners, the tours also allowed them to support an entire band in an era when popular music and television had pushed live jazz performance to the margins of popular culture.) The musicians saw government-sponsored international tours as an opportunity to spread their own message of civil rights and promote the dignity and accomplishments of African American artists. Artists like Gillespie and Ellington, already internationally famous, were not prevented from speaking their honest opinions about American race relations, although that is not to say they and their fellow musicians did not
have their run-ins with State Department handlers. In the mid-1960s, starting with the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Nigeria, the State Department sponsored acts that were both more popular (gospel, R & B) and more specifically African American in their origins and influence. Mahalia Jackson and the Alvin Ailey dance company replaced the interracial jazz bands of the previous decade, but the U.S. government continued to view black performing artists as representatives of “the moral authority of the nation,” embodiments of a racial progress that federal officials so desperately needed to convey to the rest of the world.30

The 1950s production of *Porgy and Bess* did not originate as a State Department–sponsored cultural tour. Davis and Breen secured the rights to produce the show in January 1952. They immediately set to work assembling the cast, hiring a consultant and staging auditions in several major cities during the winter and early spring months. The fact that almost no professional opera companies in the United States employed African American singers made their quest regrettably easy. Marian Anderson’s Metropolitan Opera debut was still three years in the future, and Breen’s *Porgy and Bess* presented black singers with an unequaled opportunity to perform and advance their careers. One cast member described the professional opportunities for classically trained black singers in 1952 as limited to “church recitals . . . [or] a recital in the colored school or some of . . . the black sororities, the black fraternities that would present you in concert.” Another cast member’s wife thanked Breen after the tour ended, since “without ‘Porgy’ Henry would still be teaching voice in his obscure southern college.”31

Unable to find a director acceptable to both the Gershwin and Heyward estates and himself, Breen took the helm and began work with the cast on 5 May 1952 in a Harlem rehearsal studio.32 While Cheryl Crawford had cut the cast, orchestra, and large portions of recitative to create what the Gershwin and Heyward estates derided as a “bargain basement production,” Breen added dialogue from the novel and play, rearranged scenes, eliminated time-consuming scene changes, and restored some of Gershwin’s music (a few songs plus musical bridges between scenes).33 No fan of traditional opera, he favored musical theatre’s dynamic staging but wanted to avoid burying Gershwin’s music. While the musical restorations prompted some to credit Breen with a production closer to the original opera than Crawford’s production the previous decade, the word “opera” did not appear in advertisements and posters for its U.S. bookings.34 More important, the show had the look, feel, and pace of a Broadway musical; one critic deemed it “the very pinnacle of the American musical theatre.”35

198 • *Porgy and Bess, 1952–1956*
Visually, the sets and costumes eschewed naturalism for a broad and colorful style. Wolfgang Roth’s Catfish Row set evoked a cartoon aesthetic, with bright colors, exaggerated details painted on walls and shutters, fish nets hung just below proscenium level (they were lowered down for use in one scene), and palmetto fronds arching over the upstage gap between buildings. The Kittiwah Island set was similarly stylized, with flats painted in broad strokes to suggest the “palmetto jungle” called for by the libretto. While the program set the scene in “The Past,” its costumes worked against that conceit by reflecting clearly contemporary styles. Dresses worn by Bess had the large belts, flouncy skirts, and halter-style tops characteristic of the early 1950s. Some of the men wore sport shirts, fitted sweaters, and chinos that also resembled current styles.36
Emphasizing drama over music, Breen’s staging employed brisk pacing and an abundance of stage “business.” Cast member John McCurry recalled that Breen stressed “action and acting in directing us” and grouped the performers onstage for dramatic effect rather than placing vocal types (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) together.37 One critic carped: “There was such incessant activity on the stage that I, for one, began fearing that I couldn’t stand the sight of another denizen of Catfish Row sticking his head out of a window or rushing up and down, acting away furiously.” Others more charitably characterized it as “a stage direction full of bounce and vitality” that “more than makes up in vigor what it may lack in subtlety.”38 The production’s most infamous scene was a sexually explicit encounter between Crown and Bess on Kittiwah Island; an actor who played Crown described how each performance, he would order Bess into a thicket and, as she obeyed, move toward her, undoing his pants as the curtain fell.39

The Crown/Bess scene on Kittiwah Island was but one signal to audiences that this was not their parents’ Porgy and Bess. Even before they arrived at the theater, Breen’s prodigious publicity had established a framework for understanding his new production, one that simultaneously gave a nod toward previous incarnations of the Heyward-Gershwin creation and staked out new territory. The poster used in the United States featured a sexualized cartoon couple with exaggerated curves and form-fitting outfits strutting across the visual field, with the silhouette of a palm tree in the background (see page 86). The image, along with the billing of Porgy and Bess as “America’s Greatest Musical,” suggested popular images of Jazz Age Harlem or zoot-suited lindy hoppers far more than it did the earnest “folk opera” of 1935 and 1941. Although his press materials provided the story of the opera’s origins and past productions in some detail (including timelines and cast lists), Breen was ambivalent about the show being overly associated with the past. He instructed the cast to remember, in their conversations with the public and the press, that “in all of our public relations we are trying to turn the emphasis onto the excellence, popularity, and adventures of this company, and to divert it from past productions.”40

Breen shared with previous Porgy and Bess producers the urge to replicate authentic details of African American life onstage and, more importantly, to make such meticulousness part of the show’s publicity. Costume designer Jed Mace, a Texas native, used upholstery fabric for some of the costumes, reasoning that the women of Catfish Row would have been given such fabric by their white employers and used it to sew their own clothes. (If the fabric’s authenticity was lost on audiences, it retained the benefit of durability, an
important consideration for a four-year run.)\textsuperscript{41} Press reports described Roth’s set design as “inspired by the works of Horace Pippin, famed Negro primitive painter,” even though Pippin was not precisely a “primitive” painter and, as a native of Philadelphia, had visited the South only twice.\textsuperscript{42} One article, written by the show’s press agent, described how Breen had staged the saucer burial scene in the courtyard of Catfish Row (rather than in Serena’s apartment, as written) to eliminate the need for a scene change, noting that it was “an innovation which Mrs. Heyward assured [Breen] violated Southern custom to no degree.” In unpublicized efforts at authenticity, Breen drew on cast members for material to use in the show. He placed a tape recorder in the standing poker game where some members of the company passed time on the long tour and inserted bits of dialogue he recorded into the onstage dice-game scene; he also verified dialogue and stage business with cast member Joseph Attles, a Charleston native. \textit{Porgy and Bess}’s publicity narrative also retold the stories of Heyward and Charleston that had framed earlier productions. On the eve of the show’s first New York City run, the \textit{New York Times} ran an arts-section article titled “Man Called ‘Goat Sammy’ from Cabbage Row,” written by \textit{Charleston News and Courier} editor Thomas Waring, a Heyward family friend. The article rooted \textit{Porgy and Bess} firmly in Charleston by quoting from Heyward’s 1920s writings on why he wrote about African American subjects, describing the newspaper clipping that inspired him, and narrating the novel’s transformation into a hit stage play. Waring duly noted director Rouben Mamoulian’s trip “to soak up Charleston atmosphere,” as well as Gershwin’s iconic trip to Folly Beach. Many programs also contained a shorter version of these events penned by Dorothy Heyward.\textsuperscript{43}

Breen worked relentlessly to frame the way audiences and the broader public understood \textit{Porgy and Bess}. While he directly controlled the contents of programs distributed to ticket holders, he and his staff also supplied the press with a steady stream of material and access that shaped media coverage of the show, particularly outside of the United States. Publicity was the lifeblood of the \textit{Porgy and Bess} tour. For U.S. government officials, the propaganda value of their financial support for the show lay in the way the production and its cast were covered in the world press, but they no doubt also valued the tremendous publicity the tour received in U.S. newspapers and magazines. For Breen and his nonprofit Everyman Opera Company, which hovered constantly on the edge of financial disaster, the abundant domestic and international publicity powered an unending quest for funds from the U.S. government and individual backers to keep the show afloat. The publicity also fueled Breen’s larger goals; he had secured the rights to \textit{Porgy and
Bess for a ten-year period and had grand plans for a traveling African American repertory company and years of future productions.

Despite their ostensibly different objectives, publicity for and about the domestic and international legs of the tour became intertwined. In the United States, publicity efforts focused on raising the show’s visibility in order to sell the maximum number of tickets. Overseas, publicity served to promote the U.S. government’s propaganda message of cultural accomplishment and equal opportunity for African Americans. Yet virtually none of the articles or reviews in the U.S. press failed to mention the opera’s State Department–sponsored international tour, lodging it prominently into public perceptions of the show and its cast. What in other circumstances would have been an ordinary ticket-selling campaign took on much larger cultural and political resonance. And the State Department’s publicity objectives sometimes clashed with Breen’s, as evidenced by his 1954 instructions to press agent Rose Tobias:

I notice that phrases “negro opera” and “negro troupe” and such are being used again by the press. Guess you don’t know we battle this kind of billing. All through last European tour we strongly emphasized to press that Porgy and Bess must be referred to only as “an American opera” or “American troupe.” We don’t qualify Americans by referring to Irish German or whatever extraction. This is very important and you must strongly press this point with all press and others in public relations.44

Despite Breen’s instructions, the cast’s racial identities remained a central element of publicity at home and abroad.

In the United States, the publicity campaign around Porgy and Bess used strategies common to Broadway and Hollywood. These included the placement of articles, interviews, and column items in a range of newspapers and magazines, including feature articles on the cast’s well-known members, such as Calloway and Warfield; mass press-release mailings; and personal appearances by cast members.45 Bill Doll, Breen’s industrious press agent, also arranged to mail a list of Porgy and Bess recordings, along with a “complete pitch on the show,” to all East Coast disc jockeys and promised that “as a matter of policy we plan to get out a good strong note every day to all New York papers” in the days leading up to Porgy and Bess’s New York City opening.46

Doll supplemented these broad promotional efforts with a range of tactics specific to Porgy and Bess’s perceived natural constituency, making sure
“to plug the Negro and Yiddish press.” Wilva Breen also counseled: “We will have to take some advertising in Yiddish papers prior to opening. Gershwin is practically a national hero—and he was a Jewish boy.” He noted that *Porgy and Bess* was a natural draw for audiences from the city’s now-defunct Yiddish theatres.47 Publicity efforts in the black communities of the cities on the American tour extended far beyond press releases and advertising, and Doll shrewdly targeted the black middle class and its institutions. Breen’s staff assiduously courted local African American politicians, ministers, newspaper editors, and leaders of civic and arts groups with special mailings, meetings, and ticket discounts; they also asked cast members to supply them with the names of local black leaders they knew in each city.48 The mailings were both general and specific. A “Dear Friend” letter from Congressman Adam Clayton Powell and his wife, pianist and singer Hazel Scott, urged its recipients “to avail yourself of the opportunity to see . . . one of the great classics of the American theatre.” Mirroring the State Department’s framework, the letter also noted that the show “portrays an aspect of Charleston, S.C. that no longer exists.” Another letter to a friend of cast member Georgia Burke included copies of London awards and a European program and urged: “If you can think of any way to get the word around about how exciting this production is—it would be a good thing for all of us—and for the company.” It closed by offering to supply “pamphlets and printed materials” that the recipient could distribute “in your home, your place of business, your Church or social center.”49

Personal appearances by the cast played a large role in domestic publicity efforts. During the first leg of the domestic tour, Warfield recalled, “the publicity campaign got larger and louder. We were involved in just about every kind of promotion you can imagine.” Warfield’s August 1952 wedding to costar Price at Harlem’s Abyssinian Baptist Church also provided grist for the publicity machine and garnered detailed coverage in the black press.50 In addition to radio and television appearances, cast members were also dispatched to speak and sing before civic clubs, college student groups, and church services.51 Breen left little to chance, and his public-relations management extended to these personal appearances as well. He praised as “unprecedented” the manner in which “members of the company have of their own accord pitched in to do a spontaneous job of public relations for Porgy and Bess here and abroad.” But spontaneity was not at all what Breen had in mind, and he coached the cast on how to talk about the show in public. His detailed instructions included several specific talking points.
The one aspect of this production that needs continued stress is that this company had in every respect a gala tour of European capitals[,] . . . that we were sent by the United States Department of State[,] . . . that all the European critics agreed the production was a triumph[,] . . . that the applause was tumultuous[,] . . . that official honors, receptions, etc., were heaped upon the company[,] . . . and perhaps most important, that the Porgy and Bess tour of Europe accomplished an untold amount of good for the United States in demonstrating the high quality of American artistic standards.

Breen further prompted them, “In talking and meeting with people, try to remember some of the individual and humorous incidents that occurred during the tour”; and he helpfully provided a page of examples, including President Truman’s attendance and President Eisenhower’s letter of support.52

Personal appearances by cast members also proved crucial during the international tour, but outside of the United States, their identities as representatives of Porgy and Bess subsumed their individual identities. As Warfield later recalled in his autobiography, Davis and Breen ensured “that the publicity was focused on the musical itself, and not the performers.”53 Promoting the Porgy and Bess cast as a group rather than highlighting individual performers was in part necessitated by the exigencies of keeping the show going through a long and grueling tour. Once stars Calloway, Warfield, and Price left the show, Breen instituted an ensemble system, where some company members rotated through principal roles, which meant that at any given time there were three Besses, three Porgys, and two Sportin’ Lifes. Chorus members could work their way up to attain principal roles. This allowed for the inevitable turnover of a long tour, as actors joined and left the company. It also meant that publicity had to emphasize the group rather than individual performers, since the same performer was not always in the same role. Presenting the Porgy and Bess cast to the public as a group rather than highlighting any individuals within it facilitated the State Department’s political message that the performers represented African American group opportunity and progress in U.S. society. And this group identification also minimized the potential that the political opinions of any one performer might contradict the larger Cold War message of American racial egalitarianism and cultural achievement.

For the international tour, Breen and his staff worked with the State Department to establish a context for Porgy and Bess for the foreign press in each of the cities the show visited and, simultaneously, for the domestic press.
in the United States. Breen’s professional public-relations staff generated a variety of materials that were distributed to the local press in each new city, a process greatly facilitated by the contacts, expertise, and translation services of local State Department public affairs officers. Breen and the USIS supplied vast quantities of photos and written materials, translated into local languages, about every aspect of the show. Regardless of whether the government was funding a stop in their city, public affairs officers at U.S. embassies and missions supplied Breen’s publicity staff with lists of U.S. press personnel assigned to the city or region (such as wire-service reporters) as well as drama editors and critics for local news outlets; they also arranged for the local press to cover the cast’s arrival in the city.  

During the Vienna engagement, the USIS recorded the opera for rebroadcast on Voice of America and other U.S.-controlled radio networks abroad and also produced a newsreel film of the cast on and off the stage for distribution in the United States. To keep *Porgy and Bess* in magazines and newspapers at home, Breen arranged for American reporters and columnists to travel with the company. For the historic performances in the Soviet Union, the owner of the *New York Times* and his wife—along with Truman Capote of the *New Yorker* and representatives of the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *New York Post*, *Saturday Review*, *Time*, *Life*, the Associated Press, and CBS—all accompanied the cast to Moscow. Breen’s staff also compiled brief dispatches that strung together laudatory quotes from local newspaper critics—all identified, in proper USIS style, as “pro-communist,” “rightwing,” “leftwing,” or “independent”—ready for insertion into stateside newspapers.

The USIS hired a local photographer to document the cast in almost every city that *Porgy and Bess* visited, even those not directly supported by State Department funds, and the company also traveled with its own photographer. These photos were sent to press outlets in the countries on the tour as well as to major U.S. news outlets. Cast members recalled “endless picture taking,” and Breen’s archives indeed contain box after box of photos of the cast’s offstage activities as well as more customary production shots. Breen and his press agents understood that certain photos were easier to place in newspapers and magazines than others. Consequently, they instructed staff members traveling with the company to use specific types of photos—ones with cast members clearly visible, visual details that identified the city or locale, “interesting looking natives,” and detailed captions describing the places and people depicted—and cautioned them to “avoid straight line-up shots that look like they might have come out of a high school annual.” For U.S. journalists, a New York–based press agent requested “any human inter-
est shots that you can get, like those of the people in front of the Parthenon. . . . Get as many shots of Porgy personnel in front of historical monuments as possible.”

Breen’s publicity apparatus distributed text materials on *Porgy and Bess* that were even more influential than the photos in framing how the foreign press portrayed the show. In each country the show visited, limited runs and high ticket prices prevented most people from seeing *Porgy and Bess* onstage. Local journalists used the fact sheets, background material, and plot summaries—translated into local languages and distributed by Breen’s staff—to write the reviews and articles that constituted the public’s primary source of information about the show. And the foreign press covered *Porgy and Bess* with alacrity. As a large group of African American performers, the cast was intrinsically newsworthy everywhere they went outside the United States and especially behind the Iron Curtain, where many citizens had never even seen black people. These text materials framed the *Porgy and Bess* plot as a universal story yet also reinforced the show’s links to its authentic Charleston setting in much the same way as Theatre Guild materials had in 1927 and 1935. The translated plot summary, titled “The Passionate Story of a Girl and Three Men,” was particularly important for foreign reviewers, since the opera’s heavy dialect made understanding the plot difficult, even for reviewers with some command of English. This plot summary identified *Porgy and Bess* as “an American folk opera,” a term that, for European audiences familiar with the genre, signaled a setting and characters taken from the rural peasantry. (Breen used this strategy more specifically in the Soviet Union, where a program note compared *Porgy and Bess* to *Boris Godunov.* The summary drew on a stereotyped shorthand to describe *Porgy and Bess* as “a story of life and love among the hard-working, deeply religious, and yet carefree Negroes in Catfish Row, a section of Charleston, South Carolina, about fifty years ago.” But this specific context was broadened into “folk opera” as the plot summary also explained: “The joys and sorrows, hopes and fears of the people of Catfish Row, the love story of Porgy and his woman, Bess, could, and probably do, take place in any community in the world where money is scarce and life is hard.”

A handout titled “The Creators of Porgy and Bess” reinforced the specificity of the opera’s Charleston setting and characters and celebrated the “cross-section of Americans” who created the show. The Gershwin brothers were “sons of poor Russian Jewish immigrants,” while Heyward was “the son of an aristocratic but impoverished family which has lived in Charleston, South Carolina, for about 300 years.” The handout also cataloged the
firsthand contact that George Gershwin and Heyward had experienced with the African American community on which *Porgy and Bess* was based. It described Gershwin’s well-publicized 1934 trip to Charleston as the composer having “spent a great deal of time in South Carolina,” where he “absorbed at first hand the authentic musical atmosphere,” and it noted Heyward’s early job working as a cotton checker supervising black stevedores on the Charleston waterfront. When *Porgy and Bess* debuted at Milan’s famed La Scala opera house, the USIS went beyond fact sheets and mounted an exhibit of artifacts related to the show and its creators. The exhibit included a picture of the Folly Beach studio where Gershwin stayed during his visit and a picture of Samuel Smalls, whom Heyward claimed was his inspiration for the character of Porgy. The indefatigable Breen even inquired about bringing the Jenkins Orphanage Band to Milan.

Since the State Department wanted overseas journalists to note *Porgy and Bess*’s offstage presence as much as its onstage performances, a press handout also emphasized the cast’s educational backgrounds and ambassadorial roles. “The Artists in Porgy and Bess” characterized cast members as “Highly educated, generally and musically,” and ready to extend “openhearted friendship” during their “missions of goodwill.” It elaborated, in a way that would never have been deemed necessary or useful in regard to a group of white performers, that “every one of the artists in the company has attended a college, university or conservatory of music, and in most cases, all three. A recent count revealed more degrees than individuals in the company.” The sheet also provided the more standard career genealogies for the cast, describing awards, attendance at prestigious conservatories, and roles in other productions.

While Breen’s publicity materials promoted *Porgy and Bess* as both a universal folk opera and the specific tale of Catfish Row, most overseas reviewers embraced only the latter view, praising the show for its racial authenticity and true-to-life depiction of Charleston. A London critic described the plot as “a transcription to stage form of the life of the Negro community in the slums of Charleston,” while an Austrian declared that it was taken from “the everyday life of the American Southern States” as “little more than straight reporting.” Critics in Warsaw, Oslo, and Brussels agreed. Such responses defied State Department efforts to frame *Porgy and Bess*’s onstage content as an artifact of the American past and the cast’s offstage identities as symbols of the American present and future, although it is unclear how much U.S. officials cared about theatrical reviews. Internal State Department reports on the show’s reception rarely mentioned them, and then usually only in
reference to their appearance in newspapers known to be “friendly” or “unfriendly” to the United States. Similarly, stateside publicity about the overseas response to *Porgy and Bess* ignored reviews in favor of stories about the clamor for tickets, standing ovations, and moments of offstage cross-cultural interaction. But for most residents of the cities and regions where *Porgy and Bess* appeared, theatrical reviews gave them their only details about a popular show they would never see for themselves.

Many overseas critics extrapolated from *Porgy and Bess* all manner of racist assumptions about African Americans, displaying exactly the kind of response that many of the show’s black critics feared. Just as in the United States in the 1920s, numerous European and South American writers saw *Porgy and Bess* not merely as a documentary of Charleston but of “the inside life of” the entire African American race, with a story that starred not the opera’s principals but “the mass, the people of Catfish Row, all the Negro race in the South.” Critics could not resist imputing a range of characteristics to all African Americans based on what they saw in *Porgy and Bess*. A Polish reviewer romanticized oppression, seeing in the characters “a lust for life, a spontaneity of temperament, superstitions which originate in the murky past, a feeling of having been wronged but at the same time a peculiar and unique brand of poetry.” Lausanne’s newspaper critics used the kind of catalog of racial traits that so many earlier *Porgy* reviewers had relied upon. Their readers learned that in *Porgy and Bess*, “a whole race expresses itself, with its naïveté, its religious faith . . . its sudden violence, its primitive sensuality, its joys and its sorrows”; the race was also notable for its “eruptive character . . . spiritual aspirations and sensual frenzy, childish fervor and unrestrained animality.”

Overseas reviewers also echoed American critics from the late 1920s when they credited the opera’s cast with inhabiting their roles naturally, rather than by dint of talent and technique. African Americans were “born musicians, born actors, dancers by necessity” who possessed “primitive spontaneity” and “burst into song . . . through sheer necessity. A negro sings and dances as we breath.” Assumptions that African Americans were “natural” performers slid easily into assertions that they were not acting, which in turn bolstered perceptions that *Porgy and Bess* was a realistic depiction of African American
LAUSANNE
THÉATRE DE BEAULIEU

Du 16 au 20 mars, tous les soirs à 20 h. 15
Samedi 19 et dimanche 20 mars, matinée à 15 heures

L’événement artistique de l’année
L'ASSOCIATION DES INTÉRÊTS DE LAUSANNE
présentée
en accord avec les Spectacles Lumbroso Paris, et Maurice Verleye, Genève

Pour la première fois et
en exclusivité pour la Suisse

Le célèbre production de
BLEVINS DAVIS et ROBERT BREEN

PORGY AND BESS

Drame musical de
George Gershwin
Dorothy et Du Bose Heyward Ira Gershwin
Mise en scène de Robert Breen

ORCHESTRE ET CHŒURS
Direction musicale
Alexander Smallens

70 artistes de couleur

Prix des places: Fr. 6.- à 20.- plus taxe
Location: Factisch frères S.A., Caroline 5, Lausanne, tél. (021) 22 30 45, et à Genève, Vevey,
Montreux, Martigny, Payerne, Fribourg, Berne, Zurich, Bâle, Neuchâtel, Bienne, Yverdon
life. The Vienna Neues Österreich commented of the cast that “one never has the feeling that they have studied their parts, they seem not to be acting at all,” while the city’s Wiener Kurier exclaimed that “they are not acting, they simply are here!” Others explained that because the African Americans on stage were not really acting, their racial authenticity rendered the show’s violence and sexuality acceptable, despite violating white standards of decorum. A French critic explained: “The action would seem purely melodramatic to us whites if it were not done by Negroes, playing, living their own lives. And so everything which might seem sentimental or violent, primitive, savage, takes on the accent of truth and reality.” The Neues Österreich reviewer made a similar point, describing Porgy and Bess as “a naïve realistic theatre which otherwise we would no longer consider suitable material for the stage, but which, in this exotic atmosphere, in which the people play themselves as they are, has a plausible and strong effect.” Describing the erotically charged scene between Bess and Crown, a Berlin reviewer noted that “what sensual tension is there between the two of them, as one could not believe it possible or permissible on a ‘white’ stage.”

If the Porgy and Bess performers functioned in newspaper reviews as evidence for racist stereotypes about African Americans, they appeared elsewhere in the overseas press as polar opposites of their onstage characters. The State Department worked diligently to promote the cast members off stage as exemplars of African American educational accomplishment and professional opportunity. Publicists arranged a variety of events (including receptions, concerts, and sightseeing tours) that highlighted the cast’s public comportment, education, and appearance (especially their clothing) but not their individual personalities or opinions. C. D. Jackson, Eisenhower’s special assistant for Cold War operations and a proponent of “psychological warfare,” regularly argued for increased funding for the Porgy and Bess tour within the administration. He recognized that opportunities for “conversations, discussion, or argument between members of the cast and the Russians will probably be very limited,” and he also shrewdly recognized that verbal exchange was beside the point. The physical presence and appearance of the black performers were far more valuable; as he put it, “their clothes will be visible, and touchable, and their freedom from fear will be visible.” Another Eisenhower administration official attributed the show’s success to “a secret weapon as far as the Soviet Union is concerned”: “the cast which, off-stage, is so well-mannered, well-dressed, happy and free.”

Clothing, as the most visible marker of middle-class, or nonoppressed, status, figured prominently in the cast members’ offstage presentation. The
women’s clothing received the most frequent notice, and the cast members knew what was expected of them. Wilva Breen, reporting to the State Department on the cast’s ambassadorial work, included among their tasks “always being sure that [thei]r clothes are fresh.” Lillian Hayman remembered: “We always looked well when we went out to these parties, we had dresses, every one of these embassy parties that we went to, we had to dress well. And we went in our evening gowns, and our mink stoles.” New York Journal American columnist Leonard Lyons, countering a Soviet critic’s reference to “the corrosive effect” of capitalism, cited the sartorial splendor of one of the actors playing Sportin’ Life, who “keeps himself warm with a nutria coat and matching hat, tailored for him in Rio.” Publicity photos printed in American and overseas newspapers reinforced the image of the female cast members’ wardrobes, as they were invariably well tailored and often included hats, gloves, and fur wraps. Cast member Joy McLean noted that “we surely didn’t feel or look oppressed when we emerged from the theatre.”

American press accounts of the international tour noted the cast’s appearance and clothing with approval. Saturday Review reported: “The first time the company visited the ballet the Russian ballerinas made the American girls open their coats. They saw a modest display of silks, furs, and jewelry, enough to make them gasp.” An American newspaper columnist noted of the cast: “All Milan could see they were not [downtrodden but] were, on the contrary, well-schooled artists, fashionable clothes-horses with courteous manners and straightforward charm.” A Tennessee newspaper’s account of opening night in Moscow observed that “Ethel Ayler . . . was dressed in a black suit with rhinestone pin and earrings.” Blevins Davis, in an interview with the Kansas City Star, cut to the chase and focused on the buying power signified by the cast’s apparel, noting that “when it became known in foreign lands that their salaries for acting were comparable to the higher salaries in government offices, or the pay of big business leaders abroad—well, with Cab Calloway, for example, being paid $1,500 a week for his role as Sportin’ Life, and actors in other major roles getting from $500 to $1,000 a week—all propaganda about the United States mistreating any classes of our people becomes an obvious mockery.”

Most publicity photos of the cast offstage showed them attending black-tie embassy receptions or sightseeing. Such events began just moments after the end of a performance, when, still in costume, cast members greeted local dignitaries who came backstage. Local embassy and USIS personnel throughout the tour packed cast members’ schedules with official activities. They attended receptions, met with local civic leaders, visited hospitals, ap-
peared on radio and television programs, and answered endless questions. While only principals performed at many of the public concerts and appearances, Breen expected the entire cast to attend and perform at the embassy parties, which took place after opening night in every city they visited. A report to the White House from the ambassador to Yugoslavia emphasized these kinds of offstage activities. The U.S. embassy reception there introduced the cast to local elites in government, culture, journalism, academia, and diplomacy. Beyond the official reception, however, they continued to make a splash. The ambassador described how “many members of the cast were invited to private homes; some appeared on Radio Belgrade; others visited schools. They drew interested throngs wherever they went: on streets, in shops, restaurants and night clubs. Reporters besieged them; they were frequently photographed; and autograph hunters dogged their every step.” The ambassador was pleased with the whole experience and lauded the cast for having “conducted themselves with grace and dignity, which resulted locally in most favorable comment. The whole group proved to be cooperative, personally delightful and excellent representatives of American culture and ideals.”

Official events were merely the tip of the iceberg: as the ambassador’s report illustrates, the cast spent virtually every waking moment in the public eye. When they stepped off of airplanes, trains, and buses in a new city, cameras and crowds greeted them. In Leningrad crowds were so enormous that they caused a traffic jam, and “by the time the cast was ready to de-train there was only a narrow aisle through the mob and the players ran the gauntlet, pummeled with flowers and applause all the way.” As a large group of African Americans, every sightseeing and shopping trip drew stares and often crowds. One Warsaw shop owner was forced to lock his door against the throngs straining for a glimpse of the cast members inside. Even in their hotel lobbies, the *Porgy and Bess* cast stood out, and strangers frequently approached them. Cast member Lillian Hayman reported that she “had people just come up and rub on [her] to see if the black came off!”; and in Milan, residents “stared at and exclaimed at the ‘cantanti negri’ as the cast [went] from theater to hotel.” The company’s press liaison reported of the cast in Zagreb: “The people of this town have never seen such a group as ours, for the most part the only Negroes they have ever seen were in American films. The Company cannot walk alone in the streets, they are followed everywhere. The people of Zagreb speak German and Italian and the favored expression is ‘bella Negra.’” In Vienna, as cast member Georgia Burke reported, “everyone
knew we were from ‘Porgy and Bess.’ We felt like walking advertisements” as people approached them and volunteered their opinions of the show.75

At virtually every public event, cast members sang. Every reception included a piano, and by the end of the evening, some performers were gathered around it. They sang in churches, hospitals, camps for Eastern European refugees, and concert halls. At a meeting with the mayor of Zagreb, they answered the Slavic folk songs performed by their hosts with Christmas carols and spirituals. Cast member Joy McClean recalled that “we were usually notified by a staff member that we would be expected to participate in a song on a given occasion,” suggesting that the performances were not as impromptu as press accounts made them seem.76 Stereotyped expectations of authentic African American music often dictated the nature of these performances. The cast members, most of whom were highly trained singers, were capable of performing a range of material, from Italian arias to German
lieder, and one cast member recalled Irving Barnes wowing the patrons of a Vienna rathskeller with his rendition of Strauss in flawless German. But another cast member reported that they “discovered after long experience with informal audiences that they preferred to hear the American jazz classics.” (The Soviet Union proved an exception, where the official hosts disdained the “decadent music of the west” and expected the Americans to perform competitively against their own classically trained singers.)

Overseas, the general public, which was the target of USIS propaganda efforts, learned about the offstage activities of the *Porgy and Bess* cast from the local press, but heavy coverage in the U.S. news media also brought this bit of Cold War propaganda home to Americans in unprecedented fashion. Photos, column items, and feature articles about the *Porgy and Bess* cast filled U.S. newspapers and magazines throughout the international tour. Almost without exception, stateside press coverage emphasized the cast’s offstage activities and reinforced the notion that *Porgy and Bess* was performing valuable diplomatic work. Photo spreads in newspapers and major national magazines displayed cast members looking glamorous at embassy receptions, sitting atop camels touring the pyramids, and delivering CARE packages in Central Europe. In addition to feature articles, the *New York Times* and black newspapers printed dispatches from every stop on the tour under such headlines as “‘Porgy’ Delights Belgrade Crowd; Residents of Catfish Row Are Seen as Goodwill Envoys—Opening Is Festive”; “‘Porgy’ Draws 12 Curtain Calls in Vienna Premiere”; “‘Porgy’ Thrills Naples, Milan”; “‘Porgy and Bess’ Hailed at Rio Opening; Makes First Stop on South American Tour”; “‘Porgy and Bess’ Ends Tour of Mexico; Off for New York, Rest”; and “‘Porgy Makes a Hit with Athens Crowd.”

Such relentless press coverage of *Porgy and Bess*’s every international move appeared not only on the arts and society pages but on the opinion pages as well. The Cold War heightened public awareness of the American image in the world and made comparisons between the Soviet and U.S. systems a common point of political reference. *Porgy and Bess*—tinged with Gershwin and glamour, and highly visible thanks to Breen’s formidable publicity—became an irresistible subject for editorial writers, columnists, and letter-writing citizens, who all had an opinion to share about whether the show was a politically useful representation of the United States to the rest of the world. This outpouring of praise, criticism, and analysis constituted a sometimes surprising national debate about American identity, racial identity, and the relationship between the two at a time just before the most visible actions of the black-freedom struggle burst into the national and international
spotlight. A majority of editorials and letters to the editor in the mainstream white press lauded the political and symbolic work that *Porgy and Bess* accomplished, but a surprising number did not. Widespread syndication of columnists and editorials assured that such opinions appeared before readers in a variety of newspapers nationwide, not merely those in major U.S. cities. While those who endorsed the diplomatic success of *Porgy and Bess* emphasized the cast’s offstage activities, some white critics—for the first time—focused instead on the show’s content, objecting to its characters and situations as painting a damaging and inaccurate portrait of typical Americans. In doing so, these critics echoed the same concerns that black publications expressed with greater frequency and force, where such debates over the racial meanings of popular cultural representations had a much longer history, and where tensions between perceptions of the *Porgy and Bess*’s African American cast and its fictional characterizations had been aired as early as the opera’s 1935 debut.

Many editorials in mainstream publications praised *Porgy and Bess* as an example of American cultural accomplishment that proved capitalism’s humanist side, the exact rationale behind the original cultural tours sponsored by the State Department. The opera was “winning us the kind of friends and admiration which dollars, machines and Coca Cola could never achieve,” proving that “the United States has something besides the H-bomb” and that Americans were more than “a nation of gadget makers, clever in turning out bathtubs and overdecorated automobiles, but barbarians in their indifference to the finer products of the mind and spirit.” Some fused such endorsements of U.S. cultural accomplishment with the USIS’s message about the show’s cast as emblems of racial progress. This had the dubious (and misleading) effect of making black performers who had long been excluded from the nation’s opera houses and concert halls the agents of America’s elite cultural prowess. The *New York Times* argued that “Communist propaganda sedulously fosters the notion that United States culture consists of comic books and gangster motion pictures, and that American Negroes live under conditions little if any different from those described in ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin.’ ‘Porgy and Bess’ strikes hard at these stereotypes, both in its musical richness and in the backgrounds of the Negroes who star in it.” The *Kansas City Star* and others also avoided the obvious facts of contemporary racial segregation in order to make a positive case for *Porgy and Bess*. Its editorial noted the cast’s ambassadorial function with approval, describing to its readers how “members of the cast, most of them college graduates, meet socially some of the most politically and culturally influential people of the continent.”
while failing to connect that fact with the frequently violent resistance that African Americans in the U.S. South were facing when they attempted to achieve educational opportunity and abolish segregation.

White newspapers in the South, however, were only too aware of the links between the struggle over segregation and the symbolism of the Porgy and Bess tour. To these editorial boards, Porgy and Bess was an instrument of racial reform far preferable to the campaigns undertaken by civil rights activists throughout the twentieth century. In the context of domestic politics, white southerners routinely sought to discredit such activism and activists by painting them red, claiming that they were part of communist efforts to undermine the American way of life. By contrast, Porgy and Bess’s content reinforced comfortable white-supremacist notions about vice, superstition, and political passivity among African Americans, making it an acceptable instrument of anticommunism in the international arena. The Charleston News and Courier, a politically conservative and vocally pro-segregation daily, declared its comfort with the level of social change that Porgy and Bess represented, praising the show for “doing more for understanding of the American Negro than all the alphabetical societies and self-appointed reformers who ever stirred a race issue.” The Richmond Times-Dispatch favorably compared international praise for Porgy and Bess to what it considered an ill-conceived Toronto school ban against Little Black Sambo. The Columbia (S.C.) Record, which, like other racially moderate southern newspapers, tried to promote small gains in racial tolerance while avoiding the kind of bold views that would antagonize segregationists, observed in an editorial that “Porgy and Bess’ depicts a side of Negro life, which is fortunately disappearing, but it nonetheless contradicts the distorted picture of the Negro in America painted by the Communist propagandists.”

Many editorials argued that the Porgy and Bess troupe functioned so well as representatives not because they were well-educated bearers of elite culture but because they were down-to-earth, friendly, and, above all, candid in their well-documented offstage appearances. In this twist on the notion of authenticity, the performers were open, honest, authentic Americans rather than duplicitous, cagey professional diplomats. A gushing CBS Radio news item about the cast, reprinted in numerous newspapers, described them as having “captivated the Egyptians with their bubbling energy, friendliness and honesty. To people in the streets and in the shops, to guests at parties and even to students at university forums, they’ve been a revelation. They’ve answered direct questions with direct answers. They’ve talked about America as no diplomat ever could.” A member of the Senate Foreign Relations Com-
mittee concurred: “This outstanding group of Negro artists has probably done more to dispel falsehood about racial relations in the United States than an almost infinite amount of words on the part of diplomats.” The New York Daily Mirror described how the Russian public “has crowded around them wherever they went, obtaining autographs, admiring their singing of carols and spirituals, and helping them in their struggles with the Russian language” and concluded that such encounters were “the kind of diplomacy that reaches people on a common ground.” For at least one editorial, cast members’ racial identities—although not in the form of their educational and professional accomplishments—were a key element of this informal diplomacy. According to the Manhattan (Kans.) Mercury, the cast made such good ambassadors because they were both diasporic and dominated, “not strictly American. . . . They are Afro-American—with a running start on international culture. They are plain folky folks from run-down homes. . . . They appeal to the luckless and impoverished of other nations.”

Other editorials took up the argument that Porgy and Bess worked effectively as propaganda precisely because the opera’s onstage characterizations depicted a vanishing black world—in the words of a letter writer to the New York Amsterdam News, “a specific era in Negro life”—and thus progress in the course of U.S. race relations. In this formulation, which echoed the strand of State Department thinking espoused by C. D. Jackson and the organizers of the “Unfinished Business” exhibit, both the social distance that African Americans had traveled and the U.S. government’s willingness to acknowledge past oppression demonstrated the honesty, flexibility, and superiority of American democracy. The New York Times approvingly repeated the comment of a Yugoslavian government official who observed that “only a psychologically mature people could have placed this on the stage.” The Somerset (N.J.) Star admitted: “It’s true that the story of ’Porgy and Bess’ is no compliment to America. But its music is beautiful, its characterization superb and its art of the highest quality. Foreigners seeing this work cannot help being impressed with American art and American genius for self-criticism.” The Peoria (Ill.) Journal-Star declared Porgy and Bess “a stirring object lesson in the workings of democracy . . . presented by a group of American Negro artists who are proud of American democracy and eager to export it in this graceful fashion.” The only black newspaper to take up this argument did so only partially; an Amsterdam News editorial made the case that the show was “an effort to dramatize the folkways of a particular segment of American society in a particular period” but offered no praise for American democracy. Ira Wolfert of The Nation resorted to outright exaggeration when he
tied together the show’s content, its cast, and American democratic virtues. Ignoring the achievements of African Americans prior to the mid-twentieth century, he lauded the propaganda power of a story “acted out by representatives of the same people who rose up out of the life it depicts . . . who have fought their way up in a single generation to acquire cultured backgrounds, to become professionals.” Of this speedy progress narrative of his own devising, Wolfert concluded triumphantly: “Porgy and Bess . . . is not propaganda about the truth; it is itself truth.”

Not everyone agreed that *Porgy and Bess* and its cast embodied any kind of truth, nor that they improved the image of the United States around the world. Some white writers objected to the opera as both inaccurate and offensive in its portrayal of “typical” Americans, and black critics were similarly outraged at its depiction of African Americans. Critics of all hues expressed their dismay at how the work might be interpreted by communists eager to criticize the United States. On these points, critics of the opera in the black press—while far more likely than their white counterparts to bemoan the wasted opportunity for the show’s talented performers—found a rare common cause with right-wing columnists in white newspapers. Westbrook Pegler, a conservative white columnist, railed against the show, describing it as “a story of low morals in a minority of a minority of the American people. It is not regarded by respectable Americans, white or colored, as a fair or decent commentary on the American Negro. . . . It has absolutely nothing to recommend it here.” The *Indianapolis Times* identified the opera’s characters as “men and women under the influence of drink, drugs, lust, hate and fear” and wondered if communist governments invited the show “because ‘Porgy and Bess’ is a picture of American life that the commissars were eager for their people to see.” To the Colorado Springs *Gazette Telegraph*, *Porgy and Bess* was “tawdry” and sacrilegious; “the Ruskies will have a chance to chuckle mercilessly over the lyrics of ‘the things that you’re liable to read in the Bible . . . ain’t necessarily so.’”

If some white conservatives objected to *Porgy and Bess* as representative of American life, proportionately many more black critics condemned the show for its representation of African American life. They balked at the USIS line that *Porgy and Bess* portrayed events from a bygone era and that the cast members themselves embodied a story of American racial progress. More than willing to recognize the cast’s professional accomplishments, they nonetheless saw danger in the fact that many audiences and theater critics accepted the show’s content as an accurate reflection of black life. To some, the show’s plot and characters presented such offensive racial stereotypes
that it was virtually an argument in favor of white supremacy. Others insisted that the U.S. government would not sponsor similarly demeaning fare about other ethnic or regional groups, nor would such groups allow it; while still others complained that black performers were forced into such roles due to a lack of worthy alternatives. These critics took their place in a long line of black writers and intellectuals navigating the difficult shoals of racial uplift and cultural representation when it came to *Porgy, Porgy and Bess*, and many other cultural productions involving African American performers and themes. Their critiques were far more sustained, widespread, and passionate than those of white conservatives. For African Americans long accustomed to such battles, the potential damage this time was worldwide.

The first critique was the most powerful and pervasive one, grounded in a clear recognition that such representations only bolstered the theory and practice of white supremacy in the United States. The *New York Age and Defender* maintained that *Porgy and Bess* “sets the darker races back fifty years or more” and wondered if that was precisely the reason the U.S. government had sponsored the show. A piece authored by the Associated Negro Press declared: “Thanks to the State Department, Negro Americans are being presented all over the world in terms of . . . [the] denizens of this Charleston slum.” The *Norfolk Journal and Guide* (responding to the *Charleston News and Courier’s* praise for *Porgy and Bess*) asserted that “it is the sheerest nonsense to claim that this colorful and dramatic vignette of a miniscule of Negro life in one city contributes to an understanding of the Negro race by peoples throughout the world who see and enjoy the operetta.” By 1956 the *Journal and Guide*’s editorial opinion had grown more explicit. An editorial titled “*Porgy and Bess Helps Spread Supremacy Myth*” characterized the tour as “a vehicle through which the advocates of the supremacy myth hope to show the world that colored Americans are—in all ways—inferior to their brighter-hued brethren.” Its author described how “foreign audiences are seldom aware that ‘Porgy’ does not deal with the present, they do not know that the music is not genuine Negro art. . . . While I was in Europe last summer, I had many heated discussions on the subject, but could not explain away the ‘authenticity’ of life as depicted in ‘Porgy.’” *Afro-American* writer James L. Hicks, an early critic of the show, maintained that “there is nothing in the show that is typical of the fifteen million colored Americans living in this country today” and predicted that archsegregationists like “Governor Herman Talmadge of Georgia . . . would welcome ‘Porgy’ with open arms.”

Some black critics made a Du Boisian appeal for more cultural representations of educated, middle-class African Americans rather than the working-
class denizens of Catfish Row. A correspondent to The Afro-American agreed with Hicks: “America would be surprised to learn of the growing number of persons who resent [Porgy and Bess] and other slanders which would deny the existence of tens of thousands of law-abiding citizens of color.” J. A. Rogers voiced his discomfort with how Porgy and Bess offered a narrow view of black life, noting that the show “does great harm because it perpetuates a stereotype out of which when a Negro steps he looks like a freak to many,” a stereotype that “gives joy to whites” but was only painful to “thinking Negros.” He called for “balance” rather than “over-sensitive censorship”; since “so much of the seamy side of Negro life is played up in movies, plays, books, why not give some of the more elevating side and advertise it as well, too.” At least one Amsterdam News reader was convinced that such concerns were oversensitive and argued that the show “was written around a specific era in Negro life [and] unfortunately that era has not improved down through the years. . . . If you don’t think so just read your local Negro papers and see how many Porgy and Bess headlines make news.” He praised Porgy and Bess as “a contribution to the American culture” and urged his fellow readers: “We should be as proud of our native heritage as any other people.”

Hicks and others challenged the widespread support for Porgy and Bess by invoking how other ethnic and racial groups were (and were not) represented in theatrical productions. The most popular of these comparisons, that between Porgy and Bess and Tobacco Road (a popular play, also based on a novel, about poor white southerners), disengaged race from class in a manner that never occurred to white critics. Rogers, Bibb, and Hicks all noted the activism of other groups (Jewish, Irish, Catholic) against stereotyped stage portrayals, with Hicks wondering: “When will the colored people of America rise up in unified protest against the way they are pictured on the American stage, radio, screen, and television?” The Afro-American ran a feature article on Porgy and Bess that asked: “If Uncle Sam Kept ‘Tobacco Road’ out of Europe, Why Did It Send ‘Porgy and Bess’?” A year later, the Norfolk Journal and Guide also compared Porgy and Bess to Tobacco Road and predicted that if Tobacco Road were ever sent on an international tour by the U.S. government, “Nobody will consider it as representative of American whites, and nobody but Russian propagandists will claim that it contributes to any ‘understanding’ of Americans generally.” The Chicago Defender also ascribed to Porgy and Bess “the persistent feeling that the folk opera was too Tobacco Road and that it gave out the false impression that all Negroes were primitives, satisfied with fish fries and cheap whiskey.”

Letter writers, often challenging what they saw as misguided editorials
in praise of the show, offered a range of opinions about the consequences of sending *Porgy and Bess* abroad. These letters reflected both white horror at the thought that foreign audiences viewed the show as a reflection of “typical” American life and black insistence that the show’s feel-good aura glossed over the real racial inequalities plaguing American society. Some letters were positive. One black letter writer defended *Porgy and Bess* against the *Tobacco Road* analogies by asserting: “I have never heard of . . . the native whites getting riled up over Tobacco Road, or the Mississippi Gambler in Show Boat. . . . The truth is all of these plays and movies are of an era and folklore.” Many more were critical, however, like the Minneapolis correspondent who complained: “With all the wealth of wonderful plays to select, the state department sends a horrible musical titled ‘Porgy and Bess’ which . . . presents a squalid and depraved picture of life in Catfish Row in a waterfront town in South Carolina. . . . This is supposed to be a cross-section of life in America as you and I live.” Other writers criticized *Porgy and Bess*’s propaganda role in the face of oppressive racial conditions at home. A letter to the *Washington Post and Times Herald* posed an alternative explanation for the enthusiastic Soviet reception of *Porgy and Bess*, asking: “Could it not be that the ‘warmth and sympathy’ evoked among ordinary Russians was for the underdog—the American Negro—rather than for Americans generally?” He also linked the show’s content, the cast’s offstage activities, and the larger context of the U.S. civil rights movement, writing: “Whereas it is true that the Russians were able to observe that it is actually possible for gifted Negroes to develop their talents in America, I doubt that they would consider this group as being a representative sample of American Negroes. The very roles that they portrayed in Porgy and Bess would preclude this possibility.” The writer concluded that “not all of the ‘Red’ propaganda about Negroes in the United States is mythical” and cited the Emmett Till case, the Montgomery bus boycott, the firebombing of a black minister’s home, and the Virginia Supreme Court upholding miscegenation laws as examples. A correspondent to the *New York Post* used the publicity over *Porgy and Bess*’s propaganda success to call out the government’s misplaced priorities and preference for symbolic rather than actual racial progress. Adopting the pseudonym “Sportin’ Life,” the letter writer suggested that “it would be healthy for the United States if somebody put Mississippi on the UN agenda” and concluded with the sarcastic observation that “the ‘Porgy and Bess’ troupe will soon play Moscow and that will certainly dispel all the ugly propaganda that Negroes don’t have a chance in this country.”

*Caught in a bind between their usual support for black artists and their*
objection to *Porgy and Bess*’s content, most black commentators—like their colleagues before them—carefully couched their criticism of the show in the recognition that “the play is furnishing jobs for a number of people and taking them into far away places” and were unanimous in expressing the wish for “a better vehicle with which to display colored American talent.” Columnist Ollie Stewart of *The Afro-American* was typical when he praised the cast’s offstage diplomatic efforts and predicted that “for the next few years, you can bet on it that at least one colored company of entertainers will be sent overseas to help shore up American prestige wherever it begins to sag.” But what were the implications of this mismatch between talented performers and unfortunate material? M. D. Cartwright, a *New York Amsterdam News* columnist, placed *Porgy and Bess* (along with *Amos ’n’ Andy*, *Beulah*, and any “role that Hattie McDaniel ever played”) in a “self-perpetuating” cycle, where a black actor portrayed stereotyped roles because nothing else was ever offered and thus “rarely gets the chance to prove that he can play any other sort of role.” More damaging politically was that “the audience . . . seldom gets a chance to accustom itself to the stage Negro as a dignified human being.” Longtime journalist and editor Joseph D. Bibb was much angrier about the disjunction between performers and material in *Porgy and Bess*, and he was crystal clear about which carried the greater political impact. In his weekly *Courier* column, he thundered: “The heavenly singing and the mellifluous voices of the colored artists in ‘Porgy and Bess’ do not drown down the voices of the depraved characters portrayed. Nor does the backdrop of art, genius or histrionics blind the eyes of observers to the sight of colored characters depicted as murderers, illiterates, sycophants, prostitutes, dope addicts and degenerates. Nor does the site of the inglorious ghetto-styled Catfish Row tend to portray the darker minority in this country as first-class citizens.” Stewart’s *Afro-American* colleague James Hicks similarly pointed out the folly and hypocrisy of black audiences who were willing to elevate *Porgy and Bess*’s performers and ignore the opera’s demeaning stereotypes. In the bluntly titled feature article “We Don’t Need ‘Porgy and Bess,’” he wondered why “forward thinking colored people show righteous indignation today at white people who seek to identify them with Saturday night brawls with knives over two bit crap games. Yet when a white man hires a few of them to present them exactly in this manner on a Broadway stage they sit beside the white people and rock the rafters with their cheers.”91 The temperature of black criticism of *Porgy and Bess* was beginning to rise.

Other black critics both acknowledged the performers and criticized *Porgy and Bess* by calling for alternative productions that would do more to “uplift
the race.” One wondered “why such productions as ‘Porgy and Bess’ dealing with the worst in the Negro race can enjoy such long runs while the higher type of entertainment with an all-Negro cast generally lasts a short time.” In a January 1956 Defender column listing his wishes for the new year, Langston Hughes hoped for an end to the *Porgy and Bess* world tour so that “the fine company of actors and singers will come back home and put on a show that colored folks at home can cheer, too, and that does not open with an interminable crap game and whose leading lady does not have to stand straddle-legged like a cow to sing her arias.” Hughes also hoped the performers had been well compensated for their labors and not left with “Plenty of Nothin’.”

The *Norfolk Journal and Guide* put on rose-colored glasses to argue: “We have a growing number of very distinguished Negro musicians whom the nation is delighted to see in the Metropolitan Opera, on the concert platform, or on the television screen. When we send American music abroad, let us be sure that our Negro artists go along with their white compatriots as dignified representatives of our culture and not as segregated curiosities.” The *Amsterdam News*’s theater critic opened his review with a more sobering reality check, reporting on “the guffaws and belly-laughs that greeted these stereotyped antics,” which led him to conclude that “most Americans may . . . get the misconceived notion that the American Negro is a breed of crap-shooters and dope addicts.”

Bibb, writing in the *Courier*, and Associated Negro Press editor Dean Gordon H. Hancock, writing in the *Amsterdam News*, were even more direct in showing how *Porgy and Bess*’s high visibility undermined the fight against segregation in the United States. Likening it to *Amos ’n’ Andy* (albeit judging that the now notorious radio and television program was “not so deadly and insidious” as *Porgy and Bess*), Bibb insisted that “times are far too critical in this land of ours for minority citizens to be portrayed and depicted as clowns, buffoons, irresponsible, and shiftless scoundrels. The enemies of job, social, and political equality all know it.” Hancock similarly argued that *Porgy and Bess* “corroborates and verifies the stereotyped conception of Negroes” and zeroed in on the show’s Charleston setting—so often lionized for its authenticity—as a symbol of black isolation that would warm a segregationist’s heart. “Catfish Alley,” as Hancock termed it, “is a faithful portrayal of Negro life, where the very thoughts of integration would be the height of sacrilege and folly. . . . The chasm between Catfish Alley and current boulevards is so great that integration becomes anathema, and proponents thereof are communist in their aspirations.” Hancock also indicted the show’s plot for failing to depict any examples of black ambition or struggle, “not one thing in
the entire play that showed the Negro trying to rise out of Catfish Alley. . . . There may be a happier lot for the oppressed, repressed, compressed, dis-
tressed, harassed and embarrassed Negro but no suggestion thereof can be
found in ‘Porgy and Bess’ of Catfish Alley which easily qualifies as the ‘place’
whites of the Talmadge and Byrnes type have consigned to Negroes.” Bibb
had an equally forceful answer for his black-press colleagues who wondered
mournfully and repeatedly why better vehicles for black performers were so
rare. In his estimation, not only did enemies of black equality appreciate cul-
tural productions like Amos ’n’ Andy and Porgy and Bess, but “they denounce
stage, screen and radio productions that show colored people in dignified
roles [and] many splendid screen plays have been barred in the South because
colored people were presented as decent human beings.” If cultural repre-
sentations of black people as shiftless buffoons advanced the cause of white
supremacy, cultural representations of African Americans as dignified and
educated furthered the cause of black equality. Hancock supplied the most
fitting final words for the new mood of black criticism of Porgy and Bess:
“The mind of the new Negro is on Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C.
not Catfish Alley, Charleston, S.C.”

All of these black critics believed that the visibility of African Amer-
cans inevitably weighed on one side or the other of the political balance in
this period, serving either to advance or to hinder black political and social
progress. It is difficult to imagine that the Porgy and Bess cast did not under-
stand this as well. Visibility itself had always been a strategy in the struggle
for black equality, as black elites attempted to patrol the public behavior of
their working-class neighbors so as to avoid reinforcing white-supremacist
notions of black laziness, criminality, poor hygiene, ignorance, and sexual
impropriety. Black performers were particularly public representatives of the
race, regularly traveling beyond the borders of segregated neighborhoods
and appearing before white audiences. Prior generations of black performers
who had toured before the Porgy and Bess cast understood this aspect of their
chosen careers, such as the turn-of-the-twentieth-century Williams and
Walker troupe, who were keenly aware of their public visibility in a society
dedicated to white supremacy. But on this tour, the show’s black performers
were not just visible in the way that all professional stage performers are; they
were deliberately made visible, aggressively promoted to international audi-
ences as representatives of African American progress. In public and private,
they juggled both the demands placed on them by these additional burdens
of representation and the ordinary challenges of a career in the performing
arts, with its never-ending quests to perfect the current job and secure the next one.

While their visibility made them representatives of the cause of black equality, few *Porgy and Bess* company members admit to having seen themselves in such a light. There are no extant contemporary accounts of cast members criticizing American racial politics publicly, as Louis Armstrong famously did in 1957 when he cancelled his own USIS-sponsored international tour to protest the Eisenhower administration’s response to the crisis at Little Rock High School. In contrast, that same year, cast member Ethel Ayler enthused that “we have befriended so many strange and wonderful people for ourselves and for America that even Dale Carnegie is jealous.” Even in retrospective accounts, cast members described political quiescence. In his 1991 autobiography, Warfield insisted that “the strong sentiment of the cast . . . was that *Porgy and Bess* was a celebration of our culture, and not an exploitation of it. The work didn’t snigger at African Americans. It ennobled the characters it depicted, and awakened generations of music lovers in America and abroad, to the universality of the ‘primitive’ civilization of Catfish Row.” Both Lillian Hayman and Joy McLean claimed that the cast was unaware of the Emmett Till murder when it occurred in August 1955, although members of the public often asked them about the case. Only one cast member, Joseph James, recalled criticizing American racial injustice before an overseas audience, and Warfield expressed approval that the word “nigger” was removed from the libretto, particularly because “we wouldn’t want to suggest to our European audiences that such racial slurs were considered acceptable among civilized Americans.” Hayman was probably correct when she observed of her fellow cast members: “Most of those people, they weren’t political. They were just singers, going over there, having a good time, and then experiencing things that we never experienced in our lives.”

Hayman’s insistence of the cast that “they weren’t political,” and the distance that other cast members put between themselves and that designation, invites speculation about how they might have defined the word. To Hayman and others, to be “political” as an African American artist might have meant to express publicly blunt political opinions about racial injustice in the United States, like Paul Robeson and Josephine Baker. But few people possess the bold temperament necessary for high-profile activism, and the *Porgy and Bess* performers lacked the celebrity through which other more outspoken black artists gained a platform. Moreover, successful black artists—such as Robeson, Baker, and Hazel Scott—who were outspoken in
their criticism of race relations in the United States found themselves facing significant professional obstacles (most extremely in Robeson’s case, when the State Department revoked his passport and thus his ability to make a living by singing overseas). In the era of the blacklist and the ready association of civil rights advocacy and communism, there was no such thing as political activism that did not have the potential to adversely, or even fatally, influence performers’ professional careers. It is also important to remember that Hayman characterized the cast’s apolitical stance in the course of an oral history interview thirty years after the events she described. Given the momentous events in the civil rights struggle that took place after the tour ended in 1956, perhaps she found it difficult to recognize political activism in their roles as public representatives of African Americans abroad. As a context for such self-assessments, it is always important to remember the role of the black press, which at once fiercely criticized *Porgy and Bess*’s content while building up the celebrity status of its performers; such messages surely did not encourage Hayman or the others to see themselves as activists.

Without a doubt, however, they were all entertainers, and they experienced the singular realities of entertainers on a lengthy tour. They endured grueling schedules and the disruptions of life on the road with remarkable aplomb. They rehearsed daily in the face of a variety of contingencies—cast members who were new to the show and those switching to different roles; venues where the stage was too small to accommodate the original blocking; and, at least once, local custom, when Soviet officials demanded that producers drastically tone down the steamy scenes between Bess and Crown. At each new venue, they quickly developed working relationships with local stagehands, often despite formidable language barriers. They also adapted to the new orchestra that conductor Alexander Smallens trained in every city where they performed. Travel between engagements provided virtually their only “down time” in a schedule packed with rehearsals, performances, and public-relations assignments. Tour life entailed numerous professional and personal stresses. Busy schedules and constant proximity ensured that cast members got on each other’s nerves at least occasionally. Long separations from spouses and families were also difficult, and Breen did his best to help, in a few cases hiring spouses to perform in the show or work with the company and in others dispatching a staff member to New York City to help a cast member’s wife find a job and arrange the funeral of another company member’s father. Cast member Joseph James nearly left the tour because he feared the long absence imperiled both his marriage and his professional opportunities in New York City. Major life events did not wait for a re-
turn to the United States: Lillian Hayman underwent an emergency appen-
dectomy, and several marriages (including a well-publicized union between
Helen Thigpen and Earl Jackson in Moscow) took place.96

The performers were hardly getting rich on this tour. Their take-home sal-
aries ranged from a low of $40 per week to a high of $200 (for a few prin-
cipals), out of which they had to pay for their own food and lodging. During
the U.S. portions of the tour, presumably because of Actors Equity rules, cast
members all took home closer to $100 per week, and some (like Calloway)
made considerably more than that. The finances of the tour were always pre-
carious; Davis and Breen convinced the cast to take a two-week unpaid vaca-
tion in Italy on the promise that there would be an additional year of touring
if they hung in (most did). But there were other compensations. Four years
on the road, while arduous, provided opportunities for international travel
that most cast members could never have afforded on their own, as well as
opportunities to hear renowned European artists perform. The multiple curt-
ain calls that greeted the conclusion of each performance deeply gratified
the hard-working performers. While Breen deliberately publicized the cast
members as a group rather than singling out individuals, overseas audiences
showered recognition and praise on them that far exceeded any celebrity they
had experienced in the United States.97

The visibility and prestige of *Porgy and Bess* created work for the per-
formers in both the short and long terms. Cast members regularly worked in
nightclubs and performed concert recitals during the rare times when they
were free from onstage and offstage *Porgy and Bess* obligations. Some took
leaves of absence from the show to perform recitals in the United States
and Europe, a practice enabled in part by the ensemble system that en-
sured the presence of multiple performers capable of singing the principal
roles at any time. After the tour was over, some performers booked engage-
ments at prestigious European opera houses. And of course there was the
perennial hope that the show’s popularity would, in the words of *Pittsburgh
Courier* writer Isadora Rowe, “have other producers looking for new ideas
through colored glasses” as they recognized the profitability that African
American performers could bring. Cast member Warren Coleman took such
matters into his own hands during this period by founding Spectrum Arts,
Inc., a film production company with an international outlook that prom-
ised to “integrate into the industry the proven talents of non-white artists
in a manner befitting their dignity” and market the resulting films to “those
four-fifths of the world’s people now designated as non-white.” It is possible
that cast members might have weighed in on behalf of equal opportunity
for their colleagues in the orchestra pit as well; when six black musicians in New York City lodged a protest against the local musicians’ union over the all-white makeup of the orchestra hired for *Porgy and Bess*’s return engagement in that city in 1953, they also wrote a letter to the show’s cast members, who were performing overseas at the time. Breen and Davis responded by instructing the theatre in no uncertain terms that “we positively want several Negro musicians in the orchestra,” which resulted in the hiring of four African American players.98

For the most part, *Porgy and Bess*’s extended overseas tour provided a significant professional opportunity without the indignity that continued to plague black performers touring many parts of the still-segregated United States. While in London and on some of the domestic legs of the tour, the cast encountered precisely the kind of discrimination that the U.S. government tried to argue was a thing of the past. In London, cast members reportedly had to pay excessive rents, or pay three months in advance; some experienced harassing behavior from white neighbors. When the company arrived in Dallas to debut *Porgy and Bess* at the Dallas State Fair, costume designer Jed Mace, a Dallas native who knew of no restaurant that would serve the interracial group, brought the entire company from the airport directly to his costume shop for dinner. In other cities, the company drove for hours looking for restaurants that would serve them. When *Porgy and Bess* returned to the United States after its European tour, one cast member recalled that they had “come from performing in front of kings and queens” yet found themselves faced with hotels that would give them the worst rooms or no rooms at all. This same cast member, who was light skinned, recalled securing an inexpensive room at a local YWCA only to discover, after a fellow cast member was turned away, that the manager had given her a room only because he thought she was white.99

*Porgy and Bess* gave the cast four years of paid work doing what they had trained long and hard to do, a credit that enhanced their future performing opportunities, and a chance to see the world. They understood the scarcity of such opportunities. During the tour, cast member Maya Angelou told an Israeli newspaper reporter: “We have a great responsibility to keep the play a success. If it is a hit (and it is), our managers are going to put on another Negro show and more Negro actors will be employed, and given a chance to show the world what we can do. We are responsible before every Negro actor in the world.” Angelou and the rest of the company had every reason to believe that *Porgy and Bess* was only the beginning. Breen was, in fact, envisioning a *Porgy and Bess* juggernaut; he secured the rights for ten years and
hoped to direct a film version that would be dubbed in ten languages. Breen also foresaw a traveling African American repertory company and made detailed (and publicized) plans to begin production of a new musical by Harold Arlen, alternately titled *Blues Opera* and *Free and Easy.*

*Porgy and Bess*’s government sponsors preferred that cast members function as symbolic messengers, via images and anecdotes that chronicled their overseas presence, rather than as bearers of direct statements about race relations back home. The State Department only briefed the cast once before the show ventured into the communist nations of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, and the Soviet Union. One cast member recalled being instructed at this briefing to tell the truth but also admonished that the Soviets were only interested “in using what you say in interviews for propaganda statements.” The cast was also warned to “keep in mind what you’d like your folks at home to read in the press about what you say.” Another cast member remembered that they “were briefed not to say a lot of things about segregation and that sort of thing in our country.” These various recollections suggest that State Department briefers conveyed their warnings about the political implications of cast members’ words while stopping short of instructing them in exactly what they could and could not say. Duke Ellington, a frequent and public critic of segregation, recalled a 1963 briefing as having a less restrictive message: he and his band members could say what they wanted, even if it was critical of the United States. (Dizzy Gillespie avoided State Department briefings but similarly recalled in his later memoir: “I’ve got three hundred years of briefing. I know what they’ve done to us and I’m not going to make any excuses.”)

For the most part, *Porgy and Bess* cast members seem to have complied with the State Department’s instructions. At the request of the USIS, the wardrobe mistress dutifully distributed copies of George Orwell’s *1984* to the performers in Czechoslovakia. Irving Barnes told his hometown newspaper that “this is our chance to refute propaganda about the United States and the way Negroes are treated here.” A wire-service item included the comments of James Reynolds, who recognized that his mere presence mattered more than anything he might say: “We don’t try to make propaganda. When things come up we try to remember that most people will meet you halfway, so we take the first step; and before you know it we’re the talk of the town.” A few performers tacitly acknowledged criticisms of the show’s content. Joseph Crawford admitted the racism he expected to encounter and adopted the State Department’s argument that lauded American candor and gradual progress in race relations, telling *Saturday Review*: “The idea that we
are here and acting reasonably intelligent is propaganda to begin with. The show we portray onstage is not particularly flattering to colored people, but the fact that we ourselves portray it and our Government permits it ought to tell them something.” Georgia Burke reported in an actor’s union newsletter that “among the company the attitude was that ‘Porgy and Bess’ has no sociological overtones, that it is simply good theatre and would be accepted as such by any intelligent audience.”102 To these performers, putting on an exceptional performance night after night was their job. To complicate or jeopardize that job with political speech would have seemed reckless, as it no doubt seemed to the majority of African Americans in this era who continued on with their jobs, finding everyday ways—short of overt activism—to work toward racial justice.

Robert Breen, ever the promoter, had a ready answer for those who challenged Porgy and Bess for purveying outdated stereotypes. So did some of the Porgy and Bess principals, as recorded in a 1952 interview with Pittsburgh Courier reporter Frank Bolden. Rather than denying that the opera’s characters represented broadly drawn types, Breen, the performers, and a number of critics began to argue that precisely because Porgy and Bess was an opera, audiences should read little significance into such depictions. The performers (Warfield, Price, Leverne Hutcherson, and Irving Barnes) noted that an opera’s libretto was less important to audiences than the performer’s skill in rendering its familiar roles. European opera singers, Warfield observed, were not “typed” by the dramatic details of the roles they performed.103 Such a formulation deftly negotiated the dilemma of weighing artistic freedom against political obligation that had so preoccupied both Du Bois in the 1920s and the opera’s African American critics in the 1950s. Categorizing Porgy and Bess as prestigious high culture answered the growing body of criticism leveled at the show and preserved the viability of a work that presented long-held stereotypes of black behavior that were falling out of mainstream cultural favor.

Dallas theatre critic John Rosenfeld, writing in the Saturday Review, was the first to inoculate Porgy and Bess’s racial content by placing it in the operatic tradition. Far from assuming that the African American cast possessed any essential or instinctive talent for their roles, Rosenfeld decreed that “alone of the cast [Price] had the second nature of the Southern Negro as of Charleston, S.C., circa 1910. Otherwise it was a curiously de-Africanized ‘Porgy and Bess.’” Rosenfeld attributed this “de-Africanization” to the very racial progress that the USIS had touted in its overseas promotion of the show and its cast. “The strutting and shouting, the dialect English, the primitive
reactions now have to be acquired,” Rosenfeld declared, citing as an example the way that William Warfield stripped one of Porgy’s signature songs of its dialect, transforming “I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin’” to “I’ve Got Plenty of Nothing.” So deracinated were the performers, in his view, that “all Breen saved by importing his Negro cast was burnt cork.” By placing Porgy and Bess in the operatic tradition, both the race of the performers and that of the composer ceased to matter; in Rosenfeld’s analogies, “The Gershwin score . . . is no more authentically Negroid than Bizet’s ‘Carmen’ is Spanish” and “Helen Thigpen was a total alien in Catfish Row, but it didn’t matter[;] . . . she sang with magnificent vocal art and the operatic breadth of an Amneris.” Brooks Atkinson of the New York Times made a similar argument but drew on examples from the theatrical rather than the operatic canon. “From the literal point of view, ‘Porgy and Bess’ is not a flattering portrait of American life, as ‘Electra’ and ‘Lysistrata’ are not flattering portraits of Greek life,” Atkinson maintained, but sophisticated European audiences “have a respect for and a knowledge of art—particularly of musical art—that absolves them from the literal point of view.” Frank Bolden of the Courier argued that “to delete any part of a classic, unless it is fraudulent, is not in the best tradition of the theatre.” A few others also deployed similar arguments to counter criticism of the show. One congressman (who had not actually seen it) complained that “the show involves people like crapshooters and prostitutes.” A representative of ANTA replied that when people see Rigoletto, “they don’t go away saying see, that’s how the Italians live.” A Chicago editorial similarly absolved Porgy and Bess of the obligation to represent “typical” American life, noting that “the operatic stage is rarely typical.”

The analogy to the content of European opera proved politically useful with overseas tour audiences, who were far more familiar with European opera than with American musical theatre. In a special note inserted in the program for performances in Moscow and Leningrad, Breen explained:

Although Porgy and Bess is being performed in the Soviet Union for the first time, in the U.S. it has long achieved the position of a classic. Musically speaking, it is a unique milestone in the development of the American theatre, although by now it is almost a “period” piece. Its subject matter is of another era, and conditions depicted in this musical drama are as far removed from today’s America as conditions depicted in the Russian opera Boris Godunov differ from those prevailing in the Soviet Union today.

Breen’s move away from a racially essentialist understanding of the show’s African American performers and toward the inclusion of Porgy and Bess...
within the high-culture canon of European opera was both well-timed and badly timed. As the white public became more conscious of issues of racial representation during the 1950s and 1960s, the argument that *Porgy and Bess* was no more objectionable than numerous European operas appealed to those who wanted to preserve the show’s viability. But it was also increasingly untenable, given that the contemporary struggle to end segregation made *Porgy and Bess*’s content far more socially and politically relevant than the productions of *Rigoletto* and *Boris Godunov* to which it was compared.

For just that reason, the highly publicized *Porgy and Bess* tour drew to a conclusion at exactly the right time; if it had stayed in the spotlight any longer, its propaganda value would have swiftly curdled. Just as social and legal campaigns to ensure equal access to education were nearing their apex, the U.S. government was tirelessly promoting the educational accomplishments of the *Porgy and Bess* cast. Photographic images and descriptions that presented the cast as poised, professional, well dressed, and unfailingly polite paralleled similar images of civil rights protesters in the South, with one crucial difference. While the *Porgy and Bess* players (with “more degrees than individuals in the company”) met curious and excited crowds, African American students taking their places on campuses, lunch-counter stools, and interstate buses faced jeering, hostile mobs. Overseas reviewers praised *Porgy and Bess*’s onstage characters for their religious fervor and heartrending spirituals, while in the real American South, African American congregations energized the freedom struggle in countless ways. On 17 May 1954, with the cast heading for Zurich after a three-week engagement in Rome, the Supreme Court outlawed school segregation with its ruling in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. On 5 December 1955, the *Porgy and Bess* company walked onstage in Munich while the black citizens of Montgomery, Alabama, walked and carpooled to work, beginning what would become a long and nationally observed challenge to legal segregation. And on 12 March 1956, the *Porgy and Bess* troupe headed for Dusseldorf while the majority of the white South’s elected representatives in Washington entered a “Southern Manifesto” into the *Congressional Record*, publicly vowing to resist the *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation decision. One spectacle was largely manufactured, the other genuinely momentous, and the former suffered in the comparison.

*Porgy and Bess* played its last Cold War performance in Amsterdam on 3 June 1956, and the cast and crew returned home to the United States. Despite Breen’s best efforts, the Eisenhower administration refused to authorize a White House visit by the cast. A Breen ally, writing to State Department
officials to request “official recognition” and “appropriate decorations” for the cast for their “splendid patriotic service,” hinted at the larger context of the burgeoning civil rights movement when he urged that “an award and ceremony of this sort for the Porgy and Bess company is . . . particularly desirable at this time.” Breen was more forthright, reminding State Department officials: “You well know how Montgomery, Miss [Aurtherine] Lucy, and other incidents have been plastered all over the foreign press.” Indeed, a few months before the tour ended, the Montgomery bus boycott became a national and international media story, much like _Porgy and Bess_ but with vastly more significant consequences. Indeed, a few months before the tour ended, the Montgomery bus boycott became a national and international media story, much like _Porgy and Bess_ but with vastly more significant consequences.107 Media coverage of Montgomery was only the beginning. In September 1957, the Eisenhower administration’s attempts to convince the world that American race relations showed only steady improvement blew apart on the steps of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Two years later, MGM Studios released the film version of _Porgy and Bess_ into a very different racial terrain than that which greeted _Porgy and Bess_ in 1952 when it embarked on its Cold War odyssey.
This page intentionally left blank
INTERLUDE
Charleston, 1940–1969

By 1960 the story of Porgy, Charleston’s goat-cart beggar, had become internationally famous. The 1952–56 tour spread the tale around the country and the world, and in 1959 Metro Goldwyn Mayer released a highly publicized film version of Porgy and Bess. Civic leaders in Charleston, who had long cultivated the association between the city and the various versions of the Porgy story, saw an opportunity to encourage both civic pride and tourist dollars with a local production of Porgy, the play coauthored by DuBose and Dorothy Heyward. Robert N. S. Whitelaw, head of the Carolina Art Association, began planning for a local production in 1952. He was not unmindful of the potential obstacles that racial politics might put in his way; in 1940 a planned production was stopped in its tracks “when protests from the white citizenry caused the cancellation of the project.” Now, he optimistically believed that “people who were against it formerly now say this could be a way of bettering race relations.”¹ His optimism would prove to be misplaced.

The Porgy production and the actions of those involved with it sat at the intersection of much larger forces, a collision between national and local ideas about race relations and between real African Americans and romanticized white notions about their fictionalized counterparts. Dorothy Heyward wanted to keep her husband’s reputation alive as the cultural and political landscape changed around her. Thomas Waring (editor of the Charleston News and Courier), Whitelaw, and their peers wanted to preserve a particularly local version of white privilege, an exercise of power that eschewed violence but still maintained an ironclad racial hierarchy. And many African Americans in Charleston, from Septima Clark and Arthur Clement to Rosa
This 1948 photo was taken at the home of Robert and Mamie Garvin Fields during a meeting of the South Carolina Federation of Women and Girls Clubs. Fields is standing; Septima Poinsette Clark is at the far right. Fields and Clark were leaders among a generation of black Charlestonians who used education, self-help organizations, and civil rights activism to erode segregation in the city and state. (Scrapbook of Septima P. Clark; photo courtesy of the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston, Charleston, S.C.)
Johnson and Mary Moultrie, wanted to challenge the generations-old bargain whereby black leaders exchanged political and social acquiescence for small tokens of white benevolence. The fraying of that bargain became apparent as well in a charged encounter between Heyward and Waring and the family of Samuel Smalls, the real-life figure upon whom DuBose Heyward’s famous fictional character was based. In public and private, Charleston was changing.

The efforts to produce *Porgy* in Charleston epitomized the waning of a certain kind of white paternalist power. The national visibility of the *Porgy* story heightened the contrast between what white Charleston was attempting to preserve and the nation’s dawning recognition that white supremacy in the South was unacceptably brutal in its methods and results. In Charleston, white southern racial power had historically come cloaked in a veneer of paternalism and alleged good feeling, but that veneer was cracking under pressure from African American activists determined to change the city’s long-standing racial order. The attempt to produce *Porgy* in Charleston put the paternalism that had so long served the city’s white elite (and many in the black community as well) in conflict with a new, more assertive brand of local black activism around civil rights.

DuBose Heyward died of a heart attack on 16 June 1940, leaving his widow Dorothy to manage his literary estate. Vigilant in defending her late husband’s reputation, she waged a tireless campaign to ensure his proper billing for productions of the opera. She frequently enlisted her friend Waring in her efforts, which she dubbed her “Don’t forget Heyward crusade.” Waring was an enthusiastic collaborator—keeping *Porgy and Bess* connected to Heyward kept the opera connected to Charleston—and used his standing as a fellow journalist to write to New York editors and writers about how to credit Heyward appropriately. In a letter published in *Newsweek*, Waring chastised the magazine’s reviewer, who thought Goldwyn had insufficiently credited George Gershwin in his film, by insisting: “The forgotten man in the whole thing is the actual creator of *Porgy*—DuBose Heyward, who wrote the original novel that started it all.” Although Dorothy recognized that the flood of glowing reviews for Robert Breen’s production was good for the opera’s reputation, and good for ticket sales, it rankled her that reviewers seldom credited Heyward with having written the libretto. Of the critical hosannas that greeted the production when it kicked off in the summer of 1952, she wrote: “My pleasure in the grand reviews was marred by the almost total absence of any reference to DuBose. . . . In his day it had not become ‘Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*.’ DuBose was then still famous.
as the author of *Porgy*. There simply never was any question about the bill-
ing.” Dorothy wrote numerous letters to reviewers directly, correcting them when they failed to credit DuBose Heyward as author of the original story or with his work on the lyrics; she was particularly bothered by the miscon-
ception that Ira Gershwin wrote all of the lyrics to *Porgy and Bess*. Suspicious that Ira had only polished her husband’s lyrics in order to gain songwriting credit, she nonetheless worried that protesting too loudly would offend the surviving Gershwin brother. And of course there was the money at stake. She asked Waring, “If it should happen to fit in with anything you write in the future, you could slip in an allusion to ‘DuBose Heyward’s ‘Summertime’” and declared: “It was my lucky day when Ira failed to change a word of that lyric. During recent years I have almost lived on that song; it has far outsold the others. I believe it has outsold all the others lumped together.”

While Dorothy’s attempts to mandate proper credit for DuBose began with Cheryl Crawford’s 1942 revival, her campaign to keep the Heyward name closely associated with *Porgy and Bess* kicked into high gear during the 1950s. She described 1957 as “the big ‘Porgy and Bess’ year:—the Fourth International Tour, the Goldwyn movie; two summer stock companies touring the States.” Recognizing the opportune moment to shore up both her husband’s literary reputation and her own, she was busily peddling short stories to magazine and book publishers, arguing that “six months from now the ‘Porgy and Bess’ publicity will be high, and my ‘Porgy and Bess’ stories will be more valuable than when the big days are over.” She pitched her stories—nonfiction reminiscences of the local color that inspired her hus-
band’s literary output and reputation with titles like “Porgy’s Goat,” “Goat Cart Beggar,” “DuBose and the Negro,” “Another Jolson Story,” and “Any-
body Here Know Porgy?”—to the major mass-circulation magazines of the day, including the *New Yorker*, *Holiday*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, the *Atlantic*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. Editors at these publications, and at the book publisher Doubleday, all turned Heyward down. The *New Yorker*’s Katharine White rejected “Anybody Here Know Porgy?” because it was “rather too much a kind of patchwork, although we feel these same facts might have worked if they had happened to you yourself.” While trying to parlay her husband’s experiences into publication did not work, Dorothy was also un-
willing to take on assignments that were from her own point of view. When the *Ladies’ Home Journal* approached her to write an article titled “I Married Porgy and Bess,” she turned it down, sniffing to her literary agent: “I am quite sure that I am not a Ladies’ Home Journal writer. You might be thinking of other ports. Harpers? Atlantic? You see I consider myself literary.”
Dorothy was not merely concerned with the Gershwins getting too much credit or her own publishing prospects. Privately, she also expressed frustration at African American criticism of the show and fretted that changing attitudes about southern race relations were casting her late husband’s work in an unflattering light. “When I worked on the play ‘Porgy’ with my husband more than twenty-five years ago,” she confessed to White, “we were quite free from self-consciousness in writing about the Negroes he knew so well. Nowadays I feel as though I were on a tightrope; I want to give a true picture but do not want to offend anyone.”

She thanked Waring for a “grand” article on *Porgy and Bess* in the *News and Courier* and inquired about an article he referenced by a “coloured teacher.” The “coloured teacher” was R. Hayes Strider, a professor of music at Morgan State College whom Waring described as “a spokesman for their race”; Strider had written a stirring defense of *Porgy and Bess*, from which Waring quoted and paraphrased in his own article. Heyward gloated that Strider’s defense of the show was “a point of view with which Brooks Atkinson obviously thoroughly agrees; he has now had two articles in The Times jumping on the people who make a race issue out of P + B.” She concluded by telling Waring: “I very greatly hope that you will find some publication with very wide circulation to use the racial defense story.”

Both Waring and Dorothy Heyward understood that maintaining DuBose Heyward’s reputation required them to defend, in a rapidly changing era, the world of race relations in which he had created the Porgy story. They relied chiefly on the old story about his unusual access to and insight concerning African Americans, but that could not entirely solve their dilemma. The basis of Heyward’s literary reputation was not so much the quality of his writing as the fact that he wrote sympathetically and authentically about African Americans in the 1920s. But by the 1950s, the kind of racial paternalism for which Heyward was celebrated was long out of date, replaced by growing mainstream recognition that black artists could and should be allowed to tell their own varied, authentic stories. Robert Breen, ever savvy to promotional opportunities around *Porgy and Bess*, saw a way to bridge this gap. He had his business manager propose to Dorothy a “solution to the problem of seeing that Mr. Heyward is not forgotten” in the form of a “DuBose Heyward Memorial Foundation” that would “make money grants to persons of any race, who write dramatic or musical works about Negroes. I think it wise to make this limitation, since Mr. Heyward is known chiefly for his writings about the Southern Negro.”

It was left to Waring to make the “racial defense,” as Dorothy termed it,
to the public. In doing so, he was defending not only the literary reputation of an old friend but also the deeply held worldview of most of Charleston’s white elite. He trumpeted the show’s local ties and praised Heyward’s literary gifts in articles and editorials for the News and Courier and for major New York City papers, but the pieces he wrote for local readers were far more pointed in their criticism of those who would challenge the South’s racial mores. Waring’s March 1953 New York Times piece titled “Goat Sammy’ from Cabbage Row” was a bit of local-color journalism and a glowing account of DuBose Heyward that subtly reinforced the merit of Charleston’s white racial paternalism. The piece provided a detailed account of Heyward’s life and writing career, the local news item that inspired the novel Porgy, and the story of how he and his wife transformed the novel into a successful play and then opera. For Waring, Heyward was unique among white authors in his depiction of black characters because “instead of clowns, or beasts, he pictured them as people—with the same elemental emotions as the rest of the human race.” Romanticizing Charleston’s segregation, Waring wrote of the city’s black enclaves: “It was a territory known by few white men other than the police and the life insurance collectors.” Heyward was one of the latter, “An eavesdropper in an alien world.” Waring concluded of the Porgy story: “This is no message of social significance. It is a story about people. They happen to be colored people, living quite separately in the midst of white people in Charleston, S.C. Their counterparts are there today.”

In contrast, the article that Dorothy found so “grand” appeared a month later in the News and Courier. It was headlined “‘Porgy and Bess’ May Run Indefinitely,” and its byline was “a Staff Correspondent,” who was obviously Waring himself. He defended Porgy and Bess against “adverse criticism in the Negro and Communist press” by reiterating Heyward’s reputation for sympathetic insight into African American life while also making more-contemporary points about the dignity and representativeness of the show’s performers. Heyward was able to write “a novel about people behind the color curtain which few white men had ever penetrated,” and the resulting book “was one of the first attempts in American literature to treat the Negro seriously as a person, instead of as a clown or a sub-human species. It is this simple fact that makes his story great for reading or the stage. It is also a fact which race-conscious critics miss and enemy propagandists misrepresent.” For hometown readers, he described the story as having been conceived by Heyward from a “flash of real life” in “a police court item published in the News and Courier,” and he detailed the neighborhoods, schools, and other local ties of cast members Joseph Attles and Urylee Leonardos (who had
lived in the city to age ten). Quotes from the show’s performers also bolstered his vision of the show. Of Leonardos, he noted that “she knows from personal experience that Catfish Row is a true picture of living conditions among a large segment of colored people, not only in Charleston but elsewhere in America,” and he quoted Attles as having remarked: “People everywhere understand the story of Porgy. It’s common to all races and everybody can understand it.” Waring’s piece exemplified the growing chasm between white southern attitudes toward race relations and the changes overtaking the country by the late 1950s. In defending Porgy and Bess against “race conscious critics” and “enemy propagandists,” he described the show in terms nearly identical to those that African American critics used to decry its obsolescence. To Waring, Porgy and Bess “faithfully recorded” African Americans’ “uncommon ability to bounce back after tragedy[,] . . . [the] resilience that has helped them to survive,” and their “simple faith, love for children and a natural talent for music.”

Thanks to Waring and other white civic leaders, Charlestonians were keenly aware of Porgy and Bess’s success during the 1950s, and city leaders were eager to continue the links in the public mind between the show and the city. Local newspaper coverage of the national and international tours consisted mainly of human-interest stories involving local people. Trips by Dorothy Heyward and other notable Charlestonians to see the show in Europe and South America garnered coverage, as did general updates on the show’s warm reception in various cities. One feature article even described the Spanish-language program’s summary of the plot, which “caught the spirit of Dubose Heyward’s libretto in a surprisingly accurate fashion.” The Charleston Post ran profiles of two local faces in the cast: Attles (who played Sportin’ Life) and his seven-year-old half brother, Hawley Steward.

A more substantial effort to capitalize on the notoriety of native son DuBose Heyward began in 1952, when the Carolina Art Association began seeking funds to produce the play Porgy in Charleston. Robert N. S. Whitelaw, the association’s head and a friend of the Heywards, had been a driving force in Charleston cultural organizations for decades. Just as civic leaders had linked historic preservation and other cultural development in Charleston to the promotion of tourism since the 1920s, Whitelaw and others envisioned Porgy as no mere community theater production but an opportunity to draw tourists on an annual basis. White opposition had stymied a previous attempt by Whitelaw and the still-living DuBose Heyward to mount a production more than a decade earlier, but he possessed renewed optimism that this time, a Porgy production would improve rather than damage the
city’s race relations.” Whitelaw’s ambitions, and efforts to stage and promote Porgy reflected the racial paternalism that had for so long characterized white supremacy in the city. The way in which the production fell apart at the eleventh hour reflected the new day that was coming, finally, to race relations in Charleston and the American South.

Whitelaw began attempting to raise money for the production in the spring of 1952. It would be produced by the Dock Street Theatre, Charleston’s local amateur theater, which was under the auspices of the Carolina Art Association. Dock Street was in financial crisis, and Whitelaw saw a production of Porgy as a means to save it. Some of Dock Street’s leaders saw the show as not just a financial lifeline but as an event that “would put Dock Street Theatre, Inc., on the map, in a very important manner—would, in fact, be front page news.” And a truly major event was what everyone involved seemed to have in mind. Modeled on successful outdoor pageants staged annually in Virginia and North Carolina, Porgy’s planners argued that “Porgy, staged annually, out-of-doors, with an all-Negro Charleston cast, will also draw hordes—every year. It will be of inestimable value to Charleston.”

A production of this magnitude—what one fund-raising pitch described as “an outdoor spectacle”—required a substantial budget (estimated at $25,000), and Whitelaw and others approached both local and national sources in their attempts to raise the necessary funds. While raising money proved difficult—it would take more than a year before Dock Street had enough in hand to proceed—Whitelaw was able to swiftly line up hometown support from the Chamber of Commerce, local hotel owners, the boards of the Carolina Art Association and Dock Street Theatre, and “several leading negro citizens.” But the show’s organizers had national ambitions. Whitelaw told one prospective donor that Life magazine had expressed interest and “national publicity for this production is assured.” Indeed, the New York Times covered Dock Street’s announcement of the production, quoting board chair Rowena Tobias’s Charleston-centric pitch that “Porgy . . . is first of all a Charleston creation and as much part of the place as the smell of pluff-mud and sweet myrtle. To me it always seemed that this play was something Charleston must simply do.”

Whitelaw’s decision to approach “several leading negro citizens” at the same time as he secured endorsements for his project from the city’s white establishment suggests that, from the very beginning, the white racial paternalism that had long characterized Charleston society infused the planning for the production. Whitelaw told the public and potential funders that the Art Association would “plow back the profits . . . into cultural enterprises
benefiting both white and Negro races. One-half of profits would go to Dock Street Theatre, Inc., for development of the theater and its educational program. One-half would go to a sponsoring committee of Charleston Negroes, for use in cultural activities.”23 The “Negro committee” was led by J. W. Brawley, acting secretary of the Cannon Street YMCA, and also included John F. Potts, principal of the Avery Normal Institute; W. J. Nichols, principal of Burke High School; Robert F. Morrison; and William A. Jacobs. The News and Courier reported of the committee: “They have approved the plan enthusiastically and are cooperating actively. All of us feel certain that a fine cast can be obtained locally.”24 Rehearsals took place in the Zion Presbyterian Church Sunday school, which the church provided free of charge.25 In another separate—but-equal gesture, the regular Dock Street committees that handled publicity and other arrangements for the theater’s productions were supplemented by parallel committees “in the colored community.”26

As benign as such outreach appeared, the more ominous politics of segregation also lurked from the project’s very beginning. Seeking the sponsorship of ANTA, Dorothy Heyward and John Dudley of the Carolina Art Association made a presentation to ANTA’s board of directors in New York City. The meeting reflected the growing tension between Charleston’s racial mores and changing national sensibilities about racial equality. Dudley, for one, “was somewhat afraid that the segregation issue would cause some embarrassment particularly in view of the fact that ANTA had taken such a strong stand about the National Theatre in Washington, and had supported Equity in its refusal to allow any of its members to play the National Theatre so long as the segregation policy prevailed.” And the ANTA board expressed “a good deal of interest in the matter” of segregation. When asked, Dudley and Heyward addressed the issue by affirming that “Negroes would be allowed to attend the productions,” but they volunteered no additional information since they “were not asked and did not state that they would be seated separately.” Dudley and Heyward also made sure to emphasize that “the production would give Negro actors a place to act for the first time in Charleston, they previously having been limited to acting in their own churches.”27

Locally, the problem of segregation haunted production plans as well. Charleston’s black community was not monolithic, and not everyone supported the planned production of Porgy. Local businessman Arthur J. Clement—president of the Charleston chapter of the NAACP as well as of the Stagecrafters, the city’s black amateur theatre group—wrote to Whitelaw expressing the dissatisfaction among some African Americans about the Porgy production and raising questions about seating policies. Whitelaw re-
sponded with the condescension typical of Charleston’s white elite, reiterating the “substantial citizens” in the black community whose support he had secured (including “my good friend, Mr. J. W. Brawley, who has known me all my life and for whom I have the greatest respect”) and bristling: “I am rather surprised at the implication in your letter which seems to indicate that I am not informed as to practices in the South. I was born here, have worked here almost all my life, and hope to continue to.”

In February 1954, with enough money finally in hand to schedule a production, the Dock Street Theatre board decided to proceed, even though “the problem of securing an auditorium which would allow a negro cast to play to a white audience, et al. to a negro audience, had not been solved.” They were turned down by the Charleston County school district when “the school attorney advised the board not to accept a production with negroes at this time,” and their backup plan to use the College of Charleston’s gym proved technically unfeasible. They finally settled on County Hall. At rehearsals, cast members, like their professional counterparts, made their own attempts to shape the material and insisted on deleting the word “nigger” from the script.

On 21 February, the Dock Street Theatre announced that it would be producing *Porgy* “with a predominantly Negro cast” in late April. Clement spoke up again, writing to Dock Street to express his hope that they would handle the production “with sincerity and sensitivity” and to propose that the seating arrangements conform to state law by “splitting the auditorium exactly in half from gallery to orchestra.” On 14 March, with rehearsals well under way, Tobias told the *New York Times* that “although *Porgy* belongs to the nation, it is first of all a Charleston creation. . . . At last we are bringing *Porgy* home.” Three days later, Tobias found herself writing to Dorothy Heyward, offering profuse apologies for the fact that Dock Street had canceled the *Porgy* production due to “the refusal of cooperation on the part of leaders of the Charleston Negro community, who had promised to assist in the presentation.”

Charleston’s African American community appeared to be divided. On one side was the *Porgy* cast and the community leaders who had endorsed Whitelaw’s project from the beginning. They were willing to continue the longtime Charleston tradition of black elites cooperating with their more
powerful white counterparts to inch forward toward racial justice. In a statement published in the *News and Courier*, fourteen cast members declared “we eagerly accepted the opportunity of participating in [Porgy], both from the point of artistic expression as well as from the means of a wonderful potential for good human relations” and noted that in rehearsals, “the cast, integrated . . . worked beautifully together.” The cancellation distressed them: “We deplore segregation and discrimination, yet we feel that to use the production of ‘Porgy’ as a means of combating it is unfair and unsportsmanlike, with a little sense of moral responsibility for the inconvenience caused the producers and the cast, none of whom was approached or consulted during any of the controversy by the persons opposing the production.” Clement, along with Mrs. R. L. Fields, Mrs. D. J. Moses, Miss Anna Kelly, R. P. Cornwell, Mrs. A. J. Clement Jr., Mrs. E. M. Parker, and Mr. Eugene Hunt, ultimately rejected the traditional Charleston approach to race relations and arrived at a more militant stance, demanding integrated seating arrangements and insisting that “Negroes would not attend any other kind of presentation and that the Negro cast would refuse to play to a house segregated in any fashion.”

While the cast and the Dock Street Theatre felt betrayed by Clement’s initial cooperation and subsequent reversal, he candidly admitted that his attempt at compromise had met with local and national pressure. “By my first suggestion of dividing County Hall exactly in half, I was trying to find a situation agreeable to all,” he explained, but that compromise prompted many to admonish him: “‘You make a mistake in splitting County Hall. We are not going to stand for it.’” Further, an item in the national black magazine *Jet* noting the planned segregated seating for *Porgy* performances drew the attention of national NAACP officials, whose attorneys, Clement said, advised him that South Carolina’s “statute concerning segregation is very vague” and that he “was in error in requesting a segregated audience.”

Waring and Dorothy Heyward refused to see the protest as a sign of things to come, preferring to view it as an aberration in Charleston politics that had been spurred by outside forces. For Waring, the *Porgy* production was a benefit to Charleston only if it could proceed on white-paternalist terms. As he wrote in a *News and Courier* editorial, “In demanding that the audience be racially mingled, in disregard of South Carolina laws and customs, these Negroes in our opinion have not helped to promote good race relations. If upsetting these customs is the only terms on which they will participate, it is better that the project be abandoned.” By not honoring Charleston’s “laws and customs,” the protestors had made local whites “less disposed, we fear, to make other attempts at public cooperation. Thus another wedge has been
driven between the races.” Waring also used the cancellation as an opportunity to editorialize against the NAACP, observing that the cast members’ disappointment at the show’s cancellation was evidence of his doubts that “the militant spokesmen for the race, notably the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, truly reflect the views of the rank and file,” including on “many issues that arise, notably the separation of races in public schools.” Dorothy Heyward similarly attributed the uproar to non-local elements, telling a correspondent a few years later that “this production was not closed by the protests from the Charleston Negroes. . . . Orders were sent down by the N.A.A.C.P. that the seating must be integrated.”

By insisting that outside forces were behind the Porgy protests, Waring and Heyward deployed a line of reasoning long used by opponents of racial equality throughout the South. It was a logic that willfully ignored the many “protests from the Charleston Negroes” that had been on the rise for nearly a decade. During the 1940s and 1950s, civil rights activism began to percolate in Charleston in new ways. In October 1945, black workers, mostly women, initiated a series of strikes against Charleston’s American Tobacco Company that lasted until March 1946. While the workers ultimately gained an eight-cents-per-hour raise rather than the twenty-five cents they sought, the renamed and newly vigorous Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union worked actively to organize Charleston’s black workers. Black women held leadership positions on the negotiating committee and were highly visible on the picket line, ending each day’s picketing by singing “We Shall Overcome,” a protest song adapted from the spiritual “I Will Overcome Someday.” The strike fostered a degree of interracial union cooperation among female workers who had previously been part of segregated locals, although Charleston’s white American Federation of Labor locals and the all-white machinists union at American Tobacco refused to support the strike.

Most of the increase in black activism focused on Charleston’s public schools, which were starkly underfunded compared to the city’s white schools. By 1940, African Americans made up 45 percent of Charleston’s population; two out of three black adults in the city worked as domestic servants or laborers. A mere 14 percent of the city’s black workforce was employed in professional, managerial, clerical, or skilled blue-collar jobs, as compared to 70 percent of the white workforce. The city had three public high schools for white students and only one for black students, the Burke Industrial School. Burke’s enrollment tripled between 1935 and 1945,
as Depression-era unemployment among black youth drove many more to attend school, an infusion of federal money into Charleston during World War II brought African Americans from the nearby Low Country into the city in search of new wage-earning jobs, and higher wages for black adults resulted in more black children being able to enroll in school. Part of the increased enrollment also came from island students, where public education ended at the seventh grade and teachers like Mamie Garvin Fields and Septima Clark urged their best students to move to Charleston to attend Burke. Even so, in 1936 per-pupil spending in Charleston was three times higher at white high schools than at Burke, and student-teacher ratios were 30 percent higher at Burke. When voters approved a $1 million bond for school improvement in 1947, 70 percent of it was spent on white schools, even as their enrollment was dropping as white families began a postwar exodus to the suburbs.

Charleston’s black high schools were a product of two competing philosophies about African American education and racial uplift that dated back decades. Burke was founded in 1910 with support from the Peabody Education Fund and John F. Slater Fund for the Education of Freedmen, foundations established by northern philanthropists in the years after the Civil War to support the education of emancipated slaves. Like Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute, Burke emphasized industrial and vocational training for its black students. During the 1920s, teachers and parents at the school pressured the Charleston school system to allow Latin, French, and other academic classes to be offered at the school, but the school superintendent refused, believing it was more appropriate to educate African Americans for the jobs available to them. Undeterred, parents and community members continued to push for curriculum changes at Burke, whose enrollment swelled during the 1930s, and by the early 1940s, the school was offering social science and language courses. By contrast, in 1865 the American Missionary Association (AMA) founded the school that soon became the Avery Normal Institute. Northern volunteers and members of Charleston’s antebellum free-black community staffed Avery, and because the Charleston public schools refused to allow academic subjects to be taught at Burke, Avery was the city’s only academic high school for African Americans. By the 1940s, most teachers and principals in Charleston’s black public schools were Avery graduates, as were the majority of the city’s black doctors and businessmen. The AMA decreased its support for Avery through the 1920s and 1930s, forcing the school into ever greater reliance on tuition payments.
and fund-raising, which further widened the intraracial class divisions that the school had always reinforced. Avery became a public high school in 1947, and the city of Charleston closed it in 1954.46

National NAACP leaders saw the Charleston school system as ripe for a legal challenge, but the city’s black leaders were hesitant to confront local white leaders in court. They preferred the less-confrontational methods of inching toward equality that they had employed for decades, characterized by frustrated NAACP official Robert Bagnell as “gain favor with the mighty and beg favors of them.” Many were also more concerned with protecting Avery’s status than with expanding public educational opportunities for all black students.47 The NAACP’s Thurgood Marshall was similarly unimpressed with the Charleston branch; after meeting with “the leading and ‘leading-est’ Negroes in Charleston,” he concluded that “everyone is too busy to take on leadership of the branch. Negroes as a whole are militant, [but] they lack leadership.”48 Despite Marshall’s qualms, Charleston did become the site of a legal challenge to the city’s segregated school system. In 1943 the state NAACP chapter led a campaign to equalize the yawning gap between black and white teacher salaries. Black teachers were paid $25 per month, while white teachers with comparable qualifications earned $85 per month. To add insult to injury, the class sizes facing black teachers usually were far larger than those of their white counterparts. Septima Clark recalled a particularly glaring instance of two black teachers assigned to a school with 132 students while a nearby white teacher taught three pupils.49 Charleston teacher Viola Louise Duvall, represented by Marshall and his NAACP colleague Harold Boulware, filed a class-action suit on behalf of her fellow teachers; its success forced the Charleston school board to accept a consent decree requiring that equal salaries for teachers and principals be phased in by 1946.50

The state NAACP also began to undertake voter-registration campaigns and challenges to the state’s all-white primaries during the 1940s, as did its close ally, the Progressive Democratic Party, which was formed in 1944. In 1946 the NAACP brought two civil rights cases in federal district court, one by a black plaintiff seeking admission to the University of South Carolina law school and the other a class-action suit on behalf of black voters who were denied the right to vote in a primary election. Judge J. Waties Waring (cousin of News and Courier editor Thomas Waring) ruled in favor of the plaintiffs in Elmore v. Rice (the voting-rights case), writing in his opinion that “it is time for South Carolina to rejoin the Union.”51 These campaigns and cases marked a turning point in black activism in Charleston and across the state, as activists turned away from previous efforts that focused on black uplift
and increasing black access to resources at the local level and instead made a direct challenge to segregation.\textsuperscript{52}

The NAACP’s assault on segregated public schools in South Carolina continued in 1951, when it filed suit on behalf of all African American students in the state in \textit{Briggs v. Elliot}. Marshall, arguing in federal court in Charleston, maintained that the state’s racially separate educational facilities were unequal, and—in a dress rehearsal of the argument used in the landmark \textit{Brown v. Board of Education} case three years later—that separate schools were inherently damaging to African American students. The state of South Carolina conceded that black schools were inadequately resourced and asked the court for time to remedy the inequity. While the majority on the panel of federal judges ruled against the NAACP, Judge Waring dissented from his colleagues and declared: “The system of segregation in education adopted and practiced in the state of South Carolina must go and must go now.” The case galvanized many African Americans in Charleston, who, like NAACP activist J. Arthur Brown and the 250 other black spectators packed into the courthouse, were thrilled to see “the ‘old Charleston types’ exposed.”\textsuperscript{53} White Charlestonians, outraged at what they saw as interference by the NAACP, were “bitterly resentful” of the federal mandate to equalize school spending, and the city initially used half of the state funds intended for school equalization on construction of white schools. Local black leaders pushed back. Charleston NAACP branch president A. J. Clement presented a petition to the school board and threatened litigation, noting: “You established the separate but equal theory, it has protected you for these many years, and now you are faced with the problem of paying for it.” The school board backed down, allocating more money to the black schools but also closing Avery High School, a move seen by the city’s black community as retaliation for their newfound militancy.\textsuperscript{54} The battle over desegregating Charleston’s schools continued, however, in the wake of the \textit{Brown} decision (announced five days after the city closed Avery), as white Charlestonians, like whites across the South, devised various forms of resistance to the federal court order. When the city attempted to pass another school bond in 1957 to equalize spending on racially separate schools, the local NAACP led a successful campaign to defeat the measure, as many (though not all) in Charleston’s African American community were no longer willing to accept white largesse in exchange for capitulating to continued segregation.\textsuperscript{55}

Dorothy Heyward and Thomas Waring experienced an example of this kind of black challenge to white control on a much smaller and more intimate scale when they were forced to confront the real people behind \textit{Porgy}’s
local authenticity. In early 1951, the News and Courier published a series of articles on the authentic Charleston origins of the Porgy story. Written by the Heywards’ friend John Bennett and News and Courier staff writer Bryan Collier, the articles attempted to fill in the details of the life of Samuel Smalls, the real-life figure on whom Heyward famously based his fictional Porgy. Largely relying on information and speculation from white observers and regularly referring to their subject as “Porgy” rather than by his actual name, the articles embodied the kind of white paternalism and authenticity-by-proximity that had contributed to Heyward’s literary reputation and structured race relations in Charleston for generations. “Remember ‘Porgy'? He Was Very Much Alive” announced the headline of the first article, which described the 89–91 Church Street property known as “Cabbage Row” that Heyward had used as a model for the fictional Catfish Row. The article also included reminiscences by Samuel Gaillard Stoney (a Heyward family friend) about the “real” Porgy, who was “neither very virtuous nor very villainous; he had this little goat wagon and he sat around and begged. DuBose Heyward certainly knew him.” Stoney also verified that “the real Porgy was once jailed for shooting a woman in the ribs,” but he also speculated: “I think he must have been turned loose eventually, mainly because nobody knew quite what to do with him. He was a nuisance in the jail.” A white resident of James Island offered the incorrect information that “Porgy’s” real name was Sam Richardson, remembering: “He was supposed to have a good deal of money, and he was a strong fellow except for his legs. He is supposed to have had a wife, and by common repute was otherwise popular with the feminine sex.” Another article was based on the memories of Mrs. Edward King, a Low Country plantation owner who had once employed Smalls as a field hand. Like the others, the piece used white memories to add colorful details to the “real” story of a fictional character. Bennett extolled his abilities as a worker despite his disability, recounting how “the indomitable Porgy, moving with astonishing rapidity down a row of bean-poles, despite his lack of legs, gathered the ripening bean-pods as fast as other bean-pickers on two legs, reached the end of his row as soon as any of the other pickers, and at the end of the day had picked about as many baskets of beans as the lead picker in the field.”

Collier succeeded in tracking down Elvira Gibbs, the mother of Samuel Smalls. This interview, too, came about through white intercession, this time in the form of Gibbs’s employer, Miss Virginia M. Meyers. Collier described the interview arrangements for readers, reaffirming Charleston’s prevailing race relations when he noted: “I don’t think Elvira would have said a word if
Miss Virginia had not visited her beforehand and told her it would be quite all right. Elvira has lived on the Myers place for a long, long time. The Myers are her white folks.” Gibbs told Collier that she had borne twenty-seven children; Sam Smalls was born with what Elvira’s husband, John Gibbs, described as “little images of feet” and limited use of his right hand and arm, although both told stories of how well he could get around. In Collier’s description, Gibbs is the very picture of a docile African American woman—“a stout, aged negro in a clean black dress and wearing a work apron; her grey hair covered by a section of brown cotton stocking. Her strong hands, work worn but wearing some silver rings, were folded on her lap; her dark eyes were placid.”

Eight years later, the *News and Courier* ran a second article about Elvira Gibbs. The times had changed, and so had the tone of the article. Whereas in 1951 the Porgy story was one of fond local interest, by 1959 *Porgy and Bess* was at the peak of its visibility after the four-year national and international tour and the premiere of the MGM film. In the intervening years, Charleston witnessed increasing black activism over segregation in its public schools and in the attempt to stage a production of *Porgy* itself. This time, the *News and Courier* reporter describes not the intervention of a white employer to authorize Elvira Gibbs’s account but his own tentative approach to Mrs. Gibbs, who is sitting on her porch. When he asks to see “Porgy’s mother,” he is met—by design or in genuine incomprehension at the fictional name—with a blank look. Recognition dawns when he describes “the man all the stories have been written about. The one with the goat and cart.” Mrs. Gibbs acknowledges that she is that man’s mother and corrects the reporter: “But his name’s Sam—Sam Smalls.” She recalls that Sammy was never able to work and confirms that he moved back to James Island as a young man and eventually died of his spinal condition. In contrast to the earlier description of Gibbs, this article closes with a section subtitled “Poverty” that paints a picture of the “two room shack” where she lives. She “spends most of each day on her porch. The scene hardly changes. The area is cluttered and rank, with the odor of waste. A mongrel dog, recently the mother of pups, lolls lazily in the yard.” Elvira Gibbs now has a voice of her own in the pages of the *News and Courier*, although it is rendered in dialect. When the reporter asks for her assessment of how whites treat African Americans (a question no one apparently thought to ask her in previous interviews), she concedes: “Deh use-it’ beat ’em a lot. I seen ’em whip. But dat don’ happen no mo’.” The limits of white paternalism are made clear by the information that she survives by relying on “De Lawd” and a small old-age pension. “Has she benefitted at all
from the money her son’s life has made for others?” asks the reporter. “No suh,” replies the mother of Samuel Smalls. “Ah don’ get nothing. But ah sho do need it. Looks like ah could get jus’ a li’l bit. Jus’ a li’l bit.”

“Jus’ a li’l bit.” That closing plea, laden with reproach, set off a wave of anxiety in Dorothy Heyward. As her private correspondence reveals, Dorothy had little concern for Gibbs and her family but worried about her reputation among her white Charlestonian peers. So she enlisted Thomas Waring to help her channel some money to Elvira Gibbs. What ensued was vintage white-Charleston paternalism, from the proposed mechanics of the donation to the private expressions of racist disdain. Dorothy intended to keep her donation private, but involving Waring ensured that the gesture would become known to white Charleston elites. And the act of noblesse oblige came soaked in racist assumptions, some of which dated back to the 1951 interview with Elvira Gibbs. When Dorothy Heyward approached attorney Thomas Stoney, asking him to represent her in the event that the Gibbs family brought a legal claim against her, she explained that she first learned of the existence of Smalls’s mother “several years ago.” At that time, friends advised her not to offer the woman any financial assistance, since, according to Thomas Waring, “she was not in need and was well cared for,” and if Heyward got involved, she might find herself “in deeper than . . . intended with a rather untrustworthy type of Negroes.” She assumed that the family members were gold diggers, wondering why they were nowhere to be found during Smalls’s prosecution for murder and confiding to a friend: “It would be fun if the old gal could be proven a fake. She certainly was in hiding when everyone was looking for someone who would admit they were a relative or friend of Sammy Small’s [sic].” Waring was more explicitly racist in his judgment of the family’s motives, telling Dorothy: “I regret that your laudable impulse has run into this unexpected snag. It is not altogether out of character, however.” When Dorothy worried Gibbs’s plea for “a little something” in the article made her look “like a skinflint,” he reassured her: “I don’t believe Charlestonians gave much thought one way or another to the plaintive quotation ascribed to an old colored woman. It is so typical of the race—pitifully begging for a handout—that I believe most Southerners would accept the idea as routine without intimation of any obligation.”

Faced with the return of the issue of the “real” Porgy and his real survivors in 1959, Heyward sent Waring a check for $500 and requested that he disburse it to the family. Waring set up a savings account in the name of Elvira Gibbs, but Gibbs herself could not draw money from it; only Waring, his assistant, and a bank employee had signature authorization for the account.
He explained to Dorothy that he had arranged to have a check drawn quarterly to “Miss M. Virginia Myers, a white neighbor who has known and befriended the old woman for years. Miss Myers will dole out the money at the rate of $10 a week. This should last almost a year.” When Waring arrived at Elvira Gibbs’s home to present this beneficent arrangement, a young woman who identified herself as Elvira’s daughter referred him to the family’s attorney. Heyward characterized the attorney as an opportunistic “shyster” and questioned whether the young woman was actually Gibbs’s daughter. The Gibbs family had their own ideas about how any money would be handled, and they did not hesitate to express them. This came as a shock to Waring and Heyward. As Waring told Heyward, another daughter, Rosa Johnson, wanted “a lump sum given into her custody so that it can be invested and produce income. I have told her that I have no authority to handle the money this way (and would not advise you to authorize it, because Elvira would see precious little of the proceeds).” The paternalism of “our white folks” could cut both ways; Waring learned that Johnson had retained the lawyer because she knew him from having worked in his home as a domestic. Waring had no patience for the idea that the African American recipients of white charity could dictate its terms; he planned “to deliver an ultimatum: Either the family accepts the money now as a dole till it runs out, or I return it to the donor.” Rather than talking to Gibbs or Johnson on equal terms (although he confided privately to Heyward, “As Negroes go, Rosa is less dumb than you might think”), Waring gained his information through white employers. He “kept a pipeline through a lady who employs one of the daughters” and learned “that the daughter fears Elvira will lose her welfare income if she accepts money.” He also made contact with Rosa Johnson’s employer, “who gives me reason to believe that Rosa eventually may come around and consent for money to be given Elvira, though she has not yet so notified me.”

The Porgy story’s celebrated and oft-repeated claims to Charleston authenticity, so critical to the work’s early success and DuBose Heyward’s literary reputation, were suddenly the source of Dorothy Heyward’s problem. She reasoned: “I like to hang on to my shreds of reputation in Charleston and, as most of Charleston seems to think ‘Porgy’ is the biography of Sammy Smalls—and that I am earning thousands out of it—and letting Sammy’s mother starve, I think I’d better come across.” In a more charitable vein, she acknowledged to Waring: “Notwithstanding the fact that the story is pure fiction, there never would have been any story at all if there had not been a Sammy Smalls. So I think that it is right and proper that I should be of some help to his family.” Heyward was at pains to distinguish the real Samuel
Smalls—whom she described as “a stinker who took pot shots at his lady friends and spent much of his time in jail”—from her late husband’s fictional creation Porgy, who, by contrast, was “an honest beggar.” She was exasperated that her late husband’s own explanation—included in his introduction to the first edition of the play Porgy, published in 1928—had not convinced Charlestonians of the difference between Smalls and Porgy. She sent that essay—along with her own “Anybody Hyah Know Porgy?,” an account of her friend Henry Church’s extensive sleuthing into the identity of the “real” Porgy—to Waring for publication in the News and Courier to counter the interview with Elvira Gibbs. “Anybody Hyah Know Porgy?” was one of the stories she had unsuccessfully pitched to the New Yorker and other national magazines; the News and Courier published it in its entirety (illustrated by a “staff artist’s conception of Goat-Sammy”) under her byline as “Real Life Hunt for Goat-Sammy Retold.”

A year after Heyward and Waring experienced the minor shock of discovering that Samuel Smalls’s family members were far less pliant than their fictional Catfish Row counterparts, the entire city’s veneer of racial comity cracked. During the 1950s, Charleston’s African Americans challenged white authority largely in the courthouse; by the 1960s, the city’s young African Americans were taking their activism to the streets. On 1 April 1960, two dozen students from Burke High School walked into a local department store, asked to be served at the lunch counter, and stayed for more than five hours before police finally arrested them. One waitress tried to dislodge them by pouring ammonia on the counter. These young Charlestonians were following in the footsteps of the four college students who, exactly two months earlier, had staged a sit-in at a Greensboro, North Carolina, Woolworth’s lunch counter and set off a national desegregation movement. At the same time, white flight from the Charleston public schools in the wake of the Brown decision had resulted by 1960 in a public school enrollment that was 75 percent African American; the continued designation of an equal number of white and black schools left black schools drastically overcrowded and white schools seriously underenrolled. In response, the citywide PTA organized a boycott in which 95 percent of the city’s black students stayed home from school and their parents began petitioning the school board to place the children in the schools closest to their homes. Rather than integrating existing schools, the school board responded by building new schools for African Americans. The direct-action campaigns went on, including continued sit-ins at local department-store lunch counters and a “don’t buy where you can’t work” campaign against white merchants.
In 1963 the Charleston NAACP organized a civil disobedience campaign that kicked off on 7 June and lasted all summer long. Charleston had never seen anything like it. Thousands of high school students, and a considerable number of adults, picketed, marched, sat-in, swam-in, prayed-in, played-in, boycotted, and occasionally stopped traffic, all for weeks on end, in an attempt to desegregate the city’s public and private spaces. The city responded by getting a restraining order against street demonstrations and closing parks and playgrounds, but the daily direct actions continued. By late July, 15,000 African Americans had been involved in the demonstrations, and 800 had been arrested. Sympathetic black adults offered their houses as the collateral needed to bail protesters out of jail. By August, most of the city’s white business owners, suffering sharp losses, agreed to many of the campaign’s demands, including equal pay and job opportunities for African Americans, access to restrooms and dressing rooms, the use of courtesy titles, and waiting on customers on a first-come, first-served basis. And on 23 August 1963, a federal judge ordered the Charleston school board to admit twelve black plaintiffs to white schools and to develop a systemwide desegregation plan. The entire school system was integrated by the following year.75

Thanks to black activism, Charleston was desegregating its schools, stores, and public spaces. But by the late 1960s, in Charleston as elsewhere in the nation, civil rights activists were more explicitly addressing the poverty that hindered many African Americans from achieving full equality. As Martin Luther King Jr. asked in a speech to striking sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968, “What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn’t earn enough money to buy a hamburger and cup of coffee?”76 In Charleston, the economic picture for African Americans was bleak indeed. African Americans made up nearly half of the city’s population, and a full 40 percent of black families in Charleston lived below the poverty line. The fault line for this new arena of activism in Charleston opened up at the city’s Medical College Hospital, where in 1969 a ninety-nine-day strike changed race relations in the city forever.77 At the Medical College Hospital, employment and patient care were thoroughly segregated by race. There were no black doctors and no black students in the nursing school, most nurses were white, and all nurses’ aides and other service employees were black. Private-care patients at the hospital were mainly white, while public (non-paying) patients were largely black. Wages for black nursing aides and service employees were as low as $1.30 per hour, and racial hierarchy ruled the workplace. As nursing assistant Mary Moultrie recalled, even nursing students newly arrived on one of the hospital’s units could give orders to the black
nursing assistants who worked there full-time and understood the patients’ needs far better.78

In December 1967 five black nursing assistants grew tired of that racial hierarchy and walked off the job when a white charge nurse refused to give them access to patient files they needed to do their jobs. The Medical College fired them. A handful of workers realized that the time had come to begin organizing themselves, and so they quietly reached out to local community organizers and to their colleagues. Moultrie and others spent more than a year organizing black workers. Their strategy was simple: they held weekly meetings at local churches and asked attendees to “bring the best friend that you have, somebody that you can trust” to the next meeting. Over and over, workers expressed similar grievances about wages and respect.79 Their initial goal was not to establish or affiliate with a union. Instead, Moultrie and other leaders sought redress, or even dialogue, directly with the Medical College administration, but administrators and board members refused to even speak with the workers. In the face of increasing meetings and pressure from the black community, the hospital’s one concession was to offer the workers an additional holiday on Robert E. Lee’s birthday.80

The frustrated workers finally turned to Local 1199 of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Workers, a powerful New York City–based union that had recently organized many hospitals in the northeast.81 In February 1969 they asked for recognition of the union; a month later, the hospital administration fired twelve workers who had been involved in organizing the union. On 19 March hundreds of black workers walked off the job to protest the firings.82 What began as a local struggle quickly became a national one, as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (sclc), the nationally prominent civil rights organization founded by Martin Luther King Jr., came to Charleston to support the strike.83 During the last week of April, the sclc organized ten marches in six days, resulting in nearly 500 arrests. The sclc also organized an economic boycott and “shop-ins” of Charleston’s main retail district. On Mother’s Day, Coretta Scott King led a march that drew 12,000 people.84 While the union and the striking workers largely adhered to a nonviolent approach, other Charleston residents, particularly young people, were not convinced of its usefulness. It was difficult to maintain the discipline of nonviolence, and more-militant local activists like William Saunders wanted to put pressure on white leaders through more-spontaneous and violent acts. Saunders organized an armed “community militia”; he said that he wanted to involve “everybody in the community that had been in jail before, that had a record . . . the people that lived
on the street” rather than just established black leadership. As a result of the “firebombings, gunshots, and breaking of windows” that “occasionally punctuated the Charleston events,” on 1 May the city imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew.85

The involvement of Local 1199 and SCLC drew national attention to the strike, and forty-two U.S. representatives and senators called for federal mediation.86 State politicians also privately urged some sort of resolution to the conflict. But the hospital administration remained intransigent. Medical College president Dr. William McCord refused to meet with the strikers or consider rehiring the fired workers and infuriated strike supporters when he disdainfully told reporters he was unwilling to “turn a $25 million dollar complex over to a bunch of people who don’t have a grammar school education.”87 Eventually, private negotiations between strike leaders and Medical College board members broke the logjam. In a face-saving maneuver, the South Carolina General Assembly voted to raise the salaries of all state workers, including the hospital workers, which raised their minimum to the $1.60/hour the strikers had been seeking. The hospital administration agreed to rehire the twelve fired workers, establish a credit union, and institute a grievance system. They did not, however, recognize the union or any form of collective bargaining. The strike had lasted ninety-nine days, and while it failed to gain union recognition, it was nonetheless a turning point for black Charleston.88
This page intentionally left blank
FORGET ANY VERSION
YOU MAY HAVE SEEN BEFORE

Porgy and Bess, 1959–2012

From its 1925 debut, the Porgy story exhibited a remarkable capacity for re-invention, as its producers and audiences adapted their interpretations of the show to suit the gradual shifts taking place in American attitudes about race. But by the late 1950s, there was every reason to believe that the show’s long run in the cultural mainstream would be coming to an end. Changes in how Americans viewed racial difference and its implications had gone from a simmer to a boil, and *Porgy and Bess* seemed unlikely to survive the change in temperature. African American criticism of the show grew ever louder during the early 1950s, when it toured around the world as a symbol of American culture. The 1960s and 1970s proved to be decades of transition: the musical-theatre versions of the 1940s and 1950s gave way to the fully restored opera version that persists to this day, and debates about the show’s racial politics were shaped by events of the civil rights era and a new recognition of the need for inclusive and diverse cultural portrayals of African Americans. In 1976 the Houston Grand Opera (HGO), a little-known regional opera company, put itself on the national cultural map with a production and tour of *Porgy and Bess* that aggressively sought to redeem the work in terms of its reputation for racially stereotyped characters. Rather than withering away, *Porgy and Bess* emerged from the 1970s rehabilitated, respectable, and with a secure place in the repertory of U.S. and international opera companies.

Since its 1935 debut, critics had disagreed over how best to characterize *Porgy and Bess*. Did its recitatives and almost complete lack of spoken dialogue make it an opera, or did its popular, catchy tunes make it a work of musical theatre? It was a debate that seemed to matter mostly to the critics themselves. But the fact that *Porgy and Bess* possessed elements of
both genres proved critical in the work’s rehabilitation during and after the civil rights era. African American jazz and popular musicians recorded their own versions of the show’s recognizably popular songs during the 1950s and 1960s, asserting a black musical ownership of Gershwin’s music and sanctioning this aspect of *Porgy and Bess* in the African American community at a crucial cultural moment. On the other side of the genre debate, the HGO emphasized *Porgy and Bess*’s status as an opera in order to set its 1976 version apart from past productions, as well as from troubling controversies over racial stereotyping. And the popularization of the songs increased *Porgy and Bess*’s appeal for regional American opera companies (where the opera became a staple of the repertoire by the 1990s) because they drew new audiences into their halls.

MGM Studios released its film version of *Porgy and Bess* in 1959 as the civil rights movement was rapidly gaining momentum. The film was neatly characterized by the *Amsterdam News* columnist who observed: “Many Negroes in the North condemned it while many in the South fought to see it—unsegregated.” On one hand, this was nothing new. Since its inception, the show had generated ambivalent and contradictory responses among African Americans. On the other hand, by the late 1950s and 1960s, the tide had finally turned against overtly racist depictions of African Americans in mainstream cultural productions. The show’s producers, and many white critics, clearly understood that the survival of *Porgy and Bess* as an oft-revived American classic was in jeopardy. But despite the increasing criticism leveled at it, black audiences and performers never fully rejected *Porgy and Bess*. During the late 1950s and 1960s, black performers continued to present the show to white and black audiences below the radar of the cultural mainstream. By the 1970s, black criticism of *Porgy and Bess* had for the most part ended. The Metropolitan Opera produced *Porgy and Bess* for the first time in 1985, and the opera went on to become a staple in the repertoire of opera houses in the United States and abroad. *Porgy and Bess* had finally ceased to be an object of intense cultural commentary and controversy.

The 1959 arrival of Hollywood’s version of *Porgy and Bess* was a major event. Featuring the era’s leading African American film stars and promoted with
a missionary zeal by producer Samuel Goldwyn, the film drew praise but also sharp criticism for its stereotypical representation of African American life and character. The black press’s long-standing ambivalence toward *Porgy and Bess*—simultaneously praising and celebrating its performers and expressing unease about the characters they were hired to portray—became even more acute, almost a kind of whiplash. Black newspapers covered every detail of the making of the film, which was unprecedented in its scale and budget. This was not just another black-cast film, which would have been news enough in a decade when meaningful film roles for African Americans remained few and far between; it was a movie spectacular on which Goldwyn was lavishing significant money and publicity. At the same time, however, black opinion writers—still angry about the show’s international visibility as a symbol of U.S. society and well aware that the new film would put the story before a wider audience than ever before—criticized *Porgy and Bess* more frequently and more insistently. The opera carried the weight of its own history to such an extent that in 1958, reader opinions in a black newspaper split almost evenly on the question, “Do movie stories like ‘Porgy and Bess’ reflect unfavorably on the Negro?” The respondents who objected to the as-yet-unmade film thought that it showed “the Negro at his worst” and “living in squalor, concerned only about a good time eating chitterlings, crawfish and shooting craps,” while supporters regarded the impending film as “a matter of history” that “may show the Negro’s great ability to sing and entertain.”

Preproduction controversies over the casting of the Porgy role and selecting a director provided even more opportunities to debate the work’s representation of African Americans and the obligation of black actors in the face of stereotyped roles. By the late 1950s, most black actors and black commentators understood that accepting a role in *Porgy and Bess* invited political scrutiny and might require an immediate public explanation. In prior productions, critics rarely questioned whether or not a performer should have accepted a role, even as they winced at the show’s content. Despite the new political climate, virtually all actors given the opportunity to participate in the film did so—but with some idea that they could influence the result. Responses to the film version ranged, according to *Ebony* magazine, “from the nomination of Goldwyn for a Spingarn medal [the NAACP’s highest honor] to denouncing the picture as an ‘unfunny version of Amos ‘n’ Andy.’”

First *Porgy* and then *Porgy and Bess* generated considerable interest from potential filmmakers, although Samuel Goldwyn’s was the only version ever to reach the screen. In 1927 Cecil B. DeMille purchased rights to *Porgy* but never made a film. The Theatre Guild bought the film rights in 1935 with
an eye toward a film version of *Porgy and Bess* and during the 1940s fielded numerous proposals for such a film, including offers from Otto Preminger and Al Jolson. In 1955 Robert Breen and Blevins Davis offered half a million dollars to secure the radio, television, and film rights to the opera for fifteen years. Ira Gershwin declined, leaving the way open for a bidding war among Hollywood studios. The enormous publicity generated by the international tour had made *Porgy and Bess* an even more valuable commodity, which Lawrence Langer of the Theatre Guild recognized. When he assessed the economic and political landscape of the negotiations in 1956, he saw that any delay in making a deal could be costly: “There is no doubt that time is passing and that we reached the peak of publicity for this play and the peak of price interest when it played in Moscow. Everything from now on is anti-climactic and every day’s delay is costing money. Furthermore, the segregation issue in the South is becoming more and more bitter and interest in the negro picture throughout the South may be lessened with further delays.” Langer’s judgment of the impact of “the segregation issue” rested on the conventional wisdom that southern movie theatres were reluctant to show films featuring black characters in anything but menial roles, but the change in how African Americans viewed the political impact of the show also had to be addressed. It was a change that Goldwyn, who won the bidding war in 1957 by paying $650,000 for the right to film *Porgy and Bess*, would confront in a myriad of ways before, during, and after the film’s production. He felt a strong sense of fidelity to Gershwin and Heyward’s original creation, even going so far as to insist once the film was completed that publicity materials refer to it only as an “American folk opera” and never as a musical. Screenwriter N. Richard Nash also vowed not to stray far from the original work and voiced his intention to return to Heyward’s original novel for additional material.

Commentators in the black press greeted news that Goldwyn would be making a film version of the opera by recognizing the work’s unfortunate racial stereotypes while expressing their satisfaction at the opportunities it would afford black film actors. For *Pittsburgh Courier* columnist Marguerite Cartwright, the announcement of the impending film prompted fresh memories of fielding questions from European viewers of *Porgy and Bess*, such as, “How widespread is drug addiction among poor rural Negroes?” She questioned the work’s “integrity” and concluded that it had been “a tactical mistake” as propaganda. The *Amsterdam News*’s Lester Granger acknowledged the toll that stereotyped depictions of African Americans had taken but took a more pragmatic view of the prospect of a *Porgy and Bess* film. Granger argued that “so far as these United States are concerned, there is little that a filmed pre-
sentation of Porgy and Bess could do to intensify the racial stereotype that has operated so seriously to the Negro’s disadvantage over the years. And insofar as superlative artistic talents displayed by colored performers tend to break down these stereotypes . . . the films can do a better job than the theatre, if for no other reason except that films are seen . . . many, many, many more times than plays—even perennial hits.” Granger also cited NAACP head Roy Wilkins as sharing the view that “we can’t expect, in all reasonableness, that all plays including Negroes in their casting are going to present the race in noble outline.” Given the precariousness of black acting careers, “if Negro actors sat on their hands and refused to accept parts that did not ‘win friends and influence people’ toward improved racial relationships—if they did this, there would not be enough parts for them to keep in practice and qualify for the big roles when these should come around.” Robert McFerrin, who would sing for Sidney Poitier on the film’s soundtrack, agreed: “I consider ‘Porgy and Bess’ good music and I think it will make a good film. In our fight for equality and dignity, we often lose sight of good art form. This could have been white or black, in the same locale, the dialogue would have been the same.”

As always, the black press eagerly covered the possible employment that a Porgy and Bess film would provide for African American performers. Such articles first appeared in 1955, before a final contract had been negotiated, and they increased in number in 1957, when Goldwyn finally got under way with his plans. Several major black film and music stars were reported to be angling for roles, including Nat King Cole, Abbey Lincoln, Eartha Kitt, and Sarah Vaughn—even boxer Sugar Ray Robinson was under consideration. The black press assiduously covered all of the speculation and official announcements about casting, keeping a steady drumbeat of small items about the film a regular feature in its pages throughout 1958. The Chicago Defender even ran a tongue-in-cheek item about the casting of the goat; the animal was ironically named Mr. Faust, although no connection was made to the kind of bargain the film’s human actors might have been making.

Two high-profile black stars were far less eager to get into the film, however. Harry Belafonte said he told Goldwyn: “The music is great, but I wouldn’t do it as the Dubose Heyward script was written. All that crap shooting and razors and lusts and cocaine is the old conception of the Negro.” Belafonte was swift and direct in his refusal of the role of Porgy; for Sidney Poitier, who shared Belafonte’s view of the script, the attempt to turn down the role ultimately proved impossible. An agent purporting to represent Poitier assured Goldwyn that the actor would take the part and even agreed to
a $75,000 fee on his behalf. When Poitier, shooting a film in the Caribbean, learned of the offer, he sent word that he intended to decline. But Goldwyn had already announced that Poitier had accepted the role, setting up a public and private struggle that lasted several weeks. Goldwyn made the first move. With Poitier still out of the country, he went on a public-relations offensive to pressure the actor into changing his mind. He persuaded *New York Post* theatrical columnist Leonard Lyons to run a column describing how Poitier’s friends were urging the actor to take the role because Goldwyn was “far more sensitive and sensible about such matters than any one in motion pictures” and quoting Ralph Bunche’s view that *Porgy and Bess* was “a classic, and ought to be preserved on film.” He also gave *Time* magazine his side of the story, saying that Poitier had quit over not getting script approval and asserting that “an underground movement by radicals” was behind a boycott of the film by black actors. The *Time* article also quoted NAACP president Roy Wilkins as acknowledging that “among Negro Americans there is a division of opinion as to the value of this play,” but the organization “has taken no position on *Porgy and Bess*.” (Goldwyn’s $1,000 contribution to the NAACP could have contributed to this carefully neutral stance.) Goldwyn did not exclude the black press from his campaign; he called *Pittsburgh Courier* columnist Isadora Rowe personally to explain to her that “the misunderstanding came about over a script reading technicality and not because the immortal Gershwin opus was going to be brought to the screen in a manner that would be derogatory to the Negro race.”

Poitier explained his position in a public statement: “As a Negro I have certain sensitiveness and as an artist I have certain responsibilities. Certain things I will play, but they must be constructive to my life as a Negro.” Poitier reportedly wanted “some minor changes” that would make the film “more acceptable to Negro audiences,” while screenwriter Richard Nash, director Rouben Mamoulian, and Goldwyn maintained that they planned no changes at all to the Gershwin classic. In a later memoir, the actor recalled his feeling that *Porgy and Bess* was “an insult to black people,” and he characterized as “outrageous bullshit” Goldwyn’s belief that the opera was “one of the greatest things that has ever happened for the black race.” Poitier ultimately gritted his teeth and accepted the role, despite his strong political misgivings, when it became clear that Goldwyn could block him from being able to accept a coveted role in Stanley Kramer’s *The Defiant Ones* and perhaps even derail his Hollywood career permanently. At a press conference announcing his decision, Poitier read a public statement written by Goldwyn in which he said that Goldwyn and Mamoulian “washed away” his reserva-
tions and left him “convinced irrevocably that it will be a great motion picture . . . enjoyed by everyone—little and big—people of all races and creeds.” In other news accounts, Poitier expressed his confidence “that Mr. Goldwyn, with his characteristic good taste and integrity, will present the property in a sensitive manner.” In a subsequent interview with the *Amsterdam News*, Poitier, perhaps attempting to save face, said he was promised “guarantees, changes, everything [he] wanted,” including the right to refuse “to play any scene or part that is objectionable.” A decade later, Poitier told a biographer that he had “not yet completely forgiven” himself for taking the role.13

Before Poitier’s change of heart, commentators in the black press offered divergent views of Poitier’s decision to turn down the role. A ringing editorial in the *Amsterdam News* lauded the actor for walking away from a $75,000 paycheck “because he is too much of a man and a Negro to accept a role which is notoriously degrading to his people,” unlike “too many Negroes who are willing to ridicule and sell their race short for the white man’s almighty dollar.” The editorial railed retrospectively against the State Department’s sponsorship of the show on its international tour and placed Poitier alongside movement heroes Martin Luther King Jr., Atherine Lucy, Daisy Bates, and the Little Rock nine “in the fight for equality and human decency.” Similarly, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*’s theatrical columnist, who took a dim view of filming “the sordid saga of Catfish Row” in the first place, applauded Poitier’s refusal and shuddered at the image of “the dignified and well-dictioned Mr. Poitier blubbering ‘Bess, you is my woman now.’” In the *Pittsburgh Courier*, culture columnist Isadora Rowe acknowledged the legitimacy of Poitier’s fear that “the script might have one too many crap games,” but she also saw a missed opportunity. With his considerable talent, “the life he could give the title role would go a lot further toward influencing opinion about Negroes than does his action of climbing into a vacuum and trying to pretend that there is only a future and no past.” Stanley Robertson, a Sentinel columnist, deemed Poitier’s justification for ultimately taking the role “naive,” noting that Goldwyn’s promises to add “new dimensions” to the role were about as likely to succeed as making the archsegregationist Arkansas governor “Orval Faubus a lovable character by giving him a new suit.” He believed that the actor was wasting his talent: “There are too many other fine scripts about in which a man of Poitier’s talents could be better utilized than re-hashing something that was fine for its day but whose day is long since ended.”14

The controversies over *Porgy and Bess* continued. On 2 July 1958, the day before filming was to begin, a fire tore through the soundstage assigned to *Porgy and Bess*, destroying the film’s sets and costumes. Even such an un-
likely and unlucky event became caught up in the story of racial controversy already attached to the film when the Los Angeles Mirror-News speculated that “minority groups [who] had been bitter over the studio’s plans to produce the Gershwin musical” might have had a hand in the fire. In early August, during the hiatus in filming caused by the fire, Goldwyn fired Rouben Mamoulian after he had spent several months in preproduction as the film’s director, replacing him with Otto Preminger. Actor Leigh Whipper, newly elected president of the Negro Actors Guild and member of the 1927 Porgy cast directed by Mamoulian, quit in protest. At a press conference, Whipper insisted that Porgy and Bess “has always been a theatrical property which, in unknowing and unsympathetic hands, could be and has been an unforgivable slur upon my people.” For Whipper, only Mamoulian had achieved “the heights of human dignity and spiritual content,” unlike “other theatrical presentations of this story [that] have trampled the Negro into degradation.” Whipper further charged that with Preminger at the helm, the film “is now in hands unsympathetic to my people,” citing vague “first hand information” about Preminger “which brands him, to me, as a man who has no respect for my people.”

Goldwyn did not take Whipper’s charges lying down. The show’s stars—Poitier, Pearl Bailey, Sammy Davis Jr., Brock Peters, and Dorothy Dandridge—and the head of the NAACP’s West Coast legal committee came to the defense of Goldwyn and Preminger’s ability to make the movie “in the best of taste and with good and utmost regard for the dignity of the Negro people.” Goldwyn hired Noble Sissle, famed African American star of the vaudeville and musical-theatre stages and founder and former president of the Negro Actor’s Guild, to publicly disavow Whipper as a spokesperson for the guild (an actors’ welfare organization). In a public telegram to Goldwyn, Sissle charged that it “was unfair and unethical” for Whipper to imply that he was speaking on behalf of guild members; in an interview with the New York Amsterdam News, he scolded Whipper for throwing “a racial monkey wrench in the works” when he could have simply quit the film without making accusations against Preminger. Preminger, for his part, stated plaintively: “I’m Jewish. I ran away from Hitler. How can they say I’m anti-Negro?” A Goldwyn aide offered a highly plausible explanation for the director’s firing to the Chicago Defender: “This whole thing has nothing to do with Mamoulian’s skill. Frankly, the old man simply felt Mamoulian was making too many public statements and people might start thinking of ‘Porgy and Bess’ as Rouben Mamoulian’s ‘Porgy.’”

Unlike Whipper, Bailey accepted the role of Maria in the film and then
used her influence on the set to try to mitigate what she saw as unnecessary and outdated racial stereotypes. Before the movie was even in production, some black commentators were urging the actors and director to remove racially stereotypical dialect from the script. Isadora Rowe offered the “modern advice” that “it’s the music that made ‘Porgy and Bess’ great, not the dialect,” while Hazel LaMarre expressed the hope that the film’s leading actors would only accept roles if there was “an acceptable script.” Peters (Crown) recalled how the performers with speaking roles, concerned about “whether we were doing something that was contributing negatively to Black culture,” conferred about the script and agreed: “We just wouldn’t do the dialect, the quote-unquote Southern Black dialect. We would go at it straight.” On the first day of rehearsal, Poitier began speaking the lines as written, in dialect, then changed to more standard English and persuaded Preminger to authorize the change. In a later incident that was publicized in the black press, Bailey took another actor to task during a rehearsal for using dialect in the line “Ain’t I done told you?” Bailey explained that Goldwyn and Preminger had said there should be no dialect, but “a few lesser members of the cast, who appeared in the play on Broadway and who got used to using the dialect,” were continuing to use it. Bailey quickly set them straight: “I told this kid and some of the others that it’s insane to use it if it’s not insisted on. It’s losing your dignity. It’s undignified and unnatural. I don’t care if it’s Negro or Italian or Greek or French, it’s in bad taste.” Privately, Bailey also refused to wear a bandana on her head and tried to prevent the costumer from putting them on any of the other female cast members as well; as a result of her insistence, only a few women wear bandanas in the film.

Goldwyn put tremendous energy into getting the film made and then publicizing it, and he sought to use the best available talent. He approached a number of prominent writers about adapting the opera into a screenplay, including Langston Hughes, and several high-profile directors. (Behind the scenes, Dorothy Heyward fretted that she should not have ceded her authority over the script to Goldwyn because she feared the writers he was approaching “are likely to drag propaganda into Porgy and Bess.”) Goldwyn was no less energetic about approaching well-known actors to participate; in addition to those who were eventually cast, he had attempted to cast Cab Calloway as Sportin’ Life and, when Belafonte and Poitier publicly balked, even approached sports stars Sugar Ray Robinson and Jackie Robinson about taking roles in the film. Leontyne Price turned down Goldwyn’s offer to provide the voice for the Bess role, insisting that she would only sing if she were also appearing onscreen in the part.
Goldwyn’s publicity and promotional efforts were no less thorough than his attempts to staff the film. *Porgy and Bess* was everywhere in the black press leading up to and following its premiere. The arts pages of black newspapers covered every aspect of the film, no matter how minor, from budgets, schedules, and other production matters to human-interest stories.\(^{25}\) Goldwyn missed no opportunities for publicity for himself and the film, from sending congratulatory messages to a black fraternity to offering a role in the *Porgy and Bess* film to the winner of a *Chicago Defender* “Miss Wonderful” beauty contest.\(^{26}\) For openings of the film in various cities, Goldwyn invariably donated the evening’s proceeds to charities, garnering favorable coverage. In fact, he had announced from the outset that all of the film’s profits would go to the Samuel Goldwyn Foundation to be distributed to “worthwhile organizations throughout the country regardless of race, creed, color or national origin.”\(^{27}\) Ads for the film ran in all of the major black newspapers and featured approving quotes not only from black critics but also from other leaders (such as the executive director of the Los Angeles Urban League).\(^{28}\) After the film’s opening, Goldwyn’s wife, Frances Goldwyn, surfaced in the pages of black newspapers as a judge for the “Miss Amsterdam News of 1960 Contest,” and in quotes from a *Washington Daily News* interview destined to be reprinted, she described the beauty of “Negro women” and predicted that they would soon be in high demand in Hollywood films. In keeping with the outsized attention being lavished on the film, Goldwyn arranged for the production of 1 million copies of a hard-cover souvenir book, lavishly illustrated with color stills from the film, essays on the opera’s history and the making of the film, and biographies of the principal actors. Goldwyn’s publicity team even took a page from the State Department’s playbook, claiming that the *Porgy and Bess* film cast possessed “the highest percentage of college degrees ever recorded by the cast of a motion picture” and supplying newspapers with a detailed list of the degrees and colleges for each cast member by name. Goldwyn also gained positive publicity in the black press by staging splashy opening-night galas in several cities, all of them charity benefits, and offering African American community groups the opportunity to buy blocks of tickets and hold their own benefits during the regular run of the film. Predictably, black newspapers covered these celebrity-studded premieres with photos and enthusiastic descriptions.\(^{29}\)

Goldwyn’s advertising, and the relentless coverage the film had been receiving in the black press for two years before its opening, resulted in high ticket sales in the major cities in which it was scheduled to open. Whether from anticipation, curiosity, or the persuasive powers of two years of non-
stop press coverage, African Americans were ready and eager to attend the film. Columbia Pictures, the film’s distributor, and local theatres marketed group-sales tickets to organizations and individuals for benefits or theatre parties. Advance sale of mail-order tickets, including group sales, boomed in New York City and Los Angeles, setting a record at the latter’s Carthay Circle Theatre. Three months after the film’s late June premiere in New York City, distributors began releasing it in cities across the country. The film continued to play in major cities into 1961 and opened in London in the summer of 1962. Mainstream black support for the film also came in the form of awards, such as one for “excellence in theatre arts” that the National Council on Negro Women presented to Dandridge and Davis.

The film’s success came to a halt at the Mason-Dixon Line, but not merely because of the reluctance of southern theatre owners to screen it. The segregation of movie theatres had existed since the advent of motion-picture entertainment in the early twentieth century. In some southern cities and towns, black moviegoers were relegated to balconies; in others, they could only attend a smaller number of completely separate theatres that rarely screened first-run films. In the North, the de facto impact of residential segregation made the moviegoing experience effectively segregated. As the 1960s dawned, southern cities continued to enforce the segregation of movie theatres and other public places, while local activists stepped up their campaigns to challenge that discrimination with pickets, boycotts, and “stand-ins.” Porgy and Bess became the focus of such campaigns in Louisville, Kentucky, and Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where interracial groups of protesters picketed movie theatres when theatre managers refused to offer desegregated screenings of the film. Variety claimed that the pickets were the first case of protest over African Americans being allowed to attend first-run screenings. Louisville’s intrepid activists publicized the issue by chartering a bus to carry an interracial group across state lines to attend the film in Indiana. In response, Goldwyn canceled all screenings of Porgy and Bess in the South, offering the explanation: “I just don’t want to be responsible for any race riots.” Charleston officials avoided such controversy by banning showings of the film outright. In Atlanta, however, the city’s major newspaper was keen to point out that it was not the city that had banned the film after a local exhibitor had already advertised its engagement. A Journal-Constitution editorial excoriated Goldwyn’s “censorship” as timid and hypocritical, given that, in its view, the film “has no racial content” and was “neither controversial or inflammatory.” The editorial ranked Goldwyn’s film a minor element in the region’s growing protests against segregation and scoffed at the
producer’s timidity with the observation that running a limited engagement of the film “would probably be child’s play compared to operating a lunch counter in the South these days.”

When the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*’s editorialist asserted that the film “has no racial content,” he meant that it contained no characterizations based on offensive black stereotypes. And the film, quite scrupulously, does not. It presents a picturesque version of Catfish Row’s poverty. Porgy’s room has sparse but perfectly intact furniture and pert yellow curtains at the windows; the characters wear clean and neat clothing, with nothing visibly tattered or worn, and their Sunday-best attire for the picnic scene is impressively fancy indeed. Unlike the opera, the film contains considerable dialogue, and none of it is spoken in black, southern dialect. This contrasts jarringly with the lyrics to many of the songs, which do contain dialect. Beyond its lack of realism, the film suffers more fundamentally from being less a cinematic experience than a filmed stage production, minus the proscenium. The screenplay contains no transitions between scenes; rather, they are separated by black-outs, as in stage productions. As a result, the story lurches along from song to song with little in between. The film’s only truly cinematic scene comes when Porgy kills Crown; there is no dialogue, and the tension and action are transmitted entirely through deft editing. Other scenes that should exude menace—such as the confrontation between Maria and Sportin’ Life and the white detectives interrogating Peter—are emotionally flat. The lead performers—Poitier as Porgy, Dandridge as Bess, Davis as Sportin’ Life, and Bailey as Maria—do not stray from their existing public personae. Bailey and Davis dig into their more broadly drawn roles with gusto, while Poitier exudes grave dignity and the gorgeous Dandrige seems awkward and out of place.

In all, Goldwyn’s *Porgy and Bess* makes for a contradictory, unsatisfying film, largely because all involved in making it are holding it at arm’s length, careful not to disturb the work’s beloved previous form or veer into racial stereotype.

With an actual film to judge, the opinions in black publications hewed to extremes. Many columnists objected to its very existence, charging that it perpetuated an outdated view of African American life and exemplified a continued lack of range and variety in Hollywood roles for black actors. But those black press reviewers who liked the film tended to love it. “Man on the street” interviews and letters to the editor reflected a similar split. A *New York Amsterdam News* columnist called it “a tremendous film, with tremendous photography, settings, sounds, singing, action, and acting,” and praised Poitier, “who, as an actor seems to grow in stature in every role.” After the film was completed but before it was released, Poitier, when asked if he was
“artistically satisfied” with his work in the film, hedged: “I want to see first if I am socially satisfied with it. I know I tried like hell to make it so. Artistic satisfaction? Well, it depends, being as subjective as I am, on how well it comes off socially.” The Afro-American was satisfied with how the film came off “socially,” concluding that “Preminger appears to have worked hard in smoothing out the aspects that were considered objectionable by some on viewing the original play” and noting approvingly that “the sets are stark and dramatically impressive, but there are no traces of dirt” or of “the slop and debris of the tumbledown locale” that might, presumably, embarrass African Americans. In the Courier, both reviewers and columnists noted the “unrealistically clean” Catfish Row and described it as having been “scrubbed up, toned down and glorified in a way that stops all carping criticism in its tracks. . . . The most sensitive, race-conscious colored viewer will find nothing in the picture which is offensive.” The arts pages of the Defender gave the performers credit, writing of the film that “its success was assured from the start” because of its black stars, but adding that “the story and music supplied by Dorothy and DuBose Heyward and George Gershwin, respectively, give the artists plenty to work with.” Goldwyn (and his $7 million budget) earned particular praise from the Afro-American, which described the film as “the outcome of 12 years of perseverance and vision on the part of Samuel Goldwyn” and “one of the most dynamic pictures produced in as many years.”

Those who defended the film in the black press used arguments familiar from earlier in the decade, insisting that it depicted an era widely understood to be in the past and that the talent of its actors carried a more powerful message than the content of the film itself. A letter writer to the Amsterdam News described Porgy and Bess as having “expressed [African American] shortcomings of the past,” while Lester Granger, writing in the same newspaper, was pleased to see “absolutely nothing of the vaguely contemptuous treatment of Negro life in a southern town that was in the original story of ‘Catfish Row’ by a white South Carolinian a couple of generations ago.” Granger understood the unease that accompanied the show’s overseas tour, when black Americans believed that “there was no way for overseas audiences to know” that Porgy and Bess “was only folk opera, not a rendition of Negro life.” But he concluded: “We can relax. That film is so beautiful . . . and the music and acting are so great that there’s no room for a foreign or domestic viewer to develop a contemptuous or pitying attitude.” Pittsburgh Courier columnist Isadora Rowe praised Goldwyn as “a man who had worked hard to develop an artistic masterpiece,” which, she believed, had succeeded in having “opened a whole new world for Negro thespians.”

272 • Porgy and Bess, 1959–2012
In the bluntly titled “Why Negroes Don’t Like *Porgy and Bess,*” the national African American magazine *Ebony* took a far-less-sanguine view of the film’s spectacular scale and the quality of its performances. Author Era Bell Thompson pronounced that “for all of its Todd-AO screen, six-track stereophonic sound, brilliant all-star cast and expensive shanty-town settings, to a goodly number of America’s largest minority, *Porgy and Bess* is the same old kettle of catfish.” Thompson reminded readers that “murmurs of Negro discontent” had greeted all previous productions of *Porgy and Bess* and, synthesizing black responses to the film, identified “three walled camps” of those who liked the opera, those who did not, and—taking aim at the strategy adopted by many in the black press—“the cowards who confine their reviews to the indisputable excellence of talent and to technical perfection.” Adopting a theme first sounded by some critics of Breen’s production, Thompson directly addressed the discrepancy between *Porgy and Bess*’s performers and the roles they played. He objected to the spectacle of talented, accomplished black performers speaking in dialect, “reduced to the level of Catfish Row when they have already risen to the heights of La Scala.” And he implicitly held those performers to account for their roles, recounting the 1942–44 revival cast’s insistence on removing the word “nigger” from the production, Poitier’s reluctance to take the role of Porgy, and Pearl Bailey’s chagrin at the “ungrammatical lines” spoken by another character; she deemed them “undignified” and “unnatural” and insisted that the lines be cut. Other black critics held black performers and audiences to account in a new way, unlike in the past. A. S. Young of the *Los Angeles Sentinel* argued that “there should be within us, as a race, too much pride to play such roles,” and if leading black entertainers agreed collectively to refuse such roles, “perhaps some of these Hollywood executives might begin to learn the score.” Audiences, too, were responsible for making Hollywood understand what they would and would not tolerate; Young chided that “the Negro movie fan has flubbed a golden opportunity to help this cause by failing to flood Hollywood with mail.”

Thompson and other critics made a range of arguments to support their conviction that *Porgy and Bess* did not fit contemporary times. Thompson maintained that even though *Porgy and Bess* portrayed the past, it was not far enough in the past to dismiss as harmless. Speaking for “a large group of Negroes who are tired of early American folk-fare which holds them up to ridicule,” he asserted that “although more and more Negroes are striving toward a state of objectivity regarding their earlier social status, *Porgy and Bess* continues to prick at the sensitive underbelly of the country’s number one underdog.” Leon Washington deemed it “a cruel fantasy of conditions
that the white man himself created and now has the gall to ridicule” and “a throwback to an era that if it really existed is best forgotten.” The Los Angeles Sentinel’s A. S. Young declared the film so far in the past as to be “completely out of context with modern times. . . . It perpetuates old stereotypes that right-thinking people have buried long ago.” According to Young, the film’s characters “have absolutely nothing in common with the kind of Negroes who move to Los Angeles for the purpose of bettering their condition, the Negroes who walked in Montgomery, Ala., during the great bus boycott, the sturdy-willed Negroes of Little Rock who refused to be intimidated by the bully-boy, Faubus.” For Young, the potential for damage was clear: “Can you see the majority people of America granting full-fledged citizenship to the people of Catfish Row? If you can, you’re a dreamer. But, from one corner of the earth to the other within the next couple of years, Porgy & Bess will tell millions that the Catfish people are good, ole, charmin’, quaint, lovable, typical, satisfied Negroes.” J. A. Rogers saw the same political effect of the film’s international visibility, as the “primitive sort of rubbish” it contained “helps to maintain (in Europe) the impression that all Negroes are of the slums. The race question being what it is, it has an all-around bad social effect.”

Part of the perception that Porgy and Bess was inappropriate to its time—and what largely separated criticism of the film from responses to earlier stage versions—involved the belief that the time was long overdue for other, less stereotypical roles to be made available to black performers. The Sentinel’s Young also argued that Porgy and Bess was a problem because Hollywood produced so few other representations of African American characters, concluding: “If [Goldwyn] will spend $7 million to make the story of Dr. Martin Luther King and the Montgomery walkers, and distribute this great progressive saga around the world, then I’ll say: let him have Porgy and Bess.” Jesse Walker similarly called for Goldwyn to “balance the scales by doing a whooper-dooper on the life of, say, Ira Aldridge, the first Negro tragedian, or a musical on the life of Frederick Douglass or Booker T. Washington” and noted sarcastically: “Contrary to public opinion, not every Negro knows how to shoot craps.” Performer Juanita Hall told a reporter: “I feel that the motion picture industry as a whole could find better material than the story of ‘Porgy and Bess.’” At an NAACP gathering shortly after the film’s release, black actor and writer William Branch decried the absence of other works to “balance” movies like Porgy and Bess and urged the audience to write to television stations praising positive portrayals of African Americans. Young, a frequent and vocal critic of the film, sent a similar message to his readers:
“Barber shop arguments, private vilification won’t solve a thing. See Porgy & Bess as a bit of research if not for entertainment, and let the man know how you feel, good or bad, indifferent or insulted!”39

Lorraine Hansberry was an African American playwright helping to create such new, alternative roles for black actors. The *Porgy and Bess* film opened at the same time that her groundbreaking drama, *A Raisin in the Sun*, also starring Poitier, was earning rave reviews on Broadway. In a debate with Preminger televised on a Chicago television program in 1959, Hansberry decried the film’s stereotypes as “bad art” and a sign of the artist’s inability or unwillingness “to understand his characters.” Hansberry took aim at the durable white assumption that exoticism and sexual abandon were an authentic part of African American behavior and culture and charged that American cultural producers “have apparently decided that within American life we have one great repository where we’re going to focus and imagine sexuality and exaggerated sensuality, all very removed and earthy things—and this great image is the American Negro.” When Preminger countered that *Porgy and Bess* was not intended as a realistic portrayal, Hansberry shot back: “It’s fantastic to suppose art . . . exists in some sort of removed circumstances where we can say ‘Well really, it was only a play’—where we can pretend that attitudes are not molded or deepened or affected in some profound way by what all of us take into our mental beings by cultural products.” Hansberry’s anger also stemmed from her belief that such “skin deep” renderings of black characters by white writers, composers, and directors had for a century blocked African American artists’ access to the means of mainstream cultural production. “We cannot afford the luxuries of mistakes of other peoples,” she declared, likening *Porgy and Bess* to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; “we’ve had great wounds from great intentions.”40

Through the 1960s, *Porgy and Bess* became a reliable shorthand example for stereotyped, derogatory cultural depictions of African Americans. References to it in this light appeared in a variety of black-press reviews and columns.41 Duke Ellington fumed in a 1964 interview, “Porgy and Bess, those people in alleys, waking up, dusting those carpets out of the window and beating their brooms in time and all that bullshit. You want to know about America, we’re going to make a cultural exchange, we send you Porgy and Bess, this is the complete image of our Negro.”42 The most blistering critique came in Harold Cruse’s 1967 book *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, where he termed the opera “surely the most contradictory cultural symbol ever created in the Western world.” Cruse charged that Hansberry and other middle-class black critics, in their focus on the work’s stereotypes, missed the more
significant problem of the racism underpinning the cultural marketplace in which the opera was repeatedly produced. Cruse emphasized the role of African Americans as cultural producers and the conditions, not of their own making, under which they produced art, concluding: “To criticize any play today involving Negroes, purely on content, is not enough.” The Gershwin opera was “a product of American developments that were intended to shunt Negroes off into a tight box of subcultural, artistic dependence, stunted growth, caricature, aesthetic self-mimicry imposed by others, and creative insolvency.” As a result, “a folk opera of this genre should have been written by Negroes themselves and has not,” and “such a folk opera, even if it had been written by Negroes, would never have been supported, glorified and acclaimed, as Porgy has, by the white cultural elite of America.” Cruse concluded with a rousing call that “the folk opera Porgy and Bess should be forever banned by all Negro performers in the United States. No Negro singer, actor, or performer should ever submit to a role in this vehicle again”; and he further proposed that “if white producers want to stage this folk opera, it should be performed by white performers made up in blackface, because it is distorted imitation all the way through.”

It was not just black leftist intellectuals like Cruse who came to the conclusion that Porgy and Bess was impossibly, embarrassingly out of step with the times. The same year that Cruse published his denunciation of the opera, Mad Magazine, in its “Race Issue,” proposed a different remedy for a show indelibly associated with African Americans but ill suited to the era. Because Porgy and Bess was “a charming, naïve, and—let’s face it—badly out-dated portrait of Negro Life in America,” Mad proposed “Stokely and Tess,” a parodic comic strip that better reflected the era’s civil rights politics. In it, Martin Luther King Jr. (standing in for the solid, respectable Porgy) and Stokely Carmichael (representing the charmingly seductive Sportin’ Life) vie for the affections of Tess, each making their case in dialogue and song as she agonizes over “Who is the best leader for our people?” To the tune of “I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin’,” King assures her:

> Oh we’ve made plenty of progress
> And Progress’s making us free
> We’ve got new jobs!
> We’re in white schools!
> Thanks to N-A-A-C-P!

Carmichael counters King’s interracial vision, to the tune of “A Woman Is a Sometime Thing,” with, “Yes, a white man is a two-time fink”; and Muham-
mad Ali appears to serenade (to the tune of “IGot Plenty o’ Nuttin’”) the black nationalist message:

Oh, we’ll have plenty of justice  
Yes, justice is what we all crave  
We’ll have our land  
We’ll help our folks  
From the cradle until  
The grave.

But Mad’s comic retelling gives King the last word, as he reminds Tess, to the tune of “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” that even if he himself is not the best leader for the civil rights movement,

It’s not necessarily Stoke!  
It’s not necessarily Stoke!  
No, him you can’t trust in  
Just ask Bayard Rustin  
Oh it’s not necessarily Stoke!

For better or for worse, by the late 1960s, Porgy and Bess functioned as a commonly understood symbol of an old racial order that was receding into the distance.

Yet African American singers, actors, and audiences were not ready to abandon the show, and most managed to resist Cruse’s appeal that they boycott Porgy and Bess. Despite the fact that he and other black critics had deemed Porgy and Bess to be outdated, offensive, and demeaning to the racial dignity of African American performers and audiences—opinions that, if Mad Magazine is any indicator, had hardened into conventional wisdom—live productions of the opera persisted. Every year between 1958 and 1975, performers took to the stage somewhere in the world to perform the Heyward/Gershwin opera. Professionals and amateurs alike also presented concert recitals of Porgy and Bess excerpts, and major African American jazz and popular musicians recorded top-selling versions of the opera’s music. Many of the era’s most successful African American vocalists recorded albums featuring songs from Porgy and Bess, including Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, Sammy Davis Jr. and Carmen McRae, Diahann Carroll, Ray Charles and Cleo Laine, and Harry Belafonte and Lena Horne. These pop albums were joined by critically acclaimed jazz recordings by Miles Davis, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Oscar Peterson, and Bill Potts. Nina Simone’s single of “I Loves You Porgy” reached the Billboard Top 20
In June 1967 MAD magazine parodied Porgy and Bess (now titled “Stokely and Tess”) as a way to comment on the tensions between the mainstream civil rights movement and younger Black Power activists. MAD’s underlying premise was that the show was “badly dated,” de-
Relations and Civil Rights... who's going to sit still long enough to watch a charming, naive, and—let's face it—badly dated portrait of Negro Life in America? No, we think that if they really intend to revive “Porgy And Bess” today, they're going to have to do a few revisions and come up with something like...
list in 1959, and John Coltrane recorded “Summertime” on his My Favorite Things album in 1961. If black composers in the 1930s had disparaged Gershwin’s music as lacking racial authenticity, a new generation of musicians had moved beyond that dispute to put its own stamp on the Gershwin tunes. The number and quality of black musical reinterpretations of music from Porgy and Bess served as a counterweight to the commentary and opinion that branded the work as demeaning and detrimental to African American interests; they gave black audiences a way to connect with the work that did not involve debates over stereotypes or calls to boycott it. This evidence of the opera’s popularity, particularly the popularity of its music, suggests that earlier criticisms had failed to completely dampen public enthusiasm for Porgy and Bess, even among black audiences.

Within the United States, Porgy and Bess generated work for numerous black performers primarily through low-budget tours (known as the “straw hat circuit”) that crisscrossed the country, spending a night or two in each city before moving on; the modest venues included college-campus arts series, local light-opera companies, and summer music festivals. Most of these were variants on Breen’s production directed by his former stage manager, Ella Gerber, who organized her first Porgy and Bess touring company in 1958 and continued to helm productions into the 1980s. These productions remained a steady source of employment (however low profile) for black performers, many of whom had appeared in the more-famous productions of earlier decades. A 1965 tour featured at different points the aging John Bubbles and the equally aging Cab Calloway in the role of Sportin’ Life, proof that Porgy and Bess was a fallback even for once-famous performers. Breen himself considered remounting Porgy and Bess in 1969 as a star vehicle for Sammy Davis Jr., securing a commitment from Lincoln Center and actively discussing an international tour and film, plans that failed to materialize. In addition to such tours of the fully staged production, stars who had made their names in the 1950s tour continued to use their association with the show to book concert engagements. The trio of Levern Hutcherson, Lucia Hawkins, and Avon Long toured extensively in the United States and abroad as the Porgy and Bess Singers, performing songs from the show, along with other numbers from opera and musical theatre, with symphony orchestras at African American colleges and black churches. Other stars of previous productions, including Calloway, used their association with the show to draw audiences for their solo recitals and included numbers from it in their programs. At the amateur level, black high school and college students
performed selections from the opera, while it also popped up at community benefits, festivals of black music, and even one locally cast production.49

Productions of *Porgy and Bess* appeared outside of the United States frequently during this period as well. Audiences in Tel Aviv, Australia, Brussels, and Portugal saw touring versions of Gerber’s *Porgy and Bess*.50 Opera companies in Austria, Germany, France, Norway, Sweden, the Soviet Union, Portugal, West Germany, Denmark, and Turkey staged their own versions of the opera during the 1960s and early 1970s, no doubt inspired by the opera’s popular and critical reception during its wildly successful European tour in the early 1950s. It debuted at the Vienna Volksoper in 1965 and at the Vienna State Opera in 1971. A 1970 production at East Berlin’s prestigious Komische Oper boasted of “an original Negro-ensemble from New York,” although most of the singers were living in Europe, where operatic engagements were far more numerous and career sustaining than in the United States. In 1970 the U.S.-based World Company organized a production intended to tour twenty-two European countries.51 In New Zealand, Gerber directed a 1965 production for the New Zealand Opera Company featuring mostly Maori singers (with a sprinkling of American imports); a program note on the opera’s history noted that “at the time of the first production there were few negroes with professional operatic experience, just as at the time the New Zealand Opera Company’s production was cast, there were few Maoris with professional operatic experience.”52 While these performances took place without the publicity and critical fanfare that greeted earlier revivals, they provided steady work for a number of African American singers in the United States and Europe.

While *Porgy and Bess* companies trod stages from the American hinterlands to internationally renowned opera houses during the 1960s, reactions to two New York City productions embodied the political and cultural transition that opera was undergoing in mainstream opinion. With these productions, a conversation began that moved, sometimes reluctantly, away from confident assertions of the authentic racial characteristics and behavior to be found in *Porgy and Bess* and toward a preoccupation with the work’s musical authenticity as an opera rather than a piece of musical theatre. In 1961 the New York City Center Opera Company’s production—starring William Warfield and Leesa Foster and directed by William Ball—restored some recitative and generally attempted to regain more of the work’s operatic elements, although it was still considerably shorter than the 1935 original. It broke City Center box-office records, and the cast also performed a concert.
of the opera’s highlights for one night only at upper Manhattan’s Lewisohn Stadium (on a bill with a Haitian dance company; both program and location suggest that the evening was intended for black audiences). In a nod to changing attitudes about racist stereotypes in popular culture, white critics noted the distance between this new version of *Porgy and Bess* and earlier interpretations by emphasizing its serious musical intent. Praising its “re-invented authenticity,” one reviewer insisted that “this is not a show-business *Porgy and Bess*, not a minstrel show peopled with stereotypes. . . . In general, the work has been restored to the original intent—the creation of an American opera, not a bastardized, ‘commercial’ work about dancing, laughing dark-skinned Southerners.” Returning *Porgy and Bess* to its operatic roots helped to absolve its racial sins; Ball “is restoring a work that has been badly mangled and cheapened in the drive for easy, ‘commercial’ success. . . . [He] has directed the work in a new way: these people in Catfish Row have dignity and values. They are not jiggling, cardboard Negroes. They are human beings.” Warfield, with a performer’s practical eye, undercut the optimistic notion that this production was a dramatic departure from past versions by telling a reporter: “Actually, there is not as much of a difference between this one and the Porgy I played in Europe as there was between that one and the one that opened on Broadway in 1935.”

If some critics lauded this new direction for *Porgy and Bess*, others found the turn to operatic staging emotionally unsatisfactory, robbing the show of the presumed racial authenticity they had cherished in previous versions. The assumption that genuine African Americans were poor, uneducated, and unruly had been attached from birth to the play *Porgy* and then to *Porgy and Bess*, originating in Heyward’s worldview and sustained by white critics and audiences for nearly four decades. Even though such beliefs were beginning to wither in the broader culture by the early 1960s, they were still strongly associated with *Porgy and Bess*, a work steeped in its own history. With these 1960s productions, such associations collided with the conventions of U.S. opera companies, where opera staging was not naturalistic but mannered and stiff. Judith Crist, writing in the *New York Herald Tribune*, criticized the operatic staging as static, protesting that “only intermittently are we allowed a glimpse of the teeming life of Catfish Row, the disorganized vitality of its inhabitants and the stripped-down emotions of its principals.” She described the actor playing Sportin’ Life as “a sort of Ivy League hophead, devoid of any basic corruption, an easy-goin’ type rather than a force of evil.” A letter writer to the *Herald Tribune* agreed, complaining that “somehow Mr. Warfield has, to me, lost the essential ‘Negro’ quality which must be
projected to give Porgy meaning,” and that “each time Barbara Webb was on stage with her classic serene face and her stage presence reminding me of Renata Tebaldi—yes Tebaldi—I could not get back into the Catfish Row feeling for several scenes.” Like Dallas critic John Rosenfeld lamenting the “curiously de-Africanized” version he saw in 1952, this letter writer insisted that “Mr. Warfield and several of the cast members need to be coached on projecting ‘Catfish Row Negro feelings,’” and he clarified that he did “not mean this in any derogatory way—they are brilliant artists—but somehow... it’s all Ivy League. Thank goodness one or two of the cast survived the direction—about the only correct local diction for Catfish Row came from the superb Carol Brice and Mr. Johnson.”55 Such disorientation was in the air in 1961 for white Americans befuddled at the sight of black figures who summoned images of the “Ivy League” rather than the more familiar “Catfish Row feeling.” By that year, growing numbers of composed, articulate African American college students were challenging segregation and facing down jeering white mobs on southern streets, college campuses, and lunch counters. These young protesters, too, were more Ivy League than Catfish Row and presented a new model of black authenticity to a surprised white nation.

By 1964, a scant three years later, civil rights protest was not merely a vaguely unsettling context but instead the focus of the conversation about another New York City Center Opera production of *Porgy and Bess*, this one starring Warfield, Veronica Tyler as Bess, and Robert Guillaume as Sportin’ Life. By 1964 the civil rights movement dominated the nation’s media and political terrain, and many whites outside of the South were coming to see racial integration as a moral and political imperative. Critics linked *Porgy and Bess* to contemporary racial issues and worked to fit the show within them. One reviewer commented: “As we ride toward 1965, however, in the time of the breaking of centuries of the concept of the Tomming black child, ‘Porgy and Bess’ delegates itself more and more to melody and dream and less and less to life.” The *Wall Street Journal* described how, “against the somber background of today’s racial unrest, *Porgy and Bess* just tells us incidentally how the white man’s justice in a Southern community wasn’t questioned, just endured. For the play is about people, not sociology. . . . [“Summertime” proves] that here is a universal language carrying its appeal to black and white alike.” Another reviewer proclaimed: “There’s a lot of talk these days about slum clearance projects and urban renewal programs, but there’s one thing of which you can rest assured. Catfish Row will never be obliterated by bulldozers. It has now become almost a national shrine, an endearing monu-
ment to American musicianship and stagecraft that is now an integral part of our cultural history.” An *Amsterdam News* reviewer also invoked urban renewal when she observed of a production she found unsatisfying for its lack of emotion: “Catfish Row was not a housing project, but a tightly knit community.”

Not just a political context, integration also proved to be a source of direct controversy for the 1964 City Center production, which filled out its chorus with some white singers in blackface makeup. This practice defied the terms of the Gershwin estate, which required African American singers to perform the roles. Both black and white critics noticed the breach, and at least one white critic seemed to enjoy the “gotcha” moment of discovering what the *Wall Street Journal* dubbed “integration in reverse.” Describing the discovery of white faces in the chorus, this reviewer triumphantly concluded that “there’s just no getting away from the fact that Catfish Row is now, to use the current term, ‘block-busted.’” Director Jean Dalrymple defended the use of white singers by asserting that he and the producers had “cast on the basis of voices, not blood tests . . . there were plenty of mulattoes and octoroons on Catfish Row” and maintained that competition for singers from the World’s Fair and summer musical tent shows had made it impossible to assemble an entirely African American chorus. Black commentators knew better than that. An entertainment columnist for the *Amsterdam News* chided: “You can count on one hand the number of Negro singers appearing at the World’s Fair. And you can count on the other the number getting set for summer musical shows.” Offering his own explanation, he added that “many Negro singers would prefer not to appear in *Porgy and Bess*, a show which admittedly has beautiful music, but a woeful tale of Catfish Row which some folks get tired of seeing revived time and time again.”

Not everyone dreaded revivals of *Porgy and Bess*, and in just over a decade, the Houston Grand Opera Company mounted a production that would drastically shift the terms of cultural debate around the Gershwin and Heyward opus. In 1976 the HGO’s version of *Porgy and Bess* represented a double reclamation of George Gershwin’s musical intentions and of the opera’s racial politics. The two issues frequently intersected in the way the HGO presented *Porgy and Bess* and the way the press responded to it. The HGO trumpeted its *Porgy and Bess* as a rediscovered masterpiece, much as it had its production of Scott Joplin’s *Treemonisha* the season before. Unlike Joplin’s work, however, Gershwin’s opera had left the public eye only rarely since its 1935 inception and thus returned to a public eager to embrace it but needing a way to fit
it into an altered political and cultural landscape. The HGO, the opera’s performers, and the many music critics who commented on the production addressed *Porgy and Bess’s* racial politics both head-on and from more oblique angles. Directly, the producers and commentators provided a host of reasons why audiences should no longer find *Porgy and Bess’s* characters and plot objectionable, emphasizing the passage of time since its 1935 inception and the universality of its characters. More subtly, they grappled with how *Porgy and Bess* laid bare the ways that music, race, and money informed assumptions about opera and musical theatre as genres.

During major productions of *Porgy and Bess* during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1950s, producers and critics invoked the idea of authenticity to describe and promote the show to audiences and critics. The Theatre Guild promoted *Porgy* and then *Porgy and Bess* as realistic depictions of black Charleston; Breen and the State Department presented the *Porgy and Bess* cast as authentic examples of African American achievement under democracy. The Houston Grand Opera, too, embraced this well-worn strategy, but rather than using it to highlight the work’s black characters and performers, it proposed that its restoration of the piece’s musical authenticity rendered irrelevant any criticism of the show as offensive or outdated. If the Theatre Guild’s and the USIS’s promotions of authenticity put race in the forefront, the HGO emphasized the work’s musical authenticity as a way of transcending questions about its racial representations. This maneuver relied on a pair of linked perceptions about art and social class. The first was that opera was a genre with an elite audience that emphasized artistic excellence and universal truths over monetary profits; the second was that musical theatre disregarded art in its quest for commercial success with more numerous, but less discerning, audiences.

Originating with a then-little-known regional opera company, *Porgy and Bess* quickly became a national phenomenon. The HGO scheduled its debut Houston performances for the Fourth of July weekend in 1976 and billed the show as “Houston Opera’s Bicentennial gift to Houston and, indeed, the nation.” The Houston engagement kicked off an extensive national and international tour that took *Porgy and Bess* to New York City, Washington, D.C., Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Boston, Cleveland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City, Miami, and eventually London, Paris, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. While the HGO went to great lengths to define its *Porgy and Bess* as pure opera, it also benefited from the work’s legacy and popularity as musical theatre. Its New York City run took place
on Broadway rather than in one of the city’s opera houses and lasted for 128 performances. The company was able to have its cake and eat it too when it received the 1977 Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical.

Despite the verdict of the Tony Award voters, the HGO’s production was indeed an opera; it restored to the score every note Gershwin wrote and included every player and singer called for in the original orchestration. The HGO also restored the work’s original scene order and structure, which Breen had altered to create a faster-paced and more dramatic story. Befitting the opera houses and other large theatres in which it played, Porgy and Bess was monumental in its physical scope, with seventy-one singers, forty-one musicians, dramatic lighting, and a set described by one critic as being “of Hollywood Babylon proportions.” Striving for a “realistic” Catfish Row, the HGO’s sets dispensed with the cartoonish quality that characterized the Breen production sets, but they did little to reimagine Catfish Row. The main set replicated the basic framework and many of the details of previous productions, including shutters, landings, wrought-iron railings, and an upstage archway leading out of the courtyard to the wider world. A painted scrim across the proscenium highlighted details of the Catfish Row set behind it; as the lights slowly rose at the beginning of the opera, the scrim gave the effect of, in the words of one critic, a “segue into reality, coming to life as if on film.” To those looking closely, the costumes were an incongruous mix of generically period and utterly contemporary styles that failed to clarify that the story was set in 1935. The juxtapositions were striking: long skirts and head wraps on some women and a clingy polyester dress on Bess; suspenders on some men, wide belts on others; and homespun-looking textiles alongside some distinctly 1970s fabric patterns.59

While the HGO presented Porgy and Bess as an opera and rhetorically repudiated earlier “Broadway” versions of the show, a number of its production choices illustrate the company’s shrewd understanding of what had contributed to the work’s popularity over time. By selecting Jack O’Brien to direct, David Gockley, the HGO’s general director, placed at the helm of his opera a man whose career—both before and after Porgy and Bess—consisted largely of Broadway and regional theatre. (O’Brien was not the HGO’s first choice for the job. Gockley had hoped to hire a black director, but he discovered that “the black directors [he] talked to didn’t want to touch it. There was this lingering sense of stereotype, that the opera is exploitive of blacks.”60) In this, Gockley remained true to the original 1935 production, since Mamoulian’s theatre and film experience and dynamic approach impressed music critics as superior to traditional operatic staging techniques. Many 1976 critics also
appreciated O’Brien’s dynamically theatrical approach. One enthused: “Nowhere in sight are the banal stylizations that so often mar grand opera stagings. . . . The result is wholly operatic, yet urgent and direct enough to satisfy any entertainment-craving Broadway audience.” In fact, O’Brien’s busy Catfish Row choreography resembled nothing so much as Breen’s frenetic presentation. Critics commented on “the denizens of Catfish Row whose heads pop out of those shuttered windows or whose doors opened to spill out throngs into the tight little square” and praised O’Brien’s “timing of window activity, folks hanging out and slamming shutters.” Many suggested or implied that O’Brien’s dramatization lent a greater degree of realism to the production, such as the Los Angeles Times critic who believed that “O’Brien . . . makes Catfish Row an atmospheric, credibly seedy, irrepressibly vital locale inhabited by real people—who also happen to be poor people.”

The HGO’s decision to restore music and players to Porgy and Bess and present it on a grand physical scale rendered it an opera, albeit one leavened by dynamic stage direction unusual for American opera stages of that era. The HGO’s rhetorical choices in promoting the opera, however, played an equally influential role as its artistic ones. In marketing materials, program notes, and interviews, the HGO made the case that its production, precisely because it was an opera, restored Porgy and Bess’s political acceptability in a society where mainstream ideas about African Americans had altered drastically since the 1930s. To alter public perceptions of the work’s social acceptability, Gockley presented a history of Porgy and Bess in which commercial motives dictated musical and production choices that pandered to society’s racial stereotypes. This version of the work’s lineage squeezed all previous producers—even the nonprofit Theatre Guild—into the same crassly commercial mold and also carefully avoided implicating George Gershwin himself in its criticism. In one interview, Gockley characterized the Theatre Guild’s original production as “out of Broadway and it was, frankly, a ‘darkey’ show. We are moving this into the area of verismo opera in the best sense.” An HGO press release similarly promised that “this production is no mere revival, but rather an attempt to present Porgy & Bess as an opera. Even the best productions of Porgy & Bess have compromises brought on by the constraints of the Broadway stage, namely: tiny orchestra pits; the fear of over-challenging the audience . . . and the tendency to portray characters and situations in a stereotyped way.” Commenting on the original production’s staging, Gockley asserted: “The dances and crowd numbers were choreographed in the tradition of that time—Broadway pizzaz—and the idea of making the piece puristic was not important.” In this version of events, Gershwin—despite being
a celebrated, wealthy, and influential composer—was “sadly accommodating to his producers,” who “wanted to use [Porgy and Bess] as an extension of the minstrel show idea with all the characters overdrawn.” Gockley bolstered his interpretation by citing experts like biographer Robert Kimball and Gershwin contemporary Kay Swift, and he reported that Swift “said the early cuts were anathema to Gershwin.” Blaming the Gershwin estate for its insistence on using Breen’s staging (via Ella Gerber as director) in more recent productions, Gockley set the HGO’s version apart as “not a revival, but rather an attempt to stage ‘Porgy’ as an opera.” He also connected the musical purity of the HGO’s Porgy and Bess to the opera company’s nonprofit status. “We want to do it for the qualitative aspect rather than the commercial aspect,” he insisted, “trying to be true to the work as it was conceived. That’s what we mean by operatic.” But the HGO’s Porgy and Bess proved to be, if not lucrative, hardly a financial liability or even a labor of love. Even with operating costs of $150,000 per week, by November 1976 it had earned back its initial $250,000 investment for the HGO and coproducer Sherwin Goldman.

A program note penned by Kimball was also designed to help audiences see the HGO’s Porgy and Bess as a brave, pure-minded restoration of the show to operatic status. Where program notes for previous productions had delineated the work’s history as a series of triumphs, Kimball (like Gockley) recast the production history of Porgy and Bess as a litany of damage at the hands of commercial producers and a “victim of the sobering realities of American cultural life,” as the work’s operatic elements were sacrificed to the profit motive of “the Broadway-type theatre.” While the original Theatre Guild production of Porgy and Bess identified the story as taking place in “the recent past,” the HGO set its Porgy and Bess specifically in 1935. Kimball elaborated on the 1930s setting, first to remind audiences that “of course, Porgy and Bess does not reflect the social values of the 1970s” but also to situate the opera within that era’s reputation for anticommercial artistry and pursuit of cultural nationalism. Porgy and Bess was thus a product of “the unrest and yearning of the Great Depression years when American materialism in its purest form was severely tested” and “a panoply of artistic creation bore witness to the depth and intensity of our quest for a kind of national reawakening.” This 1930s context also allowed Kimball to redefine the song “I Got Plenty O’ Nuttin’”—which some had long protested as a racist and paternalistic attempt to justify inequality—as a Depression-era “anthem that whimsically and deliciously refutes the materialist credo.”

Kimball both asserted the story’s universality—“man in his innocence and power is pitted in an eternal struggle with nature and social forces”—and
claimed it as a parable of declension specific to black migration in twentieth-century America. He gave the character of Porgy an unprecedented literary stature as “a spiritual brother to Melville’s Ishmael and Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby in the tragic dimensions of his strengths and limitations,” an archetypal American hero rather than an African American man with a childish name, impotent and crippled in the face of white power, and he characterized Catfish Row as “a kind of pre-industrial island separate from the urban, technological world . . . [yet] still dominated by the tantalizing presence of the city with its lure of sin, ‘happy dust,’ and the high life.” Departing this Edenic “pre-industrial island” at the opera’s end, Porgy may or may not find Bess, but “one thing is certain: the promised land is going to be filled with teeming tenements, and huge ghettos of anonymity where the value of the individual man, whom Porgy embodies, will mean less and less.”

DuBose Heyward, the original creator of the Porgy story, could not have put it better himself.

O’Brien’s “Director’s Notes,” published in Porgy and Bess programs along with Kimball’s program note, similarly made much of the bicentennial year’s reclamation of “indigenous American cultural events” and claimed for Porgy and Bess a kind of American cultural exceptionalism. “The power, the scope, the sheer audacity of this work could come from no other country, no other culture,” O’Brien pronounced. Reaching backward like Kimball, he noted that “the production itself has gone back to the original source for its inspiration, DuBose Heyward’s play, Porgy,” but he reassured the audience that “the world of Porgy and Bess is not the world of today. We have had successes and failures, but we have progressed from Catfish Row to another plane of understanding and mutual respect in our social structure.” Clearly not one for understatement, O’Brien credited “the humanism of the story and the blazing statement of the music” as “something that in fact binds us together as a people whose pain, love, and eventual understanding of both have begun to mark us as a culture apart from the rest of the world, a culture of depth, richness, and variety of which Porgy and Bess remains a mighty and astonishing cornerstone.”

Gockley and O’Brien also addressed specific aspects of the HGO’s production that countered the libretto’s reputation for racial stereotypes. They no doubt hoped to defuse criticism by providing concrete explanations for what might seem offensive. When asked by a reporter if Porgy and Bess was “patronizing to blacks,” O’Brien answered: “Sure, it can be seen simplistically as a put-down of a loose, improvisatory kind of life, but I think it’s actually an extraordinary metaphor for man’s spirit, for what he does through love.”
He went on to explain the opera’s characters, and their behavior, in terms of 1930s gender norms, arguing that “Bess is bright as anything, but she repeatedly has to take her identity from the man she’s with. He tells her who she is, who she’s supposed to be. Crown sees her as vulgar and brassy and, to please him, she becomes vulgar and brassy. For Porgy, that gentle crustacean hiding in his corner, she becomes very domestic. And in the process she builds up a whopping identity crisis.” For his part, Gockley maintained that the HGO’s Porgy, using his knees rather than the traditional goat-drawn cart, was “a far more powerful and less passive figure,” one who could plausibly attract a woman like Bess.

The HGO’s elaborate explanations for its new production found ready ears as *Porgy and Bess* toured the country in 1976 and 1977. Many critics greeted the show with palpable relief, such as the headline that announced: “They Said ‘Porgy and Bess’ Was Dead, but It Ain’t Necessarily So.” They viewed a version of *Porgy and Bess* that was very similar musically to the one that debuted in 1935, but unlike that era’s critics—who found it a moving, authentic picture of life among Charleston’s African Americans—they put forth a range of arguments to prove that the work was a universal tale whose specific characterizations belonged to a safely distant era. White critics—arbiters of a culture at last becoming sensitized to questions of race and representation—were well aware of the possible objections to *Porgy and Bess*, and they deliberately attempted to give readers permission to like the opera despite the tremendous changes in racial consciousness that black and white Americans had undergone in the four decades since its debut. Their extensive, sometimes labored attempts to prove *Porgy and Bess*’s cultural acceptability suggested the degree to which, at that moment, the work’s place appeared quite tenuous in a society permanently changed by the civil rights movement.

A few critics found fault with the HGO’s musical restorations, but for artistic, rather than political, reasons. Richard Coe of the *Washington Post* (an ardent fan of Breen’s production) accused the HGO of undue reverence for the written score, pointing out that “operatic composers were and are forever making changes from one production to another,” and another Washington-area reviewer noted that the HGO “was so zealous in wanting its audiences to hear the real thing, the genuine opera, that it became holier than Gershwin himself and reinstated parts of the show that Gershwin himself had excised. . . . In its attempt to give all, the Houston company gave too much.” A widely reprinted Associated Press review concluded simply that “more isn’t always better.” Many reviewers who liked the production nonetheless commented on the singers’ “fuzzy enunciation” and the fact that “almost none of
the lyrics are understandable.” “It was not always apparent that this was an opera in English,” complained one Texas critic. For a commentator in San Francisco, the transition to opera (which he dubbed “gold curtain country”) robbed *Porgy and Bess* of “the old bounce, spirit, timing, and . . . the sheer joy and tears it brought to its audiences in the past”; “this ‘classed up’ version” left him cold.67

Of the many more enthusiastic reviewers, some were reluctant to abandon the idea that Gershwin possessed particular insight into African American music and culture. Invoking the ethnic calculus so popular among 1930s commentators, Clive Barnes of the *New York Times* asked: “What other white man has captured blues and spirituals in this way?”; while *New York* magazine’s music critic marveled: “What a wonder, how this Jewish composer from Brooklyn so totally soaked up the black man’s music (not only the blues idiom, but a vast panoply of dance and folk language) that he could operate within this music as if it were his own!” The *New York Sunday News*, like 1930s critics, preferred Gershwin’s version of authentic black sound to music created by African Americans, writing: “Although written by a black man, ‘Treemonisha’ is balefully dull Uncle Tom stuff. It was the white New York Jew, George Gershwin, who first dignified the black spirit in musical theater.”68

Many critics were newly mindful of the way that the show’s language could offend racial sensibilities and tried to make the case for how the HGO’s production solved that problem (or, in some cases, urged readers to accept the racial stereotypes for the sake of the Gershwin music). *Newsweek* declared, “What is patronizingly picturesque in DuBose Heyward’s libretto becomes urgent and warm in Gershwin’s music.” A Toronto music critic who argued that “as a musical, it was artistically dead because it depended on a dangerously stereotyped play to hook all the glorious songs together” conveniently ignored the fact that the “dangerously stereotyped play” that sustained musical versions of *Porgy and Bess* also served as the libretto to this opera version. Another critic more honestly assessed the relationship between libretto and music and admitted, “There can be no denying the fact that a patronizing attitude toward blacks is built into the DuBose Heyward book, play and libretto.” He concluded simply that “if you want to hear the music, you have to swallow the questionable text.” Many critics also maintained that singing the now-outdated 1930s black dialect rather than speaking it was somehow less racially offensive. (In the name of complete restoration, the HGO reinstated the word “nigger” into their production, which casts in the 1940s and 1950s had refused to say or sing.) One critic, echoing the
racial implications of a Broadway-versus-opera split articulated by Gockley, found the HGO’s version “infinitely preferable with the original sung recitatives (as here) rather than the Stepin-Fetchit spoken dialogue (featured in most productions).” Another argued of Porgy and Bess that “its black English isn’t that bad” and was perceived negatively only because Heyward and Gershwin “attempted to spell out dialect and indicate it phonetically.”

Virtually all of the reviewers who took up the issue of racial politics pointed to the passage of time as the balm that eased Porgy and Bess’s transition into the post–civil rights era. While the ensuing decades had caused critics to judge other cultural works (such as the radio and television versions of Amos ’n’ Andy) as irredeemably backward and out of step with modern attitudes, for Porgy and Bess, time had precisely the opposite effect. A Houston critic reassured readers that the HGO’s production was “tinged with the deepening and enriching hues, the longer perspectives of a period piece.” Another instructed: “If we are going to enjoy this opera, we must bear in mind that the story reflects the social mores of the 1925–35 period and not those of 1976. If the work is to live, it cannot be seen as a reflection of present day social mores, but rather as a folk legend.” The New York Post’s music critic wrote bluntly: “There’s no use pretending that ‘Porgy and Bess’ isn’t racially offensive. If you want to buy the work, you have to somehow accept its condescending, exotic treatment of rural black Southern people. . . . It is only time’s distancing that has given the show an exaggerated naturalism, an antique acceptability.”

The most consistent theme running through critical commentary on Porgy and Bess was the assertion that this work, because it was now definitively understood as an opera, carried a universal message rather than a racially specific one. If Breen’s was the lone voice in the 1950s making this argument, by 1976 a large chorus of commentators maintained that Porgy and Bess, rather than telling a story of a particular time and place, embodied universal themes, and that its characters were not racially offensive stereotypes but narrative archetypes. Demonstrating the logic typical of many reviews, Time reassured readers that “there is no reason, therefore, for contemporary audiences to be troubled by the fact that most of the inhabitants of Catfish Row are stereotypes, and condescending ones at that. Mozart’s Turks are stereotypes too, as are Verdi’s gypsies, Puccini’s gunslingers and, for that matter, Wagner’s gods and gnomes. As with all opera, the message of Porgy and Bess lies in the music.” Other critics used this argument more explicitly to remind audiences that, contrary to prior belief, Porgy and Bess was not an authentic depiction of African American life. A Toronto critic advised: “If it’s the truth you’re
after about life as it was lived on the waterfront of Charleston, South Carolina, Porgy and Bess isn’t the place to look for it. Not unless you’re willing to settle for poetic truth, that is. For Porgy’s is a kind of morality tale, a fable of corruption, rather than a sociological tract.” *Porgy and Bess* “should be seen not as an attempt at authenticity but as an almost mythical struggle between virtue and evil that serves as an ideal framework for Gershwin’s music,” wrote another critic, while *Time* contended: “Porgy is not a folk opera—and particularly not a black folk opera. Such a notion implies a kind of ground-level realism that is just not there. *Porgy* is simply a fable about man’s innocence in a hard and corrupting world.” In Philadelphia, a reviewer maintained that “the opera is not about darky life—as some productions have seemed—but about the universal stuff of opera—love, passion and death.” One critic credited director O’Brien with removing the work’s “shallowness” and replacing it with “universalilty. . . Watermelons make a brief appearance, but this is not a watermelon play in the sense that it has often been done.”

Allying *Porgy and Bess* with recognized operas and universal themes also allowed critics to imply or ask outright: if no one considered the content of those other operas politically or socially unacceptable, how could anyone object to *Porgy and Bess*? Critics pointed out that *Porgy and Bess* tackled opera’s characteristic themes, that “the inhabitants of Catfish Row are genuine operatic cousins to those resourceful Russian vagabonds in Moussorgsky’s ‘Boris’ and the camp followers in Verdi’s ‘Forza del Destino.’” “No one judges ‘La Boheme’ on its faithfulness to the everyday realities of Left Bank life,” reminded one critic; and Todd Duncan, who originated the role of Porgy in 1935, recalled that he countered criticism from “close friends” about the show by pointing out: “Well, all that incest and everything else in the Ring Cycle, does that demean the German race? Carmen was a slut; does that demean the Spaniards? Tosca and Violetta were prostitutes; does that demean the Italians? Now Bess is just another prostitute, and it happens she’s a Negro. It makes a good story, and that’s that.”

The *New York Post*’s music critic confronted the question of contemporary racial sensibilities most directly with this challenge to readers: “If there be any to criticize the subject matter or the dialect as derogatory to the black, so then should the Italian Anti-defamation League attack the same ‘Cavalleria’ as a caricature of Italian temper or the German-American object to the pomposity of Wagner’s masters? With love Gershwin wrote a slice-of-life piece about a people of a particular time and place, and its music has first-class symphonic development connecting melodies that have the fecundity of Verdi’s in ‘Rigoletto.’” This kind of white certitude about what should or
should not be offensive to African Americans was not new in the critical responses to *Porgy and Bess*. As far back as the play *Porgy’s* debut in 1927, white commentators had rushed to the show’s defense and chided overly sensitive African Americans who criticized the show’s depiction of their own race. In the mid-1970s, critical justifications for the political acceptability of *Porgy and Bess* reflected an era marked by growing white animosity toward black claims to equal opportunity and rising cultural celebration of white ethnic identities. The politics of backlash against the civil rights movement emerged with equal clarity in the sentiment of the many critics who praised the “maturity” of 1976 audiences for their ability to accept *Porgy and Bess*. “I admit I was one of those who a few years ago thought that the time was not right to revive a folk opera with such stereotypes of Negroes (blacks is the preferred word now),” began one Canadian critic, who promised “time has brought enlightenment along with maturity to the black people and they now can accept *Porgy and Bess* as a period piece, as a valid souvenir of how some people regarded blacks in the dirty ’30s . . . Thank heavens the times came right for us to be allowed to see *Porgy and Bess* again.” Other critics also seemed grateful that the ebb of black protest meant that they were “allowed to see *Porgy and Bess* again,” such as the *New York Post* music critic who wrote that the opera “isn’t as annoying as it would have been even just 10 years ago. There is an accuracy and affection in this period feeling . . . [and] the detachment lent by time forgives much.” Another critic characterized the current moment more explicitly as “the less hectic climate of the seventies” and argued that, as a result of diminished protest, “the stereotypes have even taken on a voguish charm.” The *Washington Post*’s Richard Coe also linked audiences’ political maturity with the work’s new status as a full-fledged opera, noting: “Audiences have been growing up since ‘Porgy and Bess’ went to Moscow. . . . Today’s audiences seem to be seeing ‘Porgy and Bess’ not as a documentary slur on blacks but as a work of art.”

White critics and commentators were not the only ones making the case for *Porgy and Bess* as an acceptable post-civil rights movement work of art. Raoul Abdul, music critic for the *New York Amsterdam News*, also argued that the passage of time influenced the way audiences should understand *Porgy and Bess*. Like many black reviewers before him, he placed his views of *Porgy and Bess* in the context of African American upward mobility and black criticism of the opera at its 1935 debut. Abdul observed: “Throughout its history, ‘Porgy and Bess’ has never gained the support of Black audiences to any large degree. When it first came on the scene in 1935, Blacks who had any interest in the arts were struggling to join the mainstream of American life.
They did not care to remember Catfish Row.” The passage of time (and implicitly, the gains of the civil rights movement), he maintained, enabled the cast of *Porgy and Bess*, as “artists who are too young to remember life in Catfish Row or the social conditions in 1935,” to surmount the status anxieties of their thirties counterparts. These performers, as opera professionals, “take the enlightened view that the inhabitants of the Row are no more authentic than Bizet’s gypsies in ‘Carmen’ or Mascagni’s Sicilians in ‘Cavalleria.’” Abdul also argued that these enlightened 1970s professionals only concerned themselves with “artistic matters,” yet he used as an example the problem of “how to handle the difficult transition in Act II, Scene I where Jake speaks of the necessity of earning a living to be answered suddenly by Porgy’s ‘I’ve got plenty of nothing’”—a dilemma arguably as political as it was artistic.74

Performers in the HGO’s production discussed their views of the opera and the characters they portrayed in ways that served to reclaim the opera as a depiction of African American community life. The mainstream white press sought out their views far more often than they had during previous productions. Robert Mosley, who alternated in the role of Porgy, described his view of the character as a middle-aged man: “He’s getting on. He’s never had anyone like Bess in his life before. He’ll probably never find another one like her. You can’t play him too brash, yet you can’t play him too pathetic.” Mosley agreed with the choice to eliminate Porgy’s cart (“Having Porgy move on his knees makes him seem stronger”), yet he did not object to what his interviewer described as “DuBose Heyward’s ‘nigger’ dialect,” insisting: “It fits. It sounds right. It works.” Larry Marshall, who played Sportin’ Life, had a similarly detailed understanding of his character, who he saw as part of the Catfish Row community rather than as an outsider: “The idea was that he came from Catfish Row, went to New York and had come back. He fit with the community . . . he had been there. People knew him. He was there in the funeral and hurricane scenes.” To Clamma Dale, Bess symbolized the struggle of all African American women, including herself: Bess “has somehow, as most black women always have had, an ability to survive,” and “she had to leave home, she had to survive—she had to hustle . . . the way I do as an artist . . . to keep herself together.” In an article on the resurgence of black musical theatre that ran in a magazine supplement to African American newspapers nationwide, cast members urged black audiences to recognize *Porgy and Bess’s* relevance to African Americans. Donnie Ray Albert noted, “as blacks we have been in this position and have overcome many of the things that Porgy does. He sings ‘I’m on My Way,’ at the play’s end and that’s what black people are all about”; and Marshall made the point that
“while a white man wrote this opera, it really takes blacks to perform it.” Both Albert and Andrew Smith, who played Crown, emphasized that this production was different than previous versions, with Albert hoping “that audiences will feel proud after seeing our ‘Porgy and Bess’” and Smith adding: “I’m very impressed with the fact that this production is finally being done in its entirety. . . . I don’t want black audiences to feel offended by this work in any way.”

Dale, the principal Bess and a media favorite, had several opportunities to articulate her view of the opera’s tragic heroine. Like Gockley and so many music critics, Dale believed that producing *Porgy and Bess* as a musically authentic opera altered once-troubling racial representations. Dale freely admitted that after a 1974 turn in the role at the Los Angeles Civic Light Opera (directed by Ella Gerber), she “never thought [she would] sing Bess again . . . [and] realized that the part had become a stereotype.” But, confident that the HGO’s operatic treatment would give her “a chance to remove those prejudices against Black women,” Dale agreed to sing the role again. Although she eschewed the label, Dale offered a variety of feminist-sounding explanations for her character’s situation and behavior. “Bess is a gorgeous creature, but she can only define herself from the men in her life. She is the kind of person every woman today is struggling not to be,” she told one interviewer. And she proclaimed to another: “Bess is sensual and sexy, but at the same time she wants to be respected by her peers. Society, even today, doesn’t want to let a woman be both.” “I love Bess . . . I have tremendous feeling, tremendous compassion for her,” Dale confessed. With an intricate sense of Bess’s “brains,” motivations, and place in the story, Dale attributed Robbins’s death at Crown’s hands to Bess (“She’s tired of babysitting Crown. She’s been to a couple of parties and she’s exhausted. If she were really to have pampered and seduced him, nothing would have happened, but by the time of the [dice] game she’s too tired and it’s out of control”) and argued that Bess was an emblem of black liberation, leaving Porgy because “Porgy can give her the same kind of love [as Crown], but not the clothes and other things she liked. Bess is the one character in the opera who, in my opinion, speaks for the black community. . . . I’m going to go on and do what I want.”

While they claimed the opera’s characters, many *Porgy and Bess* performers also expressed a certain ambivalence in their recognition of the high professional and political stakes of working in the opera, from typecasting to political objections among other African Americans. The breakthroughs of black opera superstars like Leontyne Price notwithstanding, “color-blind casting” was more a nascent idea than a widespread professional practice in
the 1970s, and these singers’ comments on *Porgy and Bess* reflect their efforts to negotiate careers in a field where many racial barriers remained.77 Dale, for example, while articulating the complex “silent scripts” that made *Porgy and Bess*’s characters less stereotypical, also argued that the passage of time made them more acceptable politically. Describing the extreme stereotypes about African Americans of earlier decades, she maintained that “when you have to deal with [such stereotypes], you can’t let people who don’t know blacks personally see ‘Amos and Andy’ and Stepin Fetchit.” Then, after implicitly equating *Porgy and Bess* with *Amos ’n’ Andy*, she insisted: “The era of fist-shaking, honky-calling is over. I believe militancy is only valid if it’s an action that’s creative” rather than merely critical. Carol Brice, a Juilliard graduate and the first black winner of the prestigious Naumburg Foundation award for vocal artists, recounted that her teachers discouraged her from an opera career because of the paucity of roles for African American singers. While she did perform in *Porgy and Bess* during the 1960s, she confided to an interviewer: “During the ’60s we shunned ’Porgy and Bess’ and there weren’t many productions. The blacks felt it showed only the seamy side of black life. There was a lot of pressure exerted to keep it from being done.” Smith, while “naturally proud” of his role as Crown, said he was unlikely to play the part again because he did not “want to be stereotyped . . . [or] limited to just black roles.” Smith also added that, since “a black man must be ‘super good’ in order to land a white role,” he had used the leverage he gained through playing Crown to extract promises from the HGO that he would be considered for a wider range of roles in the future. Marshall also admitted that while enamored of the opera’s “great story line [and] great characters,” he had “come full circle” regarding *Porgy and Bess*: “I like the musical very much, but I’m not sure if I’ll stay in it when it starts its American and European tours.” Dale was particularly outspoken about the professional opportunities she intended to seize in this moment of acclaim, praising Price and Marian Anderson as trailblazers in one interview and bragging in another: “My interpretation gives me a chance to prove just how demanding Bess is for a serious, classically trained singer.” She also predicted confidently: “Blacks have asked me why I am singing ‘white’ music. But if you’re good, if you emerge from the mediocrity, I don’t think color becomes a barrier. There are too many opera companies who need singers who can really sing.”78

A well-publicized incident during *Porgy and Bess*’s New York City run directly and publicly linked the contemporary political issue of affirmative action to the opera and belied Dale’s optimism that color posed no barrier to talented African American artists. In 1975 the New York City Commission

*Porgy and Bess, 1959–2012* • 297
on Human Rights (chaired by Eleanor Holmes Norton) warned the HGO about discriminatory hiring practices in its production of *Treemonisha*, then playing on Broadway with only three African American players in its thirty-five-member orchestra. Gockley promised to make a special effort to hire minority musicians for the upcoming *Porgy and Bess*. The following year, *Porgy and Bess* arrived with only four African American orchestra members out of a total of forty-three (the same number as in the Breen production two decades earlier). Coproducer Sherwin Goldman defended the production by relying on the stereotype that African American musicians were not qualified to play classical music. He responded to the commission’s inquiry with a letter that claimed there were too few African American musicians capable of playing “an extremely difficult classical opera score,” and in fact “a Duke Ellington, a Count Basie, or a Louis Armstrong could not qualify for this orchestra.”

The HGO’s insistence on the operatic authenticity of its *Porgy and Bess*, deployed rhetorically to neutralize the work’s racial stereotypes, in this instance served only to inflame a long-troubling issue of racial bias and raise it into public view. Black musicians had long suffered the discriminatory practices of the musicians’ union, and now, thanks to the political activism of the civil rights movement, had a government body charged with investigating claims of discrimination. The HGO’s distinction between Broadway musical theatre and opera mattered little to Norton, who seized the opportunity to investigate discriminatory hiring practices on Broadway. Deeply unsatisfied with Goldman’s letter, Norton scheduled a day-long public hearing on the matter and cited *Porgy and Bess* as “an especially dramatic example of an industry-wide pattern of severely restricted opportunities for minority musicians in Broadway musicals.” At the hearing, the HGO’s production manager and orchestra contractor attributed the racial imbalance to short notice and the need to fill the orchestra seats quickly with qualified players, but the contractor did acknowledge that he had asked some African American union members to audition even though it was industry practice that union players were not required to undergo auditions. The testimony of other Broadway orchestra contractors suggested the biases that were at work, as one pledged a willingness to hire black musicians “if we can find them,” and another rationalized that “a contractor may be doing a Black musician a disservice to place him in a situation where he may bomb out.”

Always a magnet for publicity, *Porgy and Bess* proved a useful platform for publicizing the discrimination faced by African American musicians. Despite the fact that she had singled out a high-profile production with an African American cast to launch her investigation, Norton contended: “We
cannot allow opportunities for minority musicians to be restricted to Black productions alone, and tolerate their virtual exclusion from all other musicals. Nor can we count on the continued existence of a large number of Black musicals to provide the only opportunities for minority musicians.” Actor and activist Ossie Davis also testified at the hearing and used the example presented by *Porgy and Bess* to forceful rhetorical effect. “Gershwin’s score is sacrosanct,” he protested, adding sarcastically: “We are given to understand that the music of Gershwin is so marvelous, so demanding, that Black musicians could not play it.” Countering the claim of a scarcity of qualified musicians, he demanded: “The Houston Opera Company should find the best possible black musicians and help train them to live up to the standard” it required. “It may be true that we have plenty of nothing,” Davis concluded, “but it is by no means true that nothing is plenty for us.”

In 1983 the HGO and Goldman revived their 1976 production of *Porgy and Bess* with appearances at Boston’s Wang Center, Washington’s Kennedy Center, and New York City’s cavernous Radio City Music Hall. While billed as “new,” the production had entered the HGO’s repertory and was brought back in virtually identical form, including several cast members. The Metropolitan Opera Company sealed *Porgy and Bess*’s place in the operatic repertory with its 1985 production five decades after the opera’s premiere, starring Simon Estes as Porgy and Grace Bumbry as Bess.83 In an echo of the Human Rights Commission’s 1976 hearings into the HGO’s *Porgy and Bess* orchestra, the Metropolitan Opera’s full-time chorus complained that they should sing in the production’s chorus, as they did for all other Met productions. According to a union spokesman, the choristers objected to “the possible public image of an ensemble considered ill-equipped to handle that particular music,” but they had no recourse since the terms of the Gershwin estate insisted on African American singers. The Met’s chorus master later admitted that the talent level of the chorus he assembled was “just staggering” and far beyond his expectations.

The Met’s African American performers and choreographer also echoed their predecessors, claiming *Porgy and Bess* as their own but admitting their complicated feelings about the material. Bumbry noted that she had once “looked down” on *Porgy and Bess* but, upon close study of the score, did “a complete turnaround” and moved “from reluctance to acceptance to gungho.” Estes admitted he had never sung Porgy before because he “did not want to be stereotyped because [he was] black,” but he also maintained that by singing the role, he was “heir to Todd Duncan, Paul Robeson, [and] William Warfield” and proof that their struggles to break the color barrier were not
in vain. Choreographer Arthur Mitchell, founder of the Dance Theater of Harlem, instructed the chorus: “You can be poor—and elegant. Just because it’s ‘Porgy and Bess,’ you don’t have to shuffle.” In 1986 a production directed by Trevor Nunn at Great Britain’s prestigious Glyndebourne Opera Festival drew international praise; a subsequent broadcast on U.S. public television brought it into living rooms around the country.

*Porgy and Bess* was now firmly ensconced in the opera world, and its racial representations became part of the show’s historical background rather than a question for contemporary debate. African American artists continued to perform regularly in *Porgy and Bess* during the late 1980s and the 1990s as the work joined the repertory of most U.S. opera companies (it was also produced regularly in Europe). These versions generally hewed to a traditional, sepia-toned approach to Catfish Row, although at least one production, at Austria’s Bregenz Festival, took a radical visual approach. In a culture preoccupied with the racial identities of the producers and consumers of hip-hop music and other manifestations of urban youth culture, *Porgy and Bess* no longer bore the political burden that past productions had shouldered.

American opera critics and audiences enjoyed *Porgy and Bess* for its exquisite and unusually accessible music and for the sorely needed racial diversity it brought to opera stages. In 1995 choreographer Hope Clarke became the first African American to direct a major production of the opera, produced by the HGO and a consortium of seven other U.S. opera companies. White reviewers saw her as laying the last vestiges of political controversy to rest. They lauded her attempts to bring authenticity to the opera; one reviewer described “Clarke’s refreshing vision of Catfish Row” as being “based more on fact than stereotype.” And indeed, she added several small details into the staging that acknowledged the realities of black communities during segregation and the influence of African practices on African American culture. Clarke cited her own experiences and knowledge of the African American community to justify a number of her staging decisions; she told one interviewer: “Coming from a black perspective, I know how we think, how we feel, what we do. I understand the little things.” Her version of racial authenticity was radically different from that of DuBose Heyward. Where Heyward envisioned his characters as delightfully free of stifling white notions of propriety and ambition, she characterized the residents of Catfish Row as “hard-working people . . . not slovenly, sit-around-all-day black people. . . . They just happen, maybe, to be on the lower echelon, but . . . they’re upwardly mobile.” (In another interview, she insisted: “This is an opera about people in a meaningful community. They just happen to be poor.”) She used costumes to
indicate a multiclass community, a detail true to many black neighborhoods during segregation but not part of Heyward’s original conception. She also incorporated African-style drumming in the picnic scene and reincorporated as much of a Gullah dialect as possible into the singing. This cultural specificity coexisted with a firm belief that the opera’s story was universal. Clarke noted that “we’re all kind of the same, aren’t we?”; and Marquita Lister, who sang Bess, told a reporter that “the only African American thing about it is that it’s set in a black community, and the people singing it are black. The story really is universal.” Reviews in the black press took the same view, and those who mentioned Clarke’s role as the first African American to direct a high-profile production of the opera did so only in passing.86

So it is perhaps unsurprising that, on the occasion of Porgy and Bess’s first New York City production of the new century, music critic Anthony Tommasini made a radical proposal. “If Leontyne Price could portray an adolescent geisha in ‘Madama Butterfly,’ a role she sang exquisitely,” he asked

*The producers of Porgy and Bess in Bregenz, Austria, in 1997 completely reimagined Catfish Row as an abandoned and vaguely apocalyptic urban district. It was not only among the least recognizable of Catfish Rows; it was also undoubtedly the largest, installed on a floating stage before a 6,800-seat amphitheater alongside Lake Constance. (Photo by author, 1997)*
in the pages of the *New York Times* in 2002, “why not a white soprano as Bess?” When black actor and author Loften Mitchell made the same suggestion in 1967, he believed that with a white cast, “white America can see how bad [*Porgy and Bess*] really is and how insulting [it is] not only to the black race but to the human race.”87 Tommasini, in contrast, argued that the widespread use of “color-blind casting,” prevalent on opera and Broadway musical stages alike, rendered the Gershwin estate’s strict rules about the racial makeup of *Porgy and Bess* casts anachronistic. (He also made the more dubious argument that the opera “is not often produced” due to the casting requirements.) Estes agreed that “color-blind casting” was overdue for *Porgy and Bess*. “Music knows no color,” he asserted, adding: “This may sound extreme, but I think it’s almost unconstitutional for ‘Porgy and Bess’ to be performed only by black artists.” Arguing for the relative insignificance of race in operatic casting, Tommasini insisted that “it’s not that appearance does not matter in opera. But voice, artistry and dramatic presence matter more,” and he cited several examples of superstars like Plácido Domingo and Luciano Pavarotti singing, to great acclaim, roles for which they were physically unsuited. Estes’s stance was consistent, in that he had long urged opera companies to cast black singers in roles not originally written for African Americans, but he also pointed out that, despite obvious strides, African Americans “have a long way to go” before reaching equality in the opera world. Tommasini agreed, but he wondered, “How will barring white singers from productions of ‘Porgy and Bess’ help matters?”88

In the twenty-first century, African Americans continued to reclaim and reinvent *Porgy and Bess*, much as Hope Clarke had done. In 2008 the Zachary Scott Theatre Center in Austin, Texas, staged a production that directly referenced the devastation that Hurricane Katrina had wrought upon African Americans in New Orleans by staging the opera’s hurricane scene with the characters stranded on rooftops rather than huddling indoors. The *New York Times* described this version as “a bluesy new jazz, gospel and dance staging” with “jazz-heavy soul and gospel orchestrations, choreography and imagery meant to give it a contemporary twist and . . . choreography . . . indebted to Bob Fosse and African tribal dance.” Cast members did not believe the work presented offensive stereotypes; one observed: “I can relate to this material without being offended by it.”89 Another reinvented version of *Porgy and Bess* came in late 2011, when the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts, staged a briskly paced musical-theatre version that cut the most stereotypically offensive scenes and characters, replaced nearly all of the sung recitative with spoken dialogue, and reconceived the staging
of key scenes, all in order to provide more complex, fully realized emotions and motivations for the characters. Retitled *The Gershwins’ Porgy and Bess*, it opened on Broadway in early 2012 starring acclaimed musical-theatre performer Audra McDonald in the role of Bess. Before its arrival in New York, it kicked up some controversy when composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim responded to a *New York Times* interview with the show’s creative team with a blistering attack on their attempts to “deal with the holes and issues in the story” and make the show more accessible for contemporary audiences. Sondheim blasted the creative team’s “disdain . . . toward the opera itself” and challenged their desire to add backstory for characters who are “archetypes and intended to be larger than life”; Sondheim argued that “filling in ‘realistic’ details” for these characters “is likely to reduce them to line drawings.”90 The creative team made its changes in order to solve problems in how *Porgy and Bess* worked dramatically; in doing so, they also solved the core problem of the show’s troubling stereotypes of African American character and behavior. *Porgy and Bess* may still generate lively debate among producers, critics, and audiences, but the argument over race and representation so long and durably attached to the show seems to have taken its final bow.
This page intentionally left blank
EPILOGUE
Charleston, 1970–2005

In 1970 South Carolina celebrated its three-hundredth birthday, and in Charleston, *Porgy and Bess* played a starring role in the festivities. The first production of the opera ever in its city of origin was produced by the Charleston Symphony Association and funded largely by the South Carolina Tricentennial Commission. *Porgy and Bess* veteran Ella Gerber was brought in to direct a cast of local amateurs. An enthusiastic black-tie crowd of 2,700 (including prominent elected officials and *Porgy and Bess* VIPs such as Jennifer Heyward and Eva Jessye) packed the city’s Municipal Auditorium on opening night and applauded through several curtain calls before consuming “85 cases of champagne and a refrigerator truck filled with food” at a post-show reception. A total of 35,000 people viewed the two-week run, which boasted seven sold-out performances.1

The response in the local press was as enthusiastic as it was in the Municipal Auditorium on opening night. Reviews and other press coverage lauded the production’s local authenticity, from the sets to the accents. “For the first time, the dialect of ‘Porgy’ was repeated by the Charlestonians who had inspired Heyward to the work,” boasted one review, while another remarked: “In the spoken lines Charleston accents did not have to be acquired. They rolled with natural credibility from native throats.”2 The set was “an authentic representation of local buildings,” and, the *Charleston News and Courier* assured readers, “modifications to accommodate the dramatic action are the only variations from a completely accurate reproduction” of local buildings.3 With characteristic Charleston gallantry, no one noted that while this was the first production of *Porgy and Bess* to reach a Charleston stage, it was not the first attempt. Nor did any of those praising its example of inter-
SAMUEL "GOAT" SMALLS
BETTER KNOWN AS
PORGY
BORN 1889
DIED 1924
THE INSPIRATION FOR
DUBOSE HEYWARD'S NOVEL "PORGY"
AND LATER THE OPERA
"PORGY AND BESS"
BY
HEYWARD AND GERSHWIN
racial unity mention the hospital workers’ strike that had wracked the city the prior year. Waring, still the editor of the News and Courier, alluded to the strike as he enthused: “The production is particularly timely for reasons too obvious for comment here. The glow of friendship and admiration pervading this community is a credit to our people of both races and a source of gratitude for our state, our region and our country.” One Charlestonian wrote to the News and Courier to declare how “seeing the mutual respect and cooperation between the whites and blacks was a heartwarming experience.” Another shared: “I felt great pride that in a world torn by upheaval our local people could work together, our whites and blacks if you will, blend their wonderful talents to produce something as beautiful and heart satisfying as ‘Porgy and Bess.’ I hope those souls, publications, etc., who are so quick to report national dissent will hear, see and applaud.” Indeed, the production drew national press coverage from the New York Times, the New York Amsterdam News (in which a columnist wrote of the integrated audience, “the end crowns the work”), and the CBS television news program 60 Minutes.

The production’s smashing success sparked thoughts of a reprise for the Charleston Symphony Association, which immediately began seeking the rights to produce the opera again the following year. That did not pan out, but the Symphony Association set its sights on a production during the U.S. bicentennial year in 1976. In the meantime, the Symphony Association and the Choraliers Music Club, an amateur African American chorus, presented concert opera versions of the Porgy and Bess music, having been restricted by the opera’s rights holders from including dramatization, sets, or costumes. At least one letter writer to the News and Courier saw even the concert opera as an interracial collaboration that went “farther than any others in dispelling ideas of racial disharmony in Charleston.” (Unlike the Symphony Association’s attempts to gain the rights to produce a fully staged Porgy and Bess, the Choraliers did manage to make their Porgy and Bess performances into annual events and even toured the region.)

Seven years later, the Houston Grand Opera’s plans to bring its production of Porgy and Bess to Charleston stirred controversy. The bicentennial had come and gone, but the undaunted Symphony Association was planning its own production for 1978; the opera’s rights holders were unwilling to license productions in successive years, fearing overexposure. Both of Charleston’s

(opposite)
The honorary grave site of Samuel Smalls, erected on James Island, near Charleston, in 1985. (Photo by author, 2005)
major newspapers editorialized in favor of an annual production “using local talent under local sponsorship,” like the fondly remembered “memorable and enriching” version produced to such local acclaim in 1970. The twin civic goals of tourism and interracial harmony remained the chief justifications for presenting *Porgy and Bess*; according to the *Charleston Post*, a local production “would give our city another outstanding tourist attraction as well as an opportunity for enriching the lives of all our citizens, black and white.” Local authenticity was another factor; a letter writer responding to the news that the Houston Grand Opera had canceled its Charleston engagement insisted: “No one can feel deeply the love, affection, and the relationship between blacks and whites in Charleston’s ‘Catfish Row’ than Charlestonians themselves. We don’t have to be directed or instructed because we have lived the life and have witnessed these experiences.” While the *Charleston Post* argued that the city’s “special relationship” with the opera should outweigh the rights holders’ concern about overexposure of the work, the rights holders disagreed. The next fully staged production of *Porgy and Bess* in Charleston did not occur until 1985, produced by the Catfish Row Company, a local non-profit established to present *Porgy and Bess* in its hometown and distribute any profits to local cultural organizations. Professionals sang the principal roles and the Choraliers made up the chorus.

In twenty-first-century Charleston, successful productions of *Porgy and Bess* have not erased the traces of the previous century’s racial segregation. I conducted significant research for this book at the South Carolina Historical Society (SCHS), which houses the extensive papers of DuBose and Dorothy Heyward and the Dock Street Theatre. The SCHS is located in a meticulously preserved antebellum-era building on Meeting Street in the center of Charleston’s historic downtown. The generally well-cataloged Heyward papers betrayed the influence of the city’s racial politics; many materials relating to the cancellation of the *Porgy* production in 1954 were filed in a folder marked “Photocopies of clippings from the Amsterdam News (a black NYC newspaper) about the play Porgy, 1960s,” even though the folder’s contents included clippings from the *News and Courier* and private correspondence. Perhaps the items were honestly misfiled, or maybe the assumption that outsiders were responsible for the controversy died hard. Either way, this curious mistake suggests how difficult it can be to contend straightforwardly with the racial conflicts of the city’s recent past.

I spent far less time at Charleston’s Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, housed in the Avery Normal School building and now part of the College of Charleston. Avery is as friendly and pro-
professionally run as SCHS, but its resources and collections are significantly smaller. There are no copies and no microfilm of the Charleston Messenger, the city’s black newspaper from the first half of the twentieth century. This archival imbalance is a legacy of segregation, the result of many decades during which well-funded institutions chose to preserve the records of white luminaries only and African Americans inclined to preserve their own community’s history lacked adequate resources to do so. It makes reclaiming the perspectives and experiences of black Charlestonians regarding Heyward, Porgy, and Porgy and Bess far more difficult than relating the story of Heyward and his peers that has dominated scholarly and popular writing about these subjects.

Outside of the archives, I discovered that I was not the only one preoccupied with reclaiming black Charleston’s relationship to Porgy and Bess. Charleston’s thriving tourism economy includes numerous bus tours of the city and the surrounding Low Country, run by a variety of operators, which depart from the Charleston Visitor Center. Among the offerings during a 2005 research trip was a “Porgy and Bess” tour, and I eagerly booked a seat. When I made my way to the appointed spot at the visitor center, I discovered that I was the only customer. The tour guide, Al, graciously agreed to take me on a solo tour, and we climbed into a van that had seen better days, unlike the sleeker, more-cushioned minibuses ferrying other tourists around Charleston’s cobblestoned streets. In addition to having conducted Porgy and Bess bus tours for years, Al was a member of the Choraliers, and he spoke proudly of how black college graduates who had sung in their college choirs, many of them educators, had founded the group in 1959 so that they could sing a variety of music in public concerts. He remembered the 1970 Porgy and Bess as the first time that blacks and whites sat together publicly, which struck me as perhaps more symbolically than literally true.

As we proceeded through the tour—a mix of sites directly related to Heyward and the Porgy and Bess story, and other locations significant in Charleston’s African American history more generally—I realized that Al was doing exactly what I planned to do with this book’s interludes: use the familiarity of the Porgy story as a hook to give people a different, more accurate account of African Americans in Charleston and the Low Country. He took me past the sites of churches (the church of Reverend Daniel Jenkins, which housed the Jenkins Orphanage, and the present-day building of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, in whose antebellum site Denmark Vesey had planned his uprising), schools (the Robert G. Shaw School, which was established during Reconstruction, and the Avery Institute), and houses (the
Aiken-Rhett House, with its slave quarters still standing; the site of Denmark Vesey’s home; and the home of the abolitionist Grimke sisters). He noted the neighborhoods that had historically been occupied by the city’s free African Americans and those that had once been integrated but suffered white flight during the 1960s. He described the slave cultivation of rice that made white Charleston rich in the eighteenth century and the caste and color discrimination within the black community. From Al, I learned that the city raised its statue of John C. Calhoun to a startlingly high pedestal because so many black citizens had spit and urinated upon it when it was first erected at ground level. I wondered how other tour guides explained the monument’s unusual elevation.

The sites specific to *Porgy and Bess* included the obvious (89-91 Church Street, the well-known model for Catfish Row and the only place on the tour where we passed by another tour bus; and the historic Heyward-Washington House) and the peripheral (the Customs House, mentioned at the very end of the story; and the Medical University of South Carolina, the medical school where Serena fears the coroner will take her husband’s body if she cannot raise enough money to bury him). On Market Street, Al talked about the black street vendors whose calls are so memorable in the opera, and he even sang a few of the passages. And, of course, he told me about Samuel Smalls, the “real” Porgy, whom he described as having been crippled by a childhood bout with polio. Driving across the Ashley River to James Island, he explained the African cultural retentions among the enslaved, fostered by the isolation of the Sea Islands, which contributed to the Low Country’s distinctive Gullah culture and language.

Our final stop on the island was St. James Presbyterian Church, where, Al claimed, George Gershwin had famously attended a service during his 1934 visit and whose present-day congregation included Smalls family descendants. Al demonstrated the “Charleston clap” that so entranced Gershwin when he witnessed the congregation’s syncopated response to the Holy Spirit. The cemetery next to the church was segregated, with all of the white graves facing east toward the rising sun. Al led me to a tombstone marked “Samuel Smalls.” The Catfish Row Company erected the marker in 1985, after some pressure by Rosa Johnson, on an empty spot on the black side of the cemetery; the site of the actual remains of Samuel Smalls, as with so many poor people, was never recorded. But Samuel Smalls was not just any poor black man. Generations of white readers and audiences who craved an authentic truth in DuBose Heyward’s fiction had sought the narrow truth
of his life, all the while averting their eyes from the larger truths of African American oppression, struggle, and resistance. The marker struck me as the perfect metaphor for the story of Charleston and Porgy: a gesture rooted in respect that nonetheless misses its mark; a monument embedded in the physical landscape of segregation; a tourist attraction.
This page intentionally left blank
Notes

**ABBREVIATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>The Afro-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADW</td>
<td>Atlanta Daily World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BET</td>
<td>Boston Evening Transcript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BH</td>
<td>Boston Herald</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BT</td>
<td>Boston Transcript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAA-DST</td>
<td>Carolina Art Association Dock Street Theatre Collection, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, S.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD</td>
<td>Chicago Defender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDD</td>
<td>Chicago Daily Defender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDT</td>
<td>Chicago Daily Tribune</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEP</td>
<td>Charleston Evening Post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNC</td>
<td>Charleston News and Courier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>Charleston Post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS</td>
<td>Columbia State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DBHP</td>
<td>DuBose Heyward Papers, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, S.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DHP</td>
<td>Dorothy Heyward Papers, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, S.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPL</td>
<td>Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HC</td>
<td>Houston Chronicle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HGOA</td>
<td>Houston Grand Opera Archives, Houston, Tex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAS</td>
<td>Los Angeles Sentinel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NR</td>
<td>The New Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYA</td>
<td>New York Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYAN</td>
<td>New York Amsterdam News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYEP</td>
<td>New York Evening Post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYHT</td>
<td>New York Herald Tribune</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYPL-BR</td>
<td>Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Division at Lincoln Center, New York, N.Y.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYPL-SC</td>
<td>Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York, N.Y.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYT</td>
<td>New York Times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYW</td>
<td>New York World</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION


3. For “Ethiopian opera houses,” see Burrows and Wallace, Gotham, 758. For Shakespearean and opera parodies, see Lott, Love and Theft, 73. On larger themes and audiences for minstrelsy, see also Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness.


5. Sotiropoulos, Staging Race.


7. For nineteenth-century minstrelsy, see Lott, Love and Theft. For stage versions of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, see Gossett, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” and American Culture; Lott, Love and Theft; Adams, E Pluribus Barnum; and Meserve, “Social Awareness on Stage,” 91–94.


10. Aida Overton Walker, “Colored Men and Women on the Stage,” Colored American Magazine, October 1905, 571, quoted in Krasner, Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 20–22. For African American artists and community institutions, cultural performance was often a means of economic survival. Groups like the Fisk Jubilee Singers toured and performed extensively, raising funds to support struggling black colleges. “Colored” orphanages taught their charges musical instruments, outfitted them in uniforms, and formed marching bands that similarly raised money.

11. While Porgy and Bess has given first opportunities to many (if not most) black opera singers who go on to successful careers, for many the opera has become its own ghetto, a “Porgy rut” where singers are cast in Porgy and Bess but rarely considered for traditionally white roles in other operas. Oby, “Equity in Operatic Casting as Perceived by African American Male Singers,” 24. From 1935 onward, production teams for the major Porgy and Bess productions generally included a sole African American
in the role of choral director or choreographer. Zora Neale Hurston sardonically bestowed the term “Negrotarians” on the whites who flocked to Harlem to watch black performers during the 1920s.

12. The NAACP’s first campaign against the representation of African Americans in film took place in 1915 when nationwide protests greeted the release of The Birth of a Nation. For the 1942 agreement, see Cripps, Slow Fade to Black, 3. For the 1951 NAACP protest campaign, see Ely, The Adventures of Amos ‘n’ Andy, 215–40. For the opposition of working black actors, see Tyler, From Harlem to Hollywood, and Jackson, Hattie.


15. Ibid., 214–15, 186.

CHAPTER I


3. Hale, Making Whiteness, 60; McElya, Clinging to Mammy.

4. Hale, Making Whiteness, 44–49.

5. On the ideas underlying post–Civil War sectional reunion, see Silber, The Romance of Reunion, 5–6. For Woodward quotation, see Hale, Making Whiteness, 143.

9. Ibid., “a beneficent providence,” 17; “almost grotesque,” 29; and “exotic as the Congo,” 115.
11. Ibid., “a heady, bestial stench,” 20; “Crown was crouched,” 19; “Peter shook violently,” 34.
13. Ibid., “yuh gots so much sense,” 49.
14. Ibid., “voted the democratic ticket,” 70; “the gentleman who has come down,” 96.
15. Ibid., “plea for help,” 11–12; “when nigger make de buckra laugh,” 76; “good lookin’ white gals” and Maria’s subsequent dialogue, 55–57.
16. Ibid., 92–93.
17. Ibid., 86.
18. Ibid., 149.
19. Ibid., 76–77. On the taboo against thoughtful depictions of black romantic love in the theatre, see Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 171. While a moving but understated part of the novel, the love affair would become a more dominant element of *Porgy and Bess*, providing Gershwin with the classic operatic structure of a thwarted love story and the opportunity to write a gorgeous love duet.
22. While the most recent biography of Heyward lists his first job as collecting burial-insurance payments in black neighborhoods, Heyward’s official biography makes no mention of that job, instead listing his first job as clerking in a hardware store. Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward*, 9; typescript of official biographical information that DuBose Heyward sent out in response to requests, see Box 2, 1172.01.02 (H) 01-06, DBHP. For Dorothy Heyward’s version of her husband’s biography, see Dorothy Heyward, “Goat Cart Beggar” typescript, Box 32, “Goat Cart Beggar (Ch. 11),” DHP.
23. On Heyward’s job as a cotton checker, see Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward*, 9; and Heyward’s official biographical information, 2. On the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, see Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry*, and Sullivan, *Days of Hope*. On Heyward’s work during World War I, see Slavick, *DuBose Heyward*, 31; Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward*, 15; and Heyward’s official biographical information, 3.

26. These novels included Clement Woods, Nigger: A Novel (1922); Jean Toomer, Cane (1923); DuBose Heyward, Porgy (1925) and Mamba’s Daughters (1929); and Julia Peterkin, Black April (1927) and Scarlet Sister Mary (1928). Albert Halper, “Whites Writing up the Blacks,” Dial 86 (January 1929): 29–30. For “in the current world of letters,” see Clark, Innocence Abroad, 28. See also Durham, “The Reputed Demises of Uncle Tom,” 27. A Charleston reviewer of Porgy made the same point about magazine stories, noting: “Some of the most amusing short stories in the magazines today are about negroes, and the best of them are not too exaggerated to make us laugh and say: that is just like them.” Carlotta G. Moffat, “A Beautiful Novel,” CNC, undated, in Box 7, Folder 180.01.03.01-02, DHP.

27. On Julia Peterkin, see Williams, A Devil and a Good Woman, Too.

28. There is a rich body of scholarship on the complicated racial and ethnic dynamics involved in blackface performance in all of its nineteenth- and twentieth-century forms; this includes Lott, Love and Theft; Rogin, Blackface, White Noise; Lhamon, Raising Cain; Melnick, A Right to Sing the Blues; and Dawидoff, “Some of Those Days.”


30. Ibid., 41.

31. Ibid., 42.

32. Heyward, “The New Note in Southern Literature,” The Bookman 61 (April 1925): 153. Porgy was serialized in The Bookman in three installments over three months (August, September, and October 1925). In 1925 George H. Doran and Company, publisher of Porgy, also published The Bookman; in previous years, The Bookman had been put out by other major publishing houses and contained advertisements for and reviews of titles from all of the major U.S. publishers of the time.

33. On Heyward’s comments on Fire in the Flint, see Heyward, “The New Note in Southern Literature,” 155–56. On the Jean Toomer incident, see Durham, DuBose Heyward, 28; Slavick, DuBose Heyward, 23; Williams, A Devil and a Good Woman, Too, 63–64.

34. “The Newly Articulate South: An Interview with DuBose Heyward” (typescript), in Box 2, Folder 1172.01.02 (H) 01-08, DBHP. “‘Stay Home!’ Is Heyward’s Advice to Young Authors,” Galveston News, 17 February 1929; also CEP and Birmingham News; all in Box 2, “Clippings re: DuBose Heyward, 1926–1930s,” DBHP.

35. CS, 5 November (1931?), in Box 2, “Clippings re: DuBose Heyward, 1926–1930s,” DBHP. On Heyward’s role as an organizer of the conference, see typescript of “The Newly Articulate South: An Interview with Du Bose Heyward,” in Box 2, Folder 1172.01.02 (H) 01-08, DBHP. On the Southern Writers Conference and its attendees, see McDowell, Ellen Glasgow and the Ironic Art of Fiction, 33–34.

36. Heyward’s official biography, in Box 2, 1172.01.02(H) 01-06, DBHP. “Du Bose Heyward, Author of Epics of Charleston Negro Life, Is the Son of Once Wealthy Southern Aristocrats,” Philadelphia Record, 9 February 1929, and “Writers of Today in
South Carolina,” CS, undated (probably 1934), both in Box 2, “Clippings re: DuBose Heyward, 1926–1930s,” DBHP.


38. Ibid., x–xii.


42. For Du Bois on art as propaganda and Heyward, see W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” The Crisis 32 (October 1926), 296–97. For Du Bois’s speech, see Du Bois, ibid., 292. For “a co-worker in the kingdom of culture,” see Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, 46. For “mysterious force” and “had the power to stir me,” see Heyward and Heyward, Porgy: A Play in Four Acts, ix. For “superlatively happy” and “wistful envy,” see Heyward, “And Once Again—the Negro,” 39.

43. For Chicago, see Box 7, “Clippings re: Porgy, 1925–1936,” and for movie contract, see Box 7, “Contract, 1925, and letter,” both DBHP.

44. Vertical Files 30–4, “Heyward, DuBose (Dust Jackets Only),” VF-SCHS.

45. DuBose Heyward, Porgy (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, by arrangement with George H. Doran Company), in author’s possession.

46. For “a fine character study,” see NYT, 27 September 1925, BR20; for Newman and Broun quotes, see NYT, 1 November 1925, BR14; for Rinehart quote, see NYT, 14 February 1926, BR25; for Glasgow quote and “a magnificent novel,” see NYT, 13 December 1925, BR16.

48. “Porgy,” Atlanta Journal, 18 October 1925 (reviews listing other southern authors include those in the Charlotte Observer, Charleston Post, Los Angeles News, and New York Times); “Porgy,” Charlotte Observer, undated; “Du Bose Heyward’s Book Is Remarkable Analysis of the Negro’s Psychology,” CP; Cullen, “Book Shelf,” 379. Atlanta Journal, Charlotte Observer, Charleston Post in Box 7, Folder 180.01.03.01-02, DHP.


51. “Du Bose Heyward’s Book Is Remarkable Analysis of the Negro’s Psychology,” CP; “Porgy,” NR, 23 December 1925, 143; “Porgy’ Unusual Story of Negroes; DuBose Heyward’s Novel Convincing to Those Who Know Negroes Best,” Raleigh Observer, 17 January 1926; Margaret Davis Jaffe, untitled review, Norfolk Virginian-Pilot; “A Romance of Negro Life,” NYT. Raleigh Observer in Box 7, Folder 180.01.03.01-02, DHP.

52. “Porgy,” Nashville Banner; “Inklings” column, unknown and undated Savannah newspaper; “Heyward’s First Novel,” CS; “A Romance of Negro Life,” NYT. Unknown and undated Savannah newspaper in Box 7, Folder 180.01.03.01-02, DHP.


55. “Porgy’ Unusual Story of Negroes; DuBose Heyward’s Novel Convincing to Those Who Know Negroes Best”; Moffat, “A Beautiful Novel”; “Porgy,” Nashville Banner (the “Inklings” column in the Savannah paper similarly noted “the contradictory characteristics of the race, which includes love and loyalty to their ‘folks,’ and yet
causes them to stand as a man against the white people in time of trouble”); Broun, “It Seems to Me”; Ovington, “Porgy”; “A Romance of Negro Life,” NYT.


57. Box 2, “Clippings re: DuBose Heyward, 1926–1930s,” DBHP.

58. Emily Clark, “Novel about Negroes from the Pen of a Southern Poet,” Baltimore Sun, undated, in Box 7, Folder 180.01.03.01-02, DHP.


INTERLUDE: CHARLESTON, 1680–1900


2. On the city’s population and the residences and mobility of slaves, see Wade, Slavery in the Cities, 326; Morgan, “Black Life in Eighteenth-Century Charleston,” 188–89; and Vlach, “Without Recourse to Owners,” 151. For white minister’s quote, see ibid., 157–58, and Wade, Slavery in the Cities, 61. For Bremer quote, see Vlach, “‘Without Recourse to Owners,’” 151.


5. Yuhl, A Golden Haze of Memory, 40.

6. For black settlement on “the Neck,” see Vlach, “‘Without Recourse to Owners,’” 158; Hill, “Family, Life, and Work Culture,” 158–60; and Harris, “Charleston’s Free Afro-American Elite,” 304. For 1856 grand jury testimony, see Powers, Black Charlestonians, 25. For changing racial demographics of downtown neighborhoods, see Hill, “Family, Life, and Work Culture,” 163; Powers, Black Charlestonians, 251–52; and Tindall, South Carolina Negroes, 1877–1900, 295.


9. Powers, Black Charlestonians, 14–15, 63; Morgan, “Black Life in Eighteenth-
Century Charleston,” 197, 204–6. According to Morgan, “White workers were openly resentful of the competition they faced from their black counterparts. One after another during the course of the century, shipwrights, helmsmen, chimney sweeps, house carpenters, bricklayers, cordwainers, master coopers, painters, glaziers, paperhangers, and master tailors banded together to complain that blacks were taking their jobs.” Morgan, “Black Life in Eighteenth-Century Charleston,” 204. See also Wade, Slavery in the Cities, 273–74.

10. Charleston had a long history of hurricanes, the first documented by European settlers in 1686. Heyward probably based the hurricane in Porgy on the one that hit Charleston on 28 August 1911 and caused, in the words of historian Walter J. Fraser Jr., a “night of terror” for Charlestonians, two deaths, and over $1 million in property damage. Charleston also suffered major hurricanes in 1886 and 1893. Fraser, Charleston! Charleston!, 11, 326–27, 352. For an extensive account of the 1886 hurricane, see Steinberg, Acts of God, 17.

11. On the “mosquito fleet,” see Powers, Black Charlestonians, 107, and Heyward, Porgy, 110. On black stevedores, see Heyward, Porgy, 38, and Powers, Black Charlestonians, 127–33; Jenkins, Seizing the New Day, 65–69; also see Jenkins, Seizing the New Day, on the decline of this brief moment of interracial solidarity among unions in this period. In his memoir of antebellum Charleston, Daniel E. Huger Smith also remembered the entrance of the black fishing fleet into Charleston Harbor: “It was really a sight to see them running up in a high breeze to a market. Many old gentlemen would time their dinner if possible to suit the tide, and the wharf where they landed would be crowded with servants and hucksters, through whom the fish might reach the kitchens.” Smith, A Charlestonian’s Recollections, 64.

12. For the number of slaves imported between 1706 and 1755, see Morgan, “Slave Sales in Colonial Charleston,” 905. For Sullivan’s Island, see Johnson, “Runaway Slaves and the Slave Communities in South Carolina,” 436; and Powers, Black Charlestonians, 3. For the wealth the slave trade created, see Wade, Slavery in the Cities, 20–22, 202; Morgan, “Slave Sales in Colonial Charleston,” 907, 926–27.


14. Creel, A Peculiar People, 96–99. According to Creel, the origin of the Gullah name derives from either the Angola Africans who were imported into South Carolina during the eighteenth century or the Golas from Liberia, who were imported into the state during the nineteenth century. Ibid., 15, 17. See also Wood, Black Majority, 167–91.

15. Creel, A Peculiar People, 68, 22–23, 235, 150–63. In 2001 historian Michael P. Johnson persuasively challenged the idea that Vesey and others were not actually planning an uprising, but were rather the victims of white paranoia. See Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators,” 915–76, and Morgan, “Conspiracy Scares,” 159–66. For more on the attempt by Charleston’s African Americans to establish their own Methodist church, see Berlin, Slaves without Masters, 289–90.


Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 95–96. On the treadmill, see Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 203. According to Fraser, the first “sugar house” was instituted during the American Revolution, when runaway slaves streamed into Charleston to join the British army. British officials arrested many of them and housed them in a “Sugar House” (on Broad Street near the Ashley River) owned by a local slave trader; the prisoners were used to repair fortifications and clean city streets. It is unclear whether the building was in fact a sugar warehouse or if the cruel irony of the name was intended even then. The antebellum “sugar house” was located at Magazine and Mazyck Streets. Ibid., 164, 203.


20. On grog shops, see Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 137. According to Wade, in 1851 the Charleston Grand Jury was still arguing against drinking sites, which brought “the negro slave in such familiar contact with the white man, as to excite his contempt, or invite the assertion of equality, or draw from him exhibitions of presumption and insubordination.” See also Johnson, “Runaway Slaves and the Slave Communities in South Carolina, 1799 to 1830,” 423–29; and Powers, *Black Charlestonians*, 24. Philip Morgan describes Charleston as “renowned for the most openly displayed interracial liaisons in British North America” during the colonial era and cites numerous contemporary sources for Charlestonians’ casual attitude toward interracial sex. Morgan, “Black Life in Eighteenth-Century Charleston,” 210–11.

21. For runaway slave ads, see Johnson, “Runaway Slaves and the Slave Communities in South Carolina, 1799 to 1830,” 425–27; and Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 215–18. According to Wade, some fugitive slaves were able to remain at large in Charleston, using their networks of African American acquaintances and knowledge of the city to elude capture. For attitude of self-assurance, see Morgan, “Black Life in Eighteenth-Century Charleston,” 187, 226–28. Morgan posits that this very self-assurance and relative autonomy blunted the urge to violent collective revolt that played out in Haiti and elsewhere in the Caribbean.


23. On the Charleston City Council, see Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 91. On secret schools, see ibid., 173–76. The state of South Carolina passed its first laws outlawing the education of slaves in 1740; see Birnie, “Education of the Negro in Charleston, South Carolina,” 14. See also Gutman, “Schools for Freedom,” 261. Gutman explains the great sacrifices that freedpeople made to obtain education by describing “the extraordinary energy and social purpose revealed by these men and women. Theirs was a magnificent effort” that did not spring fully fledged after emancipation but rather drew on “preexisting notions of parental responsibility and kin obligation” from slavery; “the freedpeople’s early post-emancipation craving for and defense of schooling for themselves, and especially for their children, rested in good part on values and
aspirations known among them as slaves.” Ibid., 296. See also Jenkins, *Seizing the New Day*, 71, 73.

24. Creel, *A Peculiar People*, 85–86. See also Comminsey, “The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts and Black Education in South,” 364. According to Comminsey, the school’s religious mission enabled it to evade the 1740 law preventing the education of slaves.


26. Gutman, “Schools for Freedom,” 272. Gutman further explains that many African American parents paid a “school tax” to pay for the new schools and bought books and other materials for them. Ibid., 277–80. On freedmen’s education in postemancipation Charleston, see also Jenkins, *Seizing the New Day*, 70–91. For literacy statistics, see ibid., 90. One clue to how the freedpeople of Charleston were able to pay for schools comes from W. E. B. Du Bois: “In 1866, the Charleston branch of the Freedmen’s Bank had deposits of $18,000; in 1870, $165,000; and in 1873, $350,000 belonged to 5,500 depositors, showing that this was the savings of the poor and not the capital of the petty bourgeois. Only about 200 of the depositors were white. The colored people had accounts ranging from 5 cents to $1,000. When the bank failed in 1874, the Charleston branch owed 5,296 depositors a total of $253,168.” See Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*, 416.

27. On black teachers, see Gutman, “Schools for Freedom,” 272. On the origins of Charleston’s free black population, see Morgan, “Black Life in Eighteenth-Century Charleston,” 212. On the free black population during the nineteenth century, see Powers, *Black Charlestonians*, 267 and 41, and Harris, “Charleston’s Free Afro-American Elite,” 303. According to Powers, almost 82 percent of free black workers during the antebellum period worked in semiskilled or skilled occupations. By the eve of the Civil War, 131 free blacks in Charleston owned a total of 388 slaves, and only 9 percent of these free black slaveholders controlled 31 percent of the slaves.


30. Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places*, 17–18. For “one of our civic organizations,” see ibid., 29. Examples of black professional organizations included the South Carolina Association of Colored Physicians, organized in 1899, which was headquartered in Charleston and established an African American hospital and training school for nurses in the city; and the Negro Cooperative and Protective Union, which advocated for black business development, educational opportunities, and the protection of civil rights. See Drago, *Initiative, Paternalism, and Race Relations*, 98, 120. The Brown Fellowship Society’s motto was “Charity and Benevolence,” and its mission was to as-
sist “widows and orphans” who were afflicted by “distress, sickness, and death.” Harris, “Charleston’s Free Afro-American Elite,” 292.

31. On distinctions, see Jenkins, Seizing the New Day, 107, and Clark, Echo in My Soul, 13. On Brown Fellowship Society, see Fitchett, “The Traditions of the Free Negro in Charleston, South Carolina,” 144, 150; and Harris, “Charleston’s Free Afro-American Elite,” 291–93. Drago, Initiative, Paternalism, and Race Relations, 81; Powers, Black Charlestonians, 99. Harris argues that historians have exaggerated the degree of color discrimination among African Americans in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Charleston, citing the presence of both black and mulatto men in the city’s two major benevolent associations for free African Americans. He further argues against the notion that Charleston experienced a three-tiered system of racial hierarchy (white, mulatto, black) such as that which defined New Orleans and some Caribbean societies.


34. Heyward, Porgy, 93–94, 39, 95.


36. On domestic servants, see Powers, Black Charlestonians, 103; on incidents at the Battery, see Jenkins, Seizing the New Day, 134; on the general end of deference, see Powers, Black Charlestonians, 76–79. For “nauseating sight” and “every mulatto,” see Fraser, Charleston! Charleston!, 275. For William Heyward quote, see Williamson, After Slavery, 277.

37. For Cardozo quote, see Powers, Black Charlestonians, 87; for Cardozo biographical information and June 1865 petition, see Foner, Freedom’s Lawmakers, 39, 146. For Colored People’s Convention, see Jenkins, Seizing the New Day, 130; and “Address of the Colored State Convention to the People of the State of South Carolina,” History Matters: The U.S. Survey on the Web, http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6514 (21 April 2009). See also Du Bois, Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880, 231, 387.

38. Foner, Freedom’s Lawmakers. For Charleston City Council and police force, see Jenkins, Seizing the New Day, 161; Powers, Black Charlestonians, 228; and Fraser, Charleston! Charleston!, 286, 291, 296–97.

39. On the streetcar protests, see Powers, Black Charlestonians, 233–35, and Jenkins, Seizing the New Day, 143–44; on the Academy of Music, see Powers, Black Charlestonians, 240. Charleston was not alone in its early effort to fight segregation on public conveyances; African Americans in New Orleans, Richmond, and Louisville also successfully protested streetcar segregation during this period. See Meier and Rudwick, “The Boycott Movement against Jim Crow Streetcars in the South, 1900–1906,” 758.


41. Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators,” 915–76; for numbers arrested and executed, see pages 937 and 941. See also Morgan, “Conspiracy Scares,” 166. Morgan observes that “New World slave societies were not police states constantly on the brink of violent rebellion, and yet sporadically white fears about potential slave rebelliousness assumed near-hysterical proportions. Rumors of slave rebelliousness in one place tended to generate other rumors elsewhere. Noteworthy too is how often urban places featured in slave conspiracy scares.” Morgan argues that the fear of slave conspiracies peaked during times of social tensions among whites, suggesting the tangled possibilities of white overreaction and slaves sensing an opportune moment for rebellion; for these reasons, “conspiracy scares will always be difficult to interpret, and their genuineness or not is always likely to remain problematic.”


CHAPTER 2

“Clippings, 1927–1929, n.d., etc.,” DBHP. “Wallace Wright, Dallas, Tex. to ‘Defender Forum,’” CD (national ed.), 11 August 1934, 14. The mistaken racial identity continued into the twenty-first century; I discovered an anecdote in a University of Virginia Libraries online exhibit about Heyward’s attendance at a 1933 conference for southern writers, where the university’s president purportedly hosted the writer in order to get around local segregation laws. When I contacted the exhibit’s curators and informed them that Heyward was white and would have suffered no discrimination in Virginia’s public accommodations, they removed the story.

2. “Negro Lithography,” NYT, 11 October 1927, in Porgy and Bess clipping file, NYPL-BR.


4. For Gershwin quote, see George Gershwin to Du Bose Heyward, 9 September 1932, in Box 1, 1172.01.01(G)01-01, DBHP. For Jolson’s plans, see Hutchisson, DuBose Heyward, 141–42.


7. On the Theatre Guild subscription series, see Crawford, One Naked Individual, 48; Crawford reports that by 1929 the Guild had 30,500 New York subscribers and 30,000 on the road. On U.S. and Canadian tour cities, see “‘Porgy’ Will Open Friday Night,” NYAN, 11 September 1929, 9, in Box 8, “Photocopies of clippings from the Amsterdam News (a black NY newspaper) about the play Porgy, 1920s,” DHP; and “Porgy Route—October 21, 1929,” in Correspondence File, Box 64, “Porgy,” TGC. It is unclear how financially successful the tour was, however, since one crew member reported an “overwhelming lack of audiences.” See Assistant Stage Manager Felix Jacoves to Production Manager Kate Lawson, Box 64, “Porgy and Bess,” and London program in Box 12, “Porgy—October 1927,” both in TGC. Clippings on the success of the London production are located in Porgy Vertical File, NYPL-SC. On second New York City, London, and potential European runs, see “‘Porgy’ Will Open Friday Night” and “‘Porgy’ Returns in June,” unknown newspaper and date in Box 19, “Clippings, 1927–1929, n.d., etc.,” DBHP, and “‘Porgy’ Booked for 3 Years; 2 in Europe,” CD (national ed.), 21 July 1928, 6. One newspaper noted Porgy’s celebrity-studded opening night in London; see Joan Littlefield, “‘Porgy’ Makes Hit in London,” unknown paper, undated, in Box 19, “Clippings, 1927–1929, n.d., etc.,” DBHP.

rately Staged but Weird Play,” *New York Journal American*, 11 October 1927; all in Box 7, “Photocopies of play reviews, late 1920s to 1952,” DHP.

9. Dorothy Heyward’s typescript notes for a memoir about the making of *Porgy* and *Porgy and Bess* in Box 19, “Notes on Porgy,” DBHP.

10. Stengel, “‘Porgy’ Is an Elaborately Staged but Weird Play.”

11. Heyward’s narrator describes how the man comes to repossess the cart: “In answer to the protests of the negroes [he] exhibited a contract, dated three years previous, by which Peter was to pay two dollars a week for an indefinite period, on an exorbitant purchase price. Failure to pay any installment would cause the property to revert to the seller.” Heyward, *Porgy*, 35.

12. “The complete text of *Porgy* by Dubose and Dorothy Heyward,” *Theatre Arts*, October 1955, 64. The contrarian Stengel was the only critic to note this change when he observed: “The Heywards have changed the fine ending into a poor joke.” Stengel, “‘Porgy’ Is an Elaborately Staged but Weird Play.”

13. On script changes, see “Porgy—The Third Phase,” *CNC*, 13 May 1928, in Box 7, “Photocopies of 1920s clippings,” DHP. On the reduction from four to three acts, see “‘Porgy’ Will Open Friday Night,” *NYAN*, 11 September 1929, 9; on the rewritten ending, see “Porgy as Seen by One of London’s Leading Dramatic Writers on Opening” (reprint from *London Daily Express*), *NYAN*, 1 May 1929, 12; both in Box 8, “Photocopies of clippings from the Amsterdam News (a black NY newspaper) about the play *Porgy*, 1920s,” DHP. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* also reported that the play had “what the play-reporters regarded as an unpropitious start” in New York City before it “grew into a success.” See FD, “Theater,” *CDT*, 17 May 1928, 7.


15. Clippings located in *Porgy* Pressbook, TGC.


19. Ibid., 180.


Wanderings and Hopes,” The Messenger, January 1925, 32. Sotiropoulos, Staging Race, also describes the philanthropic efforts of turn of the twentieth century African American performers.

23. For a thorough treatment of black musical revues in this period, see Woll, Black Musical Theatre from “Coontown” to “Dreamgirls.”


26. For Shuffle Along, see ibid., 65; for Strut Miss Lizzie, see ibid., 79–80; for Bottomland, see ibid., 117; for Bamboola, see ibid., 133; and for Blackbirds of 1928, see ibid., 126, and advertisement, Nyan, 9 May 1928, 12.

27. Reviews of Blackbirds of 1928 described “a Porgy number, in which they reproduce that macabre witchery of shadows from the undertaker’s scene,” and “the Porgy scene, in which Aida Ward and a large chorus sang and moaned ‘Sing, Brother Sing, and Send This Man to Hell,’’ in the manner of a negro spiritual. [T]his was done ‘with apologies’ to the Theatre Guild.” A review of Blackbirds of 1933 refers to parodies of O’Neill’s The Emperor Jones, in the form of an “Emperor Bones” sketch, and of Marc Connelly’s Green Pastures. See Lew Leslie’s Blackbirds clipping file, NYPL-BR. See also “'Porgy' to Be Sung in 'Blackbirds of 1928,'” CD (national ed.), 25 February 1928, 6. For “jazzification glorification” and information on the Handy interpolation and Waters recording, see Vertical Files 30–4, “Heyward, Dorothy,” VF-SCHS. For “one touch of seriousness,” see “Hit of 'Blackbirds' Is the Travesty on 'Porgy,'” CD (national ed.), 30 November 1929, 7. Vaudevillian Salem Tutt Whitney lauded the number in his Defender theatrical column as “one of the most daring, sensational, and fascinating finales ever offered in a musical comedy presentation. Billy Cortex sings the solo while the choir sings, shouts, moans and groans in the accompaniment.” Salem Tutt Whitney, “Timely Topics,” CD (national ed.), 30 June 1928, 7. See also Waters, His Eye Is on the Sparrow; Nixon Theater, The Jewish Criterion (Pittsburgh), 11 October 1929, 42; and F. D., “Theatre,” CDT, 27 November 1929, 27. “'Porgy' Troupe Welcomed by Ardent Fans,” CD (national ed.), 21 September 1929, 7, reprint of New York Sun item from 14 September 1929.

28. During the 1880s and 1890s, the theatre business consolidated, as independent permanent stock companies were replaced by “combination” companies organized in New York City that toured the country with a single play each season. The Little Theatre movement was a reaction against the proliferation of homogenous, frivolous plays that this centralized system produced and distributed to cities and towns across America. While self-proclaimed highbrow institutions of music and visual art were established in the late nineteenth century, it took until the World War I era for similar theatrical institutions to develop. See Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow, 78–79.
29. My understanding of the Little Theatre movement comes from Chansky, “Composing Ourselves.” Both Chansky and Susan Curtis make the important point that the Little Theatre movement attempted to create a new kind of theatre, and that theatre audiences were in many ways characterized by the racism and nativism common to the early twentieth-century United States. Curtis, The First Black Actors on the Great White Way.


34. Chansky persuasively argues that this educational presence is a large part of the reason that the Little Theatre movement, despite its brief tenure, succeeded in establishing beliefs about the place of theatre in American culture that endure to this day, as witnessed by government and philanthropic support for nonprofit theatre.


37. “Cleveland Amateurs Put on ‘Porgy’ in Real Pro Style,” CD (national ed.), 1 April 1933, 5. For more on the Gilpin Players of the Karamu Theatre, see Hill and Hatch, A History of African American Theatre.

38. Bruce Cunningham, “‘Porgy’ Marks Innovation in Play Listings; Cliff Theater Is First White Group to Produce All-Negro Play,” unknown newspaper, undated; “‘Porgy’ to Run Another Week at Cliff Theater,” unknown, undated clipping; Fairfax Nisbet, “‘Porgy’ True Work of Art on Monday at Cliff Theater,” unknown Dallas paper, undated; all in Box 7, “Photocopies of play reviews, late 1920s to 1952,” DHP.


40. Dorothy Heyward’s typescript notes for a memoir about the making of Porgy and Porgy and Bess, Box 19, “Notes on Porgy,” DBHP. Handwritten on the typescript next to the note about the actors’ attempt to “high-hat the parts” are the words “nigger + slut,” suggesting that perhaps the actors objected to those words in the script.

41. For “the exotic world,” see Stark Young, “Races,” NR, 26 October 1927, 261. For title change, see “Cast and Forecast” column, NYW, 1927, in Porgy Vertical File, NYPL-SC. For “en masse” and “pervading laziness,” see “The Scene, the Folk, the Song, the Dance, the Personal Drama; from ‘Porgy’ Comes Five-Fold Pleasure,” BET, 10 April 1928; for “lurking savagery” and “the quiet brutality,” see John Anderson, “The Play: The Theatre Guild Opens Its Tenth Season and ‘Porgy’ at One Stroke,” NYEP, 11 October 1927; all in Box 7, “Photocopies of 1920s clippings,” DHP. For “the life of the row,” see E. W. Osborn, “‘Porgy,’” NYW, 11 October 1927, in Porgy program file, NYPL-BR. For “an exposition of group psychology,” see “Tragedy and Spirituals in
the Black Belt,” 28. For “conveying to the spectator,” see “Black Ecstasy,” The Nation, 26 October 1927, 458.


44. For “on the stage,” see Brooks Atkinson, “Negro Mystery,” NYT, 16 October 1927, sect. 9, 1. For “the cast talk their own idiom,” see Whipple “What Price Spirituals?” For “the Negro throws himself,” see Osborn, “‘Porgy.’” For “the Negroes who form the cast,” “there is no criticism,” and “just seem to live their parts,” see Seibel, “‘Porgy,’ out of Catfish Row,” in Box 7, “Photocopies of 1920s clippings,” DHP. For “not that there would,” see “Now ‘Porgy’ Comes: Paired Playwrights, Players and a Goat,” BT, 6 April 1928, in Porgy clipping file, NYPL- BR.

45. For “no wonder,” see “The Scene, the Folk, the Song”; for “casual style,” see McLauchlin, “Catfish Row Lives Again; both in Box 7, “Photocopies of 1920s clippings,” DHP. For “native instincts,” see “The Listener,” BT, 21 April 1928, in Box 7, “Photocopies of play reviews, late 1920s to 1952,” DHP. See also Philip Hale, “‘Porgy’ Opens at the Hollis; Striking Performance Witnessed—An Unusual Production; Melodrama Is Spectacular,” unknown Boston paper, undated; Hale praises “the delightfully unconscious, spontaneous acting of the characters. It is impossible to think of this play acted by white men and women”; in Box 19, “Clippings, 1927–1929, n.d., etc.,” DBHP. For “in such acting,” see “Negro Lithography,” in Porgy clipping file, NYPL- BR. For “how fundamentally,” see “Black Ecstasy,” 456.


48. “‘Porgy’ Returning to N.Y. Next Week,” NYAN, 23 May 1928, 6; “‘Porgy’ Accepted in Boston after Some Minor Changes,” NYAN, 25 April 1928, 7; “Move on to

49. “Honor ‘Porgy’ Stars,” *NYAN*, 1 February 1928; “The Crab Man in ‘Porgy’” (photo of Leigh Whipper with caption describing his performance at a benefit for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters), *NYAN*, 1 August 1928, 6; both in Box 8, “Photocopies of clippings from the Amsterdam News (a black NY newspaper) about the play *Porgy*, 1920s,” DHP.


55. Salem Tutt Whitney, “Timely Topics,” *CD* (national ed.), 7 April 1928, 6; Calvin, “Calvin Reviews ‘Porgy.’” In a *Defender* review of the anthology *Plays of Negro Life* (edited by Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory), the paper’s “Book Shelf” columnnist concluded that the prospects for African American theater were bright, since “New York’s greatest theater is crowded night after night while a Negro company interprets DuBose Heyward’s poetic story of ‘Porgy’ and his neighbors in Cat Fish Row. The climax has been reached. Or is it, perhaps, only the beginning?” “Play Life,” *CD* (national ed.), 10 December 1927, A1.


59. The amateur and professional wings of the Little Theatre movement mutually reinforced the cultivation of theatre audiences. New York–based professionals and far-flung amateurs were linked together through publications such as Theatre Arts Monthly and, thanks to wire-service reports, readers around the country could keep informed about the latest offerings by New York City theatre companies. For example, newspapers in medium-sized cities from coast to coast published the Theatre Guild’s 1927–28 season announcement and reviews of its shows. This shared information, along with amateur local efforts, cultivated audiences for serious theatre that supported Theatre Guild touring productions (including Porgy) in the late 1920s. Theatre Guild clippings in Porgy Pressbook, TGC.

60. The first African American actors to perform in a drama in a Broadway theatre appeared in the 1917 Three Plays for a Negro Theatre, by Ridgely Torrence. While acclaimed by white and black drama critics, the show ran for barely a month, and white drama critics and later anthologists quickly forgot it. See Curtis, First Black Actors on the Great White Way, 1–10. For the Provincetown, the success of a drama featuring an African American actor (Eugene O’Neill’s The Emperor Jones, starring Charles Gilpin) transformed it from an amateur to a professional theatre.

61. Unidentified, undated clipping in Porgy Pressbook, TGC.


63. “Porgy of Catfish Row,” Theatre Guild Quarterly, 1927, 7, in Box 19, “Theatre Guild Quarterly, 1927,” DBHP. In the face of a storm of nationwide criticism about the show, New York City attempted to halt the production of All God’s Chillun Got Wings by refusing to issue work permits for the show’s child performers. For an extensive account of responses to All God’s Chillun Got Wings and an analysis of its catalyzing role in ushering interracial sex into the realm of avant–garde art, see Mumford, Interzones.

64. On the trip, see DuBose Heyward’s typescript draft for an article on the making of Porgy in Box 19, “Notes on Porgy,” DBHP; Porgy program dated 30 September 1929 in Porgy program file, NYPL-BR; and “Now ‘Porgy’ Comes,” Porgy clipping file, NYPL-BR. On spontaneous ovation by audience, see Jessye, “‘Porgy’ a Stellar Production.”

65. Like the Fisk Jubilee Singers and other groups, the Jenkins Orphanage Band used the proven appeal of black southern music to support their own work. The band was formed in the early 1890s when the orphanage’s founder, Reverend Daniel Joseph Jenkins, decided to teach the boys in his care to play instruments and perform concerts
to raise money for the orphanage. The band toured regularly in the United States and Europe, and many of its members went on to careers as professional jazz musicians. Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 255.

66. Original Theatre Guild *Porgy* program dated 10 October 1927 in *Porgy* program file, NYPL-BR. London audiences received additional coaching in their program notes, with explanations for the saucer burial, conjure-woman, crap game, hurricane bell, and happy dust (“usually cocaine”). See program in Box 12, “Porgy—October 1927,” TGC.


68. Dorothy Heyward, “‘Porgy’s’ Native Tongue,” 2.


71. Dorothy Heyward, “‘Porgy’s’ Native Tongue,” 2.

72. Arthur Pollock, “‘Porgy,’ a Folk Play,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, 11 October 1927, in Box 7, “Photocopies of 1920s clippings,” DHP.

73. Program cover located in Box 12, “Heyward, DuBose & Dorothy; Porgy—Oct. 1927,” TGC. For stage directions see Heyward and Heyward, *Porgy: A Play in Four Acts*, 1. For examples of reviews mentioning the set’s Charleston origins, see “Now ‘Porgy’ Comes,” in *Porgy* clipping file, NYPL-BR; and Percy Hammond, “The Theaters,” *NYHT*, undated, and Hale, “‘Porgy’ Opens at the Hollis,” both in Box 19, “Clippings, 1927–1929, n.d., etc,” DBHP. For “Porgy’s habitat,” see “American Plays, a Traveler Finds, Have Now Developed a Personality,” unidentified New York City newspaper, 1 July 1928; and for “the hives of colored life,” see Alan Dale, “Play of Negro Life Rare and Colorful Gem, View of Dale,” *New York City American*, 17 October 1927; both in Box 7, “Photocopies of play reviews, late 1920s to 1932,” DHP. For “where dilapidation,” see “The Scene, the Folk, the Song”; and also Anderson, “The Play”; both in Box 7, “Photocopies of 1920s clippings,” DHP.

74. For Charleston trip quote and crowd scene technique, see Mamoulian interview with *New York Herald Tribune*, excerpted in “Tragedy and Spirituals in the Black Belt,” *Literary Digest* 95 (5 November 1927): 28. For “in the depiction of,” see “‘Porgy’ at Ohio,” *Cleveland News*, 14 January 1929; and for “throbs and creates,” see “‘Porgy’ Limns Negroes’ Folk Ways Superbly; Depiction of Mass Emotion and Manipulation of Mob Skill Fully Handled at Guild—Special Cast of Colored Players Assembled,” *Women’s Wear*, 11 October 1927; both in Box 7, “Photocopies of 1920s clippings,” DHP. For “the rich languor,” see Young, “Races,” 262. An undated clipping from *Theatre Arts Monthly* also notes of Mamoulian’s direction: “if his direction lacks the drawl so typical of the movements as well as the speech of the Southern negro, it is because he has paced his crowds to the quicker beat of the regulation theatre”; in *Porgy* Vertical File, NYPL-SC. For “it had its own,” see “The Theatre,” *Dial* 83 (December 1927): 530.
“Mr. Mamoulian’s entire knowledge,” see unidentified column, NYW, 16 October 1927, in Porgy Pressbook, TGC.


78. “Now ‘Porgy’ Comes,” 10. Eva Jessye, “Not Propaganda Insist Producers; Theatre Guild Declares Play Not Intended to Create Sentiment,” AA, 17 September 1927, 7. Literary Digest similarly echoed the Guild’s publicity when it described Porgy as “a story of colored life” but “not a discussion of the race question, and so begs no support on that ground.” “Tragedy and Spirituals in the Black Belt,” 27. The comments about interracial relations were undoubtedly references to O’Neill’s 1924 All God’s Chillun Got Wings and its treatment of miscegenation. Time, 24 October 1927, 26; Whipple, “What Price Spirituals?”


80. Little’s review excerpted in “Weekly Comment,” BH, 15 April 1928; “The Scene,
the Folk, the Song”; Russell McLauchlin, “Catfish Row Lives Again”; all in Box 7, “Photocopies of 1920s clippings,” DHP.

81. “Censorship Again: After ‘Lulu Belle,’ ‘Porgy’ Is in Peril,” BET, 28 March 1928, 11. See also “Boston Bars ‘Porgy,’ Popular Broadway Play,” CD (national ed.), 7 April 1928, 1, and “Boston Lifts Ban on Stage Play ‘Porgy,’” CD (national ed.), 14 April 1928, 4. “‘Porgy’ Approved; City Hall Directs Only Trifling Changes, Readily Accepted, in a Few Speeches,” unknown Boston newspaper, undated clipping in Box 7, “Photocopies of play reviews, late 1920s to 1952,” DHP. See also “Move on to Bar ‘Porgy,’ Says the World,” and “‘Porgy’ Accepted in Boston after Some Minor Changes,” NYAN 25 April 1928, 7. For argument about why Lulu Belle was banned in Boston and Porgy was not, see Reardon, “Banned in Boston,” 149–52.


83. New York Evening World, 19 February 1927, in In Abraham’s Bosom clipping file, NYPL-BR. Variety added that “Mr. Green knows his people and knows how to present them.” See Variety, 12 January 1927, 43. The New York Times specified: “In writing of the poor tenant farming class Mr. Green draws from his own experience; he was born on a North Carolina farm in 1894, and he has toiled the fields beside those whom he now exhibits in sophisticated theatres.” See J. Brooks Atkinson, “Pulitzer Laurels,” NYT, 1 May 1927; see also “The Village Comfortable ‘In Abraham’s Bosom,’” New York Telegram, 31 December 1926; both in In Abraham’s Bosom clipping file, NYPL-BR.

84. In Abraham’s Bosom starred Julius Bledsoe (a celebrated baritone), Rose McClendon, and Abbie Mitchell; only McClendon was familiar to Broadway audiences as a dramatic performer, although both McClendon and Mitchell were well known to Harlem audiences—Mitchell for her work in turn-of-the-century black musical theatre. For black press reviews of In Abraham’s Bosom, see Countee Cullen, “The Dark Tower,” Opportunity, February 1927, 54; “In Abraham’s Bosom’ Returns to the Stage in New York City,” CD, 2 July 1932; “Julius Bledsoe in First Straight Acting Part at the Provincetown,” NYAN, 29 December 1926, 11; “‘In Abraham’s Bosom,’ New Play about the Negro, Presents Julius Bledsoe in the Character of Strong Dramatic Star,” NYA, 8 January 1927, 6.

85. Instituted in 1918, the Pulitzer Prize for drama was in many ways an emblem of the Little Theatre movement philosophy (although no formal relationship existed between the two), awarded to an American play “which best presents the educational value and power of the stage in raising the standard of good morals, good taste and good manners.” Toohey, The Pulitzer Prize Plays, 59. On Broadway insiders, see Percy Hammond, “A Rumored Favorite for the Pulitzer Prize Moves Closer to the Jury Box,” NYHT, undated, in In Abraham’s Bosom clipping file, NYPL-BR.


88. “In Abraham’s Bosom a Powerful Tragedy.” The *New York Post* described the play as “ringing with the true accents of the naive, superstitious, singing and cursing negro folk of North Carolina.” See “De Blind Man Stood in de Road and Cried.” Several reviewers identified the same scenes as the production’s dramatic highlights, scenes that exemplified the stereotypes of unchecked emotion and fervent piety. For example, *The New Republic* asserted: “The best places in this play of Negro life are those like that orgiastic end of the first act; or the scenes where the loose and worthless grandson with his jazz talent sings for his old aunt and the two of them have one blood in their veins; or Abe’s prayer when the land becomes his and he dedicates his baby to God and his race. In these there is an essence that is racial, dramatic and moving.” See “In Abraham’s Bosom,” *NR*, 47; see also “‘In Abraham’s Bosom’ a Powerful Tragedy.”

89. “Julius Bledsoe in First Straight Acting Part at the Provincetown,” 11.

90. “‘In Abraham’s Bosom,’ New Play about the Negro, Presents Julius Bledsoe in the Character of Strong Dramatic Star,” 6.

91. For Heyward quotation, see his typescript draft for an article on the making of *Porgy* in Box 19, “Notes on Porgy,” DBHP. “Robeson in ‘Porgy,’” undated, probably March 1928, unknown newspaper, in Box 19, “Clippings, 1927–1929, n.d., etc.,” DBHP. See also “Paul Robeson Joins Cast of Popular ‘Porgy,’” *CD* (national ed.), 10 March 1928, 2. The part—which Robeson took only “to keep from starving”—proved a vocal strain, and he left the show after six weeks when the opportunity arose to play Joe in the London production of *Show Boat*. See Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 113.


Approval,” New Yorker, 22 October 1927, 29. The Chicago Defender thought that the spirituals “add[ed] to the effectiveness” of a 1931 Los Angeles production of Porgy; see “Coast ‘Porgy’ Stars C. Muse and E. Preer.” For letter, see Mary Kellogg, 652 W. 145th Street New York City to New York Telegram, 22 October 1927, Porgy Pressbook, TGC.

95. Herschell Brickell, “Creator of Catfish Row,” NYHT, 10 March 1929, 16–17, in Box 19, “Clippings, 1927–1929, n.d., etc.,” DBHP; and “Best Sellers,” Egyptian Mail, 3 May 1929, in Box 7, “Photocopies of 1920s clippings and one later article,” DHP.

96. For initial solicitation, see the London Star to DuBose Heyward, 15 April 1929, Box 26, “Article re: prejudice and letter,” DBHP. For article, see DuBose Heyward typescript, Box 26, Folder 1172.01.04.05(P)01-01, DBHP; also see reprinted article, “England Gets Views on U.S. Prejudice; ‘Porgy’ Author Gives Opinions to Europeans,” CD (national ed.), 6 July 1929, A1.

97. For Heyward, see “The Negro Play. How ‘Porgy’ Was Written. A Talk with the Author,” London Observer, 7 April 1929, Box 9, “Clippings re: foreign productions of Porgy and Bess 1950s,” DHP. Heyward may have meant that there were no lynchings in Charleston, a fact that white leaders in that city liked to repeat. In any event, in 1934 Heyward submitted a statement to The Crisis in support of the Costigan Wagner Anti-Lynching Act. For lynching statistics, see National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889–1919 (New York: 1919), 88–91; reprinted by Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969. For Heyward’s support of Costigan Wagner Act, see Box 26, “Statement re: legislation,” DBHP.

98. For twelve curtain calls, see “‘Porgy’s’ Star Writes,” NYAN, 8 May 1929, 12, in Box 8, “Photocopies of clippings from the Amsterdam News (a black NY newspaper) about the play Porgy, 1920s,” DHP. For “crowded houses,” see Edward G. Perry, “‘Porgy’ a Masterpiece,” The Interstate Tattler, 3 May, 1929. For Frank Wilson, see “‘Porgy’s’ Star Writes,” NYAN, 5 June 1929; both in Porgy Vertical File, NYPL-SC. For cast’s difficulty in finding lodging, see “Other Papers Say: The Color Bar,” CD (national ed.), 21 September 1929, A2.

99. For “clowning, playing the banjo,” see “Colored Troupes in London,” unknown, undated 1929 newspaper, Box 19, “Clippings, 1927–1929, n.d., etc.,” DBHP; it was reprinted as “High Class Talent Well Appreciated in London,” CD, 15 June 1929, 6. For “all of the Southern Negro,” “it is, so far as one can judge,” and “have seen the black race,” see James Agate, “A Negro Epic.” For “a page torn out of life,” see “Porgy as Seen by One of London’s Leading Dramatic Writers on Opening,” NYAN, 1 May 1929, 12; all in Box 8, “Photocopies of clippings from the Amsterdam News (a black NY newspaper) about the play Porgy, 1920s,” DHP. See also Porgy Vertical File, NYPL-SC. For “a glimpse of another world,” see “‘Porgy’ Hits in London, CD (national ed.), 20 April 1929, 7. For “The Prophet of the Negroes,” see “The Prophet of the Negroes,” Birmingham Post (England), 13 April 1929, Box 7, “Photocopies of play reviews, late 1920s to 1952,” DHP.

100. “Porgy as Seen by One of London’s Leading Dramatic Writers on Opening.”

101. For “voice is that of aboriginal Africa,” see W. R. B., “The Negro in Drama,”
unknown South African newspaper, 10 May 1929, in Box 7, “Photocopies of play reviews, late 1920s to 1952,” DHP. For French Huguenots, see “Verrons-nous à Paris une pièce jouée par des noirs? Une interview de l’auteur Mr. Du Bose Heyward,” Le Gaulois, 21 March 1929, in Box 7, “Clippings re: Porgy, 1925–1936,” DBHP. One French review included Heyward’s oft-told story of the real-life incident that inspired his novel and quoted extensively from a London interview where Heyward justified southern race relations. “Une pièce nègre à Londres,” Le Figaro, 12 April 1929, in Box 7, “Photocopies of foreign clippings, late 1920s,” DHP. For West Virginia, see W. R. B., “The Negro in Drama,” unknown South African newspaper, 10 May 1929, in Box 7, “Photocopies of play reviews, late 1920s to 1952,” DHP. For publishing firm, see “Une pièce nègre à Londres”; for “made Harlem fashionable,” see “Le Théâtre à Londres,” Royal Auto, 15 June 1929; both in Box 7, “Photocopies of foreign clippings, late 1920s,” DHP.

102. For “a piece in which,” see “La signification de ‘Porgy,’” unknown French language newspaper, 26 May 1929; for “like all negroes,” see “Le Théâtre à Londres”; for “realist drama,” see “Saison de printemps et Campagnes électorales,” unknown French-language newspaper, 22 April 1929; all in Box 7, “Photocopies of foreign clippings, late 1920s,” DHP. For “the child races,” see W. R. B., “The Negro in Drama,” unknown South African newspaper, 10 May 1929, in Box 7, “Photocopies of play reviews, late 1920s to 1952,” DHP. For “in many ways,” see “Ein Negerstück (A Negro Play), Neue Freie Presse, 16 April 1929, in Box 7, “Photocopies of foreign clippings, late 1920s,” DHP; this review also noted that Heyward was “from an old plantation family.”


INTERLUDE: CHARLESTON, 1920–1940

1. Devlin, South Carolina and Black Migration, 1865–1940, 285, 365.

2. I am indebted to Stephanie E. Yuhl’s excellent study of this movement in Charleston, A Golden Haze of Memory, as well as Martha R. Severens’s The Charleston Renaissance.

3. “High Praise for Stage Production of ‘Porgy’ Is Given by the Leading Dramatic Critics,” CNC, undated, in Box 19, “Clippings, 1927–1929, n.d., etc.,” DBHP; “Second Thoughts on ‘Porgy’ in Opera Form” (reprint of Associated Press article), CNC, 27 October 1935, in Vertical File 30-04, “Heyward, DuBose, ‘Porgy and Bess’: Related Articles,” VF-SCHS. On the etiquette of craps, see “Perils of an Author,” undated, CNC, in Box 7, “Clippings re: Porgy, 1925–1936,” DBHP, which responded to a column item by the celebrated New York Tribune columnist Franklin Pierce Adams (also known as “FPA”). When the technical director for Porgy and Bess wanted to get the chiming bells of St. Michael’s Church just right, he asked local socialite and musician Martha Laurens Patterson to report the bells’ exact tempo and pitch, and the News and Courier reported on her efforts. See “St. Michael’s Chimes, Flat E and All, to

4. For “forgotten that there was a beggar,” see Heyward and Heyward, Porgy: A Play in Four Acts, xi. For Ralph Bennett, see “‘Honey Man’ Is Traffic Victim; Ralph Bennett Loses Life on Meeting Street Road Monday,” CEP, 27 December 1927, in Box 19, 1172.01.04.03(P)01-09, DBHP. For renovation of Catfish Row, see “Cabbage Row Is Purchased; New York Architect Will Convert Property into Studios,” unknown, undated newspaper clipping; “Catfish Row to Be Remodeled,” undated Brooklyn newspaper; “Artists to Live in Cabbage Row; Property Sold to New Yorker Who Will Restore It. Scene of ‘Porgy,’” undated, probably Charleston newspaper; all in Box 20, 1172.01.04.03(P)01-22, DBHP.


6. Dorothy Ducas, “Success of ‘Porgy’ Abolishes the ‘Catfish Row’ That It Made Famous,” NYEP, 9 February 1929, Box 20, 1172.01.04.03(P)01-22, DBHP.

7. For quotations, see Yuhl, A Golden Haze of Memory, 172; Yuhl cites an article about Charleston that appeared in the St. Louis Christian Advocate in the 1930s. For the statistic on Charleston tourism, see Severens, The Charleston Renaissance, 170; she quotes Frank, “The Economic Impact of Tourism in Charleston, South Carolina, 1970,” 6. Natchez, Mississippi, followed Charleston’s lead and in the 1930s began promoting plantation house tours to northern tourists; see Severens, The Charleston Renaissance, 6.

8. For black “types,” see Yuhl, A Golden Haze of Memory, 14. For the market for Smith’s paintings, see ibid., 67; magazine articles and memoirs written by Smith sound the same notes as Heyward’s nonfiction pieces, mournful about modernity and inventing a positive gloss for South Carolina’s slave past. For “the Negro is nature’s child,” see ibid., 83. According to Yuhl, Verner also omitted from her scenes such trappings of modernity as streetcars, electrical wires, and automobiles; see ibid., 81.

9. DuBose Heyward, “Charleston—The Meeting of Past and Present,” typescript in Box 26, 1172.01.04.05(c)03-01, DBHP. For “an antidote for the jangled nerves of today,” see ibid., 9; for “doubtless the pick” and “the vanguard of the vast,” see ibid., 3; for “extremes of good and evil fortune,” see ibid., 6; for “poverty may well have been the ally of good taste,” see ibid., 8.

10. Ibid., 12.

11. John Oliver La Gorce, Associate Editor, National Geographic, to DuBose Heyward, 10 January 1938, in Box 26, “Article re: Charleston,” DBHP.


13. For “negro tenement,” see Yuhl, A Golden Haze of Memory, 45, 48–49; see also ibid., 25, 30.

14. Devlin, South Carolina and Black Migration, 1865–1940, 193–99, 218. I. A. Newby writes that 72,000 African Americans left the state between 1900 and 1910, 75,000
left between 1910 and 1920, and 204,000 left between 1920 and 1930. Newby, *Black Carolinians*, 193–94. The U.S. Labor Department reported that between 1915 and 1918, 400,000 to 500,000 blacks migrated from the South to the North; for context, consider that from the 1880s to 1910, only about 10,000 blacks left the South annually.


16. Devlin, *South Carolina and Black Migration, 1865–1940*, 247, 249–50. According to Devlin, the *Columbia State* newspaper maintained “the cost of uplifting the black race was more than the expense caused the state by their migration. The newspaper felt that the migration would properly disperse the black race throughout America, and the more ‘the problem could be scattered, the better.’” For Ruth Anderson story, see ibid., 156–57; for Mamie Garvin Fields, see Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places*, 13, who recalls that even at the turn of the twentieth century, “To Negroes in Charleston New York was the place to go, and the Clyde Line ship was the way to get there.” See also ibid., 141–42.


18. Lau, *Democracy Rising*, 50–52; on Rep. James F. Byrnes, see ibid., 56. See also Devlin, *South Carolina and Black Migration, 1865–1940*, 231–32; Tuttle, *Race Riot*, 24–25; and Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit-In, 1919 and the 1960s*, 13–14. Waskow argues that Charleston’s police and municipal government were quicker “to control the aggressors and protect the victims” than in other cities where race riots took place in 1919.


20. Lau, *Democracy Rising*, 34, 53, 64.


23. On the paucity of black teachers, see Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places*, 42, and Lau, *Democracy Rising*, 41. Fields describes in detail the bold prejudice of her white teacher, Miss Dessiseux; see ibid., 43–44.

24. On the successful lobbying of the state legislature, see Lau, *Democracy Rising*, 43; on the growth in branch membership, see ibid., 40, 44, 46; on the slight rise in black voter registration, see ibid., 46; on the dormancy of Charleston branch, see ibid., 65, 115–16; on the strength of Columbia NAACP branch, see Lau, *Democracy Rising*, generally.


29. For Alfred Huger, see ibid., 133; for White House performance, see ibid., 154; for the SPS understanding of the meanings of the spirituals, see ibid., 143; for “Charleston people,” see ibid., 133–34. See also Smythe and others, *The Carolina Low-Country*.

30. Heyward’s argument about the benefits of slavery for the enslaved closely echoed that of historian Ulrich B. Phillips’s *Life and Labor in the Old South*, published in 1929. Phillips was a student of William Dunning, a Columbia University historian best known for his early twentieth-century interpretation of the post–Civil War South as a region dominated by corrupt African American freedmen who were unfit to participate in democratic government. The ideas put forth by Dunning and other turn-of-the-century scholars gave intellectual credence to the notion that northerners ought to defer to alleged southern expertise in race relations. W. E. B. Du Bois refuted Dunning’s arguments with his masterful 1935 volume *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*, but the “Dunning School” view of Reconstruction remained dominant in American historiography for decades to come.


32. Ibid., 184, 185.

33. Ibid., 186–87.


35. Ibid., 48.

**CHAPTER 3**


2. Brooks Atkinson, “‘Porgy and Bess,’ Native Opera, Opens at the Alvin; Gershwin Work Based on DuBose Heyward’s Play; Dramatic Values of Community Legend Gloriously Transposed in New Form with Fine Regard for Its Verities,” *NYT*, 11 October 1935, 30. Many other newspaper columns chronicled the opening-night crowd of celebrities (and others who could afford the special ticket price of $7.70) and the star-studded party thrown by publisher Conde Nast at his penthouse apartment following the show. Celebrities in attendance included Joan Crawford, Helen Hayes, Edward G. Robinson, Rudy Vallee, Paul Robeson, Katharine Hepburn, Cole Porter, Jascha Heifetz, George S. Kaufman, and many other writers, publishers, and New York social-

3. Porgy and Bess was not the first high-profile opera production to use African American performers. Four Saints in Three Acts, an opera composed by Virgil Thomson with a libretto by Gertrude Stein, premiered in Hartford the year before Porgy and Bess with four black singers in the title roles; one historian described the work as “too popular to be intellectual, too noncommercial to be popular.” Dizikes, Opera in America, 454. While an abstract modernist opera, Thomson insisted on casting black singers for the four roles because he wanted the “dignity and poise, the lack of self-consciousness” that he felt only black singers could provide. Woll, Black Musical Theatre from “Coontown” to “Dreamgirls,” 158.


5. Floyd J. Calvin, “Race Actors Capture a Great Broadway,” CD, 7 December 1935, 8. A month later, Calvin was still sounding this theme, explaining the economics of show business to his readers as he described how Broadway agents were taking a new interest in black stage stars like Porgy and Bess’s Ruby Elzy, who had the potential to become the next Paul Robeson or Ethel Waters. Floyd J. Calvin, “Broadway Fights over Race Stage Stars,” CD, 4 January 1936, 8. “[Undecipherable] Stereotype in ‘Porgy and Bess’: Music Not Truly Negroid, and Opera Smacks of Minstrel Days, Reviewer Complains after His Second View of Work,” NYAN, 11 January 1936, 8.


9. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, 265. Taking Du Bois’s point one step further, composer and arranger Nathaniel Dett argued that the spirituals “will be of no value” unless they were “presented in choral form, in lyric and operatic works, in concertos and suites and salon music—unless our musical architects take the rough timber of Negro themes and fashion from it music which will prove that we, too, have national


17. The *Variety* reviewer also advised: “The subscriptions list of the Theatre Guild will probably carry this one for whatever run it enjoys on Broadway. If they can sell it as something that ‘must be seen’ its commercial chances will be improved.” While the guild did its best to promote *Porgy and Bess* as a “must see,” later producers of the opera perfected the strategy. “Plays out of Town: Porgy and Bess,” *Variety*, 2 October 1935, in Box 20, “Clippings, 1934–1935,” DBHP.


19. For “to teach the Harlem Negroes,” see “Porgy Into Opera”; see also “Music: Gershwin’s American Opera Puts Audience on Its Feet,” *News-Week*, 19 October 1935, 23–24. For “the cast talk in their own idiom,” see Leon Whipple, “What Price Spirituals?,” *Survey Graphic*, undated clipping in Box 12, “Porgy—October, 1927,” TGC. For profiles of principal singers, see Frederick F. Schrader, “With Music!,” *New York Enquirer*, undated; “Todd Duncan on Vacation from Teaching Post to Play ‘Porgy’,” unknown newspaper, undated; “Friday to Friday in Manhattan,” *Mayfair*, Decem-

20. For reviews and articles that juxtaposed without comment the performers’ impressive credentials with their lack of stage experience, see Roe, “Negro School Teacher Hit as Porgy”; “Todd Duncan on Vacation from Teaching Post to Play ‘Porgy’; “Friday to Friday in Manhattan”; “Folk Opera,” *Time*, 21 October 1935, 48; and “Porgy into Opera,” *Time*, 30 September 1935; all in *Porgy and Bess* Pressbook, TGC. See also the Boston critics who “thought time and again of how much any opera company could learn from an evening at ‘Porgy and Bess’” and praised the cast’s acting for possessing “none of the formal posturing of conventional opera.” “‘Porgy and Bess,’” *Boston Globe*, 1 October 1935, and Edwin F. Melvin, “‘Porgy and Bess’ for an Event of the Season,” *BET*, 1 October 1935; both in Box 20, “Clippings, 1934–1935,” DBHP. George Seibel, “‘Porgy,’ out of Catfish Row, Shows Life of Negro as It Is Lived,” unidentified Pittsburgh paper, 1929, in Box 7, “Photocopies of 1920s clippings,” DHP; and “The Listener,” *BT*, 21 April 1928, in Box 7, “Photocopies of play reviews, late 1920s to 1952,” DHP. For “minor parts are taken,” see Schloss, “‘Porgy’ Presented in Adequate Style as Folklore Opera.” For Anne Brown, see “‘Porgy and Bess’ Sidelights,” *Variety*, 16 October 1935, 58.

21. Atkinson, “‘Porgy and Bess,’ Native Opera, Opens at the Alvin”; Charles Collins, “‘Porgy’ Scores Hit; Negro Drama Scores Hit in Musical Form; Gershwin’s Jazzy Score Sets New Tradition for Story of Catfish Row,” unknown newspaper, undated; “Colonial Theatre: ‘Porgy and Bess,’” *Boston Globe*, 1 October 1935; all in *Porgy and Bess* Pressbook, TGC. See also Melvin, “‘Porgy and Bess’ for an Event of the
Season.” For reviews that reduced the show’s characters to types, see Philip Klein, “Porgy and Bess—At Forrest,” *Philadelphia’s Pictorial*, undated, in *Porgy and Bess* Pressbook, TGC; “Folk Opera,” *Time*, 21 October 1935, 48; and Lawrence Gilman, “George Gershwin’s New Opera, ‘Porgy and Bess,’ Produced by the Theater Guild,” *NYHT*, 11 October 1935, 32. See also Stark Young, “Opera Blues,” *NR*, 30 October 1935, 338, on the “due amount of relaxation and flexible languor” necessary to depict African American characters. For “new life and importance,” see “Folk Opera,” *Time*, 48. See also Gail Borden, “‘Porgy’ Opera of Gershwin Rich, Appealing,” *Chicago Times*, 18 February 1936, and Holland, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Gershwin Opera Event in American Theatre.” For “the sophisticated atmosphere,” see Warren Storey Smith, “Gershwin Starts out Ambitiously.” For “Its words,” see Lloyd Lewis, “Black Opera,” unknown newspaper, undated; all in *Porgy and Bess* Pressbook, TGC. The *New York Evening Journal* noted that Gershwin’s spirituals “were in musical treatment more complicated than the naïve singing of the Negroes is wont to be.” Henriette Weber, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Acclaimed.” *The Commonweal*’s critic compared the primitive and the sublime as well, praising Gershwin for “cloth[ing] the [characters] in a musical investiture which heightens the drama without ever lowering its atmosphere” while also expressing “the animality of the personages” with music that “is always honest, and never bears that mark of moral degradation which white composers are only too prone to show in depicting the Negro.” Grenville Vernon, “Porgy and Bess,” *The Commonweal*, 25 October 1935, 642.

22. For “born meat for opera,” see Stark Young, “Opera Blues,” 338. For “colored folk in Charleston,” see E. F. Harkins, “Gershwin’s Latest Work Delights Hub,” *Boston Record*, 2 October 1935, in *Porgy and Bess* Pressbook, TGC. See also Carol Frink, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Now Is Told in Song,” unknown paper, undated, in *Porgy and Bess* Pressbook, TGC. “Song being the Southern Negro’s most ready medium of expression,” wrote Frink, “a musical version of Dubose and Dorothy Heyward’s famed play, ‘Porgy’ was what the folks of Catfish Row would themselves call ‘a natural.”’ For “primitive” emotions suiting the story to music, see for example Lawrence Gilman’s description of the story of the “sensitive” Porgy and “the lithe, inconstant Bess,” set in “the waterfront tenements, with their crap-games, drunken brawls and murder; the superstitious terrors and exaltations of the pitiful black exiles from a forgotten world, tormented by bullying whites, terrified by the menace of the buzzards and the fury of the hurricane and the strange and sordid mystery of those who die and must be buried—all this has kindled Mr. Gershwin’s imagination.” Gilman, “George Gershwin’s New Opera,” 32. See also Frink, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Now Is Told in Song”: “With a baby to sing to, a ‘saucer burial’ to mourn over, a pagan picnic moment to celebrate in a dusk-filled palmetta [sic] jungle, love to be made to music and the race’s typical philosophical chants found to be expressed in such songs as Porgy’s ‘I Got Plenty of Nuttin,’ there is, of course, much to sing about.” See also the comment that *Porgy* was “superbly suited to operatic purposes, emotional expression in song being part of the very blood-stream of the colored race. It never seems unnatural—as it frequently does
in English opera—that these actors should sing their roles.” Walker, “‘Porgy and Bess’ First True American Opera,” quoted in William E. Clark, “In the Name of Art,” NYA, 19 October 1935, 4. For Gershwin’s explanation of his musical choices, see George Gershwin, “Rhapsody in Catfish Row,” sect. 10, 1.


24. “Porgy into Opera,” Time. A reviewer, praising Gershwin’s choice of the Heywards’ play, argued that it “serves a far more valuable purpose than the Indian legends that were woven into the dramatic structure of the late Victor Herbert’s ‘Natoma.’” Nelson B. Bell, “New Gershwin Folk Opera Given First Local Hearing at National; Adapted from Stage Play ‘Porgy and Bess’ Is True to Original,” Washington Post, 17 March 1936, 18, in Porgy and Bess Pressbook, TGC. A Pittsburgh Courier reviewer used Herbert’s 1911 effort as shorthand for Gershwin’s attempt at “native” opera by describing Porgy and Bess dismissively as “Victor Herbert on ‘Catfish Row.’” P. L. Prattis, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Is a Show Window Woman: Has Form and Beauty but Is Only a Dummy; Gershwin Has Composed an Iridescent Score, but Victor Herbert Could See Himself under George’s Sequin-like Musical Periods—Has Only a Dash of Negro Flavor,” PC (national ed.), 15 February 1936, sect. 2, 7. Isaac Goldberg also argued that “the indigenous Indian was never so bound up with American expression as the forcibly imported and eternally exploited Negro.” See Isaac Goldberg, “Gershwin at a New Period in His Career,” BT, 28 September 1935, 4–5; in Box 20, “Clippings, 1934–1935,” DBHP. Suggesting that the music world had experienced some debate over appropriate subjects for national opera, the New York World Telegram’s music critic wrote: “sticklers for an American subject for an American opera can have no fault to find with Charleston’s Catfish Row and the Negroes who inhabit it as place and dramatis personae.” Pitts Sanborn, “Music of Folk Opera Has an ‘Authentic Ring’; George Gershwin Takes forward Stride; Negro, ‘Straight’ Themes Praised,” New York World Telegram, 11 October 1935, 40.

26. For “new attitude,” see Goldberg, “Score by George Gershwin,” 38. For “about Americans, for Americans,” see Liebling, “Gershwin Music Stirs Hearers at ‘Porgy and Bess,’” 13. See also “it is an American opera that [audiences] can understand and even sing, if they want,” in Moses Smith, “Of Gershwin and His New ‘Porgy’ Music; Folk Opera as a Landmark in the Creative Career of the Composer,” BT, 1 October 1935. For “as indigenous to America,” see Ames, “Gershwin Score Called Superb”; both in Porgy and Bess Pressbook, TGC. For “not legendary but simply illustrative,” see A. Walter Kramer, “Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess Hailed in New York,” Musical America, 25 October 1935, 6. See also “the women of Catfish Row lull their babies; the men have their fishing, and their crap games on Saturday nights. Both cringe before the white folks’ laws, the ill-omened buzzards, the lashing hurricane. Charleston lies on the stage. It is native. It is the U.S.” “‘Porgy’ Is Opera of Our Own,” Chicago Evening Herald, undated, in Porgy and Bess Pressbook, TGC.

27. For “don’t stand around,” see Kolodin, “Porgy and Bess; American Opera in the Theatre,” 855. For description of the opening scene, see “Director’s Sound Theory,” unknown paper, undated, in Porgy and Bess Pressbook, TGC. For description of “I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin’,” see “Porgy into Opera,” Time; Olin Downes, “Porgy and Bess, Native Opera, Opens at the Alvin; Gershwin Work Based on DuBose Heyward’s Play; Exotic Richness of Negro Music and Color of Charleston, S.C., Admirably Conveyed in Score of Catfish Row Tragedy,” NYT, 11 October 1935, 30. For rocking chairs, see Gilman “George Gershwin’s New Opera,” 32. At least one critic found Mamoulian’s staging too distracting; see Collins, “‘Porgy’ Scores Hit,” in Porgy and Bess Pressbook, TGC; Downes, “‘Porgy and Bess,’ Native Opera, Opens at the Alvin,” 30. For “this is the manner,” see Arthur Pollock, “Theater Guild Reaches Its Peak in Presenting the Gershwin–Heyward Opera, ‘Porgy and Bess,’ at the Alvin Theater,” Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 11 October 1935, 24.

28. Samuel Chotzinoff, “The Drama Critics’ Reaction to Mr. Gershwin’s Colorful Negro Folk Opera,” New York Post, 12 October 1935, 13. Theatre Arts Monthly declared: “Mamoulian has developed a real acting ensemble out of a group of singers, many of them without stage experience, and has established and maintained a dramatic relation between the action and the song and the story, between the character who is singing and the ones who are listening. All of this, as our regular opera performances bear witness, is a difficult thing to do.” “Porgy and Bess,” Theatre Arts Monthly, December 1935, 894. See also L. A. Sloper, “Mr. Gershwin Writes an Opera,” Christian Science Monitor, 1 October 1935, 12A. Downes, “‘Porgy and Bess,’ Native Opera, Opens at the Alvin,” 30. For “the finest source,” see Pollock, “Theater Guild Reaches Its Peak,” 24. For “possibly [he] had wondered,” see Gilman, “George Gershwin’s New Opera,” 32. For Gershwin explanation, see Gershwin, “Rhapsody in Catfish Row,” sect. 10, 1.

29. Several historians have considered the ways in which white audiences responded to and indeed shaped understandings of African American spirituals from the Civil War era to the 1920s. Late nineteenth-century white intellectuals and audiences
helped to construct notions of black cultural authenticity around the spirituals, while in the 1920s whites responded to the “emotive appeal” of Robeson’s concerts of spirituals while ignoring the specific history of social oppression from which the emotions arose. See Cruz, *Culture on the Margins*; Radano, “Denoting Difference”; Radano, “Soul Texts and the Blackness of Folk”; and Carby, *Race Men*, 92–93, 98.

30. Bledsoe was Gershwin’s first choice to sing the role of Crown, and Robeson was his first choice for Porgy. See George Gershwin to DuBose Heyward, 8 March 1934, in Box 1, 1172.01.01(G)01-01, DBHP. The financial rewards of the spirituals were considerable. In 1927 Roland Hayes commanded a fee of $3,200 and Paul Robeson $1,250 for a single performance, making them the only African Americans among the country’s top twenty highest-earning singers. See Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 105. Choirs and quartets from black colleges, most famously the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Hampton Institute Choir, raised large sums for their institutions by performing spirituals in concert throughout the United States and Europe. Awareness of the white audience extended to compilers of sheet music as well. James Weldon Johnson hoped his book of sheet music for African American spirituals would have robust sales among white as well as black audiences, instructing readers on the proper pronunciation of black dialect and reassuring them that “a group does not have to be able to sing with the fervor and abandon of a Negro congregation to enjoy them. Nor does one have to be a Hayes or a Robeson to give others an idea of their beauty and power.” See Johnson and Johnson, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, 30.

31. African American intellectuals disagreed over whether black folk music should be elevated and preserved via the concert hall or if concert formalization would ultimately sever the music’s connections to its origins and stifle its future development. On black intellectuals’ debates on the role of the spirituals, see Anderson, “From Spirituals to Swing.”

32. Johnson and Johnson, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, 13–14; Anderson, “From Spirituals to Swing,” 125; “Spirituals Old and New,” *Opportunity*, February 1932, 39. While Radano and Cruz argue that the authenticity of the spirituals was largely a notion constructed by whites decades before, the fact remains that black intellectuals and musicians attempted to shape representations of African American culture, and their advocacy for a particularly class-based notion of the spirituals is significant.


35. *The Crisis* noted recitals by Miss Lucine Fitch of “Her Mammy’s Stories” in Hartford and by Mrs. Nelda Hewitt Hall singing “songs of the old southern plantations.” See “The Horizon: Music and Art,” *The Crisis* 13 (February 1917): 189. *The Crisis* also noted the recital of Mme. Cara Sapin—“a native white southerner” and member of the Boston Opera Company—which consisted of songs by Will Marion Cook and “a group of plantation songs in which she is said to be inimitable.” See “The Horizon:


39. “Tibbett Says Race Loses Its Music with Culture,” reprinted from the *Chicago Daily News*, the *Chicago Defender* 9 November 1935, 9. Tibbett recorded selections from *Porgy and Bess* on his nationally syndicated radio show and on a 1935 album; he also performed the role of Brutus Jones in blackface in the Metropolitan Opera’s 1933 production of the opera version of Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*.

40. For “the closest thing,” see George Gershwin to DuBose Heyward, 17 December 1934, in Box 1, 1172.01.01(g)01-01, DBHP. For “will you be my Porgy?,” see Robinson-Oturu, “The Life and Legacy of Todd Duncan,” 59. For Duncan’s concert programs, see “Todd Duncan Gives Recital at School,” *CD*, 6 February 1937, 4.


43. See Countee Cullen, “The Dark Tower,” *Opportunity*, April 1927, 118, and Countee Cullen, “The Dark Tower,” *Opportunity*, June 1927, 181. Earlier the same year, Cullen quipped: “the way things are going we think a play about Negroes in which nary a spiritual was sung would be a huge success because of the sheer novelty of the thing.”

44. For the Robeson controversy and quote, see Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 106 and 602; the letters appeared in the *Kansas City Call* on 18 February, 25 February, and 4 March 1927, and the interview appeared in the *New Bedford Mercury*, 16 June 1932. For Hayes, see Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 411. Southern quotes from an undated newspaper interview in which Hayes adds: “If, as I truly believe, there is purpose and plan in my life, it is this: that I shall have my share in rediscovering the qualities we have almost let slip away from us; and that we shall make our special contribution—only a humble one perhaps, but our very own—to human experience.” For the black scholar’s memory, see Daniel, “De Lawd,” i.


Notes to Pages 160–64 • 349

49. “Performers and Others Should Turn to Our Long Island Page,” NYAN, Brooklyn/Long Island section, 19 October 1927, 8; “Performers Homes at Jamaica,” NYAN, Brooklyn/Long Island section, 19 October 1927, 12. For the growth of the black middle class in Queens, see Gregory, Black Corona, 36, 48. For statistics on black home ownership, see Taylor, “Black Urban Development,” 429–48, and Brunson and Lowery, “Facts from the 1940 Census of Housing,” 89–93. By way of comparison, in 1940, 29.7 percent of African Americans in Los Angeles and 29.2 percent in Seattle owned their own homes. Home ownership rates dropped nationwide during the 1930s from 47.8 percent to 43.6 percent.

50. At least one white critic acknowledged the difference between Brown’s offstage and onstage identities, describing her as “an aesthetic and erudite off-stage parallel of Mr. Duncan.” See Holland, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Gershwin Opera Event in American Theater,” in Box 20, “Clippings, 1934–1935,” DBHP.


54. Samuel G. Freedman, “After 50 Years, ‘Porgy’ Comes to the Met as a Certified Classic,” NYT, 3 February 1985, sect. 2, 1. Brown recalled the same encounter with her father in greater detail a little more than a decade later: “When my father saw the premiere—the first performance of Porgy and Bess in New York, he was very disappointed and very sad that Negroes had been pictured in the usual clichés as ignorant dope peddlers and users, pimps, criminals, superstitious, all those things. But I told him that it offered unlimited opportunities for talented performers and singers where few existed and if you are a creator, an artist, you must create and you create with artistry that you transcend the subject matter. He didn’t look convinced one bit. But I felt truly optimistic about this.” Porgy and Bess: An American Voice, Viewer’s Guide, 16, in Porgy and Bess Folder, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston.

55. Sheryl Flatow, “Premiere Porgy; The Venerable Todd Duncan Recalls the Creation of Gershwin’s Opera,” Opera News, 16 March 1985, 35. See also Freedman, “After

56. Galbreath, “Mississippi to Broadway Story of Ruby Elzy.”


58. Fay M. Jackson, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Thrills Elite at Brilliant West Coast Premiere; Todd Duncan Excels in Difficult Portrayal; Anne Brown—First Lady; Avon Long Proves Sensational Find,” California Eagle, 10 February 1936, 10A; Lucien H. White, “‘Porgy and Bess,’” NYA, 26 October 1935, 4, 8; Fox, “‘Porgy and Bess’ First Real Theatrical and Musical Hit of Season.” Rob Roy, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Coax Stars of Song, Acting,” CD, 14 March 1936, 9.

59. Rob Roy, “‘Porgy and Bess’ More than Opera; Acting and Not Music Sells This Gershwin Hit, He Finds,” CD, 29 February 1936, 8; White, “‘Porgy and Bess,’” 4, 8; Ralph Matthews, “Broadway Gives a Royal Welcome to Gershwin’s ‘Porgy and Bess,’” AA, 19 October 1935, 8. On the next page of the same issue of The Afro-American, Matthews listed the complete educational training and professional experience of the Porgy and Bess principals. See Ralph Matthews, “Looking at the Stars,” AA, 19 October 1935, 9; Prattis, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Is a Show Window Woman,” 7; Fox, “‘Porgy and Bess’ First Real Theatrical and Musical Hit of Season.”


61. In a familiar formulation in an era in which the explicit politics of race were considered best left outside the theatre, she began her column by averring that she had “no intention or desire to pose a racial issue.” Florence Fisher Parry, “Porgy and Bess; Distinguished Colored Folk in Cast Inspiration to Others of Their Race,” unknown Pittsburgh newspaper, undated, in Porgy and Bess Pressbook, TGC.


63. Alpert, The Life and Times of “Porgy and Bess,” 123. Brown was particularly proud of this in a later recollection, although she left Duncan out of it and claimed “I was the only one” initially to speak out against performing at the segregated theatre; eventually the entire cast signed a petition. See Freedman, “After 50 Years, ‘Porgy’ Comes
to the Met as a Certified Classic,” 1. Duncan recalled a cast vote to send a letter of protest to the Theatre Guild about the National Theatre’s segregation policy. See Robinson-Oturu, “The Life and Legacy of Todd Duncan,” 65–66. On the efforts by Bunche, Brown, and Hunton, see Jesse Mann, “National Theatre in Capital Shifts Position on Jim Crow,” CD, 14 March 1936, 1. In subsequent coverage of this story, the Defender identified a coalition of “twelve liberal white organizations, among them the Inter-professional Association, and the Civil Liberties Union, and several Government workers’ unions” that had conducted letter-writing campaigns to pressure the National to change its segregation policies. Jesse Mann, “Sentiment Forecasts End of Jim-Crow in Washington,” CD, 4 April 1936, 1. The Defender also reported, in a 1943 account of a segregation protest by African Americans in Jackson, Mississippi, that “the cast of ‘Porgy and Bess’ has an arrangement with its management whereby it will not perform in any situation where Negroes are embarrassed or an attempt is made to treat them unfairly,” but I have found no other evidence for such an arrangement. “Negroes Boycott ‘Porgy & Bess’ Miss. Showing,” CD, 18 December 1943, 4.


69. For “instinctive appreciation,” see Downes, “‘Porgy and Bess,’ Native Opera, Opens at the Alvin.” For “artistic integrity,” see Vernon, “Porgy and Bess.” See also Schrader, “With Music!”; Evans, “Rhapsody in Black”; and “Friday to Friday in Manhattan.” For “employs the Negro idiom,” see “Boston Acclaims ‘Porgy,’” New York World Telegram, undated. For “comes closer to catching,” see Curtis D. MacDougall, ‘Porgy and Bess’ True Portrayal of Afro-America,” unknown newspaper, undated; all in Porgy and Bess Pressbook, TGC. See also Edwin F. Melvin, “‘Porgy and Bess’ for an Event of the Season,” BET, 1 October 1935, in Box 20, “Clippings, 1934–1935,” DBHP. For “sensual, sentimental rhythm,” see Dudley, WOR radio review, 10 October 1935. For “the naïve and complete spirit,” see Gilman, “George Gershwin’s New Opera.” For
“the superstition, terrors, ecstasies,” see Klein, “Porgy and Bess—At Forrest”; both in Porgy and Bess Pressbook, TGC. For “that essential Negro state,” see Winchester Townsend, “Porgy and Bess,” Stage, November 1935, 16, 39; Kolodin, “Porgy and Bess; American Opera in the Theatre,” 863. For “has been able to make a slave,” see Klein, “Porgy and Bess—At Forrest.”

70. Several scholars have explored the complicated relationship between American Jews and African Americans shared in the arena of popular culture during the early twentieth century. See Melnick, A Right to Sing the Blues; Rogin, Blackface, White Noise; Dawidoff, “Some of Those Days”; and Diner, In the Almost Promised Land. For Jewish press coverage of Porgy and Bess, see Martha Neumark, “George Gershwin Does a New Opera,” Jewish Ledger, Rochester, Syracuse, and Washington eds., undated; photo of Gershwin at piano with caption about how he was “showered with praise” for Porgy and Bess, American Hebrew, 4 October 1935; two photos with Hebrew-language captions, unknown newspapers, undated; all in Porgy and Bess Pressbook, TGC.

71. Goldberg, “Score by George Gershwin,” 37–38. Goldberg sounded this theme more than once. He wrote a similar article for Jewish Forum magazine, in which he added: “I thought—how could I help it?—of Germany and its Hitlerized delusions of ‘Aryan’ purity. Here, in an opera that had stirred the listeners to the depths, was a harmonious collaboration of races, colors, creeds, nations, centered upon the creation of beauty.” See Isaac Goldberg, “Melting Pot,” Jewish Forum (also reprinted in Jewish Daily Bulletin, 15 November 1935), in Porgy and Bess Pressbook, TGC. Writing in the Boston Transcript, he also summarized the ethnic collaboration at work: “That George Gershwin should have been the man to make of ‘Porgy’ an opera is eminently just. That this cosmopolitan Jew should see a work by two ‘Nordics,’ based upon the life of the humble Negro and produced by a polyglot Russian, is a profoundly American symbol” and “a notable American achievement.” Isaac Goldberg, “Gershwin at a New Period in His Career,” BT, 28 September 1935, 4–5; in Box 20, “Clippings, 1934–1935,” DBHP.


73. For references to Gershwin’s Charleston trip, see Moses Smith, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Acclaimed at Its Premiere in Boston,” CNC, 1 October 1935; “Critics Applaud ‘Porgy and Bess’; Gershwin, Who Came Here to Study Negro Life, Is Pleased with Opera,” CNC 2 October 1935; Francis D. Perkins, “Boston Cheers ‘Porgy and Bess’ by Gershwin,” NYHT, undated; and “Porgy into Opera,” Time, 30 September 1935; all in Box 20, “Clippings, 1934–1935,” DBHP.

74. While T. D. Rice and other blackface minstrel performers claimed to have based their performances on actual African Americans they witnessed on plantations or in
southern cities, in fact it was more likely that their mimicry drew from the African Americans they encountered in working-class neighborhoods and places of public amusement in antebellum northern cities. Lott, *Love and Theft*.

75. For these examples and a thorough treatment of early twentieth-century music styles, music markets, and fluid racial and regional identities, see Miller, *Segregating Sound*.

76. George Gershwin to DuBose Heyward, 25 November 1933; George Gershwin to DuBose Heyward, 19 December 1933; DuBose Heyward to George Gershwin, 6 February 1934; all in Box 1, Folder 1172.01.01(G)01-01, DBHP.

77. DuBose Heyward, “Porgy and Bess Return on Wings of Song,” *Stage* 13 (October 1935): 25–28. Melnick argues that “Gershwin’s trip south suggested a sort of reunion between northern and southern whites activated by a Jew who understood himself to be a shareholder in American whiteness. In this the creation of *Porgy and Bess* appears as a late entry in the process of sectional reunification which started at the end of federal Reconstruction, but in which Jews were not always welcome participants.” See Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*, 127–28.


79. Dorothy Heyward, “Another Jolson Story,” 4, in Box 10, “Typewritten manuscripts and a photostat of “Another Jolson Story,” DHP.

80. For “to acquire the proper mood,” see White, “‘Porgy and Bess,’” 4. For “to get the proper Negro atmosphere,” see “Gershwin: Talented Composer Gave Porgy Life and Rhythm,” *News-Week*, 12 October 1935, 22. For “absorbing local color,” see “Gershwin Comes Home with Atmosphere for ‘Porgy,’” *News-Week*, 4 August 1934, 25. For “learn at first hand,” see White, “‘Porgy and Bess,’” 4. For “the Negroes, who are likely to be shy,” see “‘Porgy’ a Sensation along Broadway,” *The Commentator*, 12 October 1935, in *Porgy and Bess* Pressbook, TGC. The African Americans Gershwin encountered at local churches may have been “his devoted admirers” because the composer generously left donations at every church he visited. See Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward*, 152. For “made a tour of Negro churches,” see “Gershwin Comes Home with Atmosphere for ‘Porgy,’” 25. For “thoroughly covered,” see “‘Porgy’ a Sensation along Broadway.” For “spent two years,” see Percy Hammond, “The Theatres,” unknown newspaper, 20 October 1935, in Box 2, Photos & Clippings 1935, *Porgy and Bess* Collection, Theatre Collection, Museum of the City of New York.

81. For “George Gershwin knows his negro music,” see “Friday to Friday in Manhattan,” 68, 96, in *Porgy and Bess* Pressbook, TGC. For Coleman, see “Words on the Negro Theatre,” M-9. For Duncan, see Armitage, *George Gershwin*, 60. For “the expression of 15 million Negroes,” see Flatow, “Premiere Porgy,” 35.

82. DuBose Heyward to George Gershwin, 27 March 1934, in Box 1, Folder 1172.01.01(G)01-01, DBHP.
83. Sources reflect some ambiguity about when Johnson uttered his oft-repeated compliment to Gershwin. Johnson himself, in a tribute book published after Gershwin’s death in 1937, places the moment onstage during the curtain calls after the first Boston preview performance. Yet Isaac Goldberg reported that Johnson conveyed that opinion to Gershwin during rehearsals. See Armitage, *George Gershwin*, 65; Goldberg, “Score by George Gershwin,” 37–38. For references to the remark, see Goldberg as well as “‘Porgy and Bess’ Sidelights,” 58, and magazine item, unknown publication, undated, in *Porgy and Bess* Pressbook, TGC.

84. Echoing Johnson, a critic in the *New York Age* emphasized that Gershwin “has answered the question as to whether or not the American Negro’s racial development can be used as a basis for a distinctive American opera. He has given an opportunity for demonstration of the Negroes’ ability in interpreting and portraying the operatic forms.” White, “‘Porgy and Bess,’” 8. Another Harlem critic concluded that “the opera is one of the finest tributes to the singing ability of the colored race. The music, written in a blue mood, brings out all the rich and pure qualities of the colored voices.” Fox, “‘Porgy and Bess’ First Real Theatrical and Musical Hit of Season.”


87. Ibid., 24, 26.

88. Ibid., 25, 26.


92. Eva Jessye oral history interview conducted by Alan Woods, in RBA; quoted in Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward*, 163.

93. Abe Hill, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Is a Bias Classic,” *NYAN*, 9 March 1944, 10A. Hill was careful to absolve the show’s performers of responsibility: “If the Negro actor is to do any acting at all, he is compelled to essay the roles offered, regardless of his integrity.”


CHAPTER 4


2. Ollie Stewart, “Report from Europe,” *AA*, 4 June 1955, 4; for “keep in mind what you’d like your folks at home to read in the press about what you say,” see Joy McLean, “Prestige, Status, and Role in a Status Group,” 8, paper written for college course,
Box F27/1, “P&B Article by Joy McClean 1958,” RBA. This was not the first time that *Porgy and Bess* had been put to patriotic purposes; during World War II, a streamlined version of the show, with a cast of sixteen, undertook a six-month tour of military bases under the auspices of the USO. See “‘Porgy and Bess’ for USO Trip,” *CD*, 23 September 1944, 7; “Eva Jessye in USO Porgy and Bess Cast Now,” *CD*, 30 September 1944, 7; “‘Porgy and Bess’ Group Set for Overseas,” *CD*, 28 October 1944, 10.

3. Two recent citations for this oft-repeated (and possibly apocryphal) quote include Julie Salamon, “She Rose above Mammyness,” *NYT*, 6 August 2001, E1, E3; and Early, “Whatever Happened to Integration?,” 108. Film historian Donald Bogle presents a slightly different, and unsourced, version of this quote: “Why should I complain about making seven thousand dollars a week playing a maid? If I didn’t, I’d be making seven dollars a week actually being one!” See Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 82.


5. See ibid., chapters 1 and 2, for a thorough description of the creation and impact of these radio programs.

6. For President’s Committee on Civil Rights report and Acheson quote, see Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 80. For State Department attention to overseas coverage of U.S. race relations, see Krenn, *Black Diplomacy*, 32; and Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 36, 38.

7. See Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 49. Dudziak also reports that Voice of America radio broadcasts reporting the *Brown* decision to listeners in Eastern Europe emphasized the democratic process through which the decision had been reached. Ibid., 107.


11. Krenn, *Black Diplomacy*, is a thorough account of African American efforts to influence U.S. foreign policy and increase African American employment in the U.S. foreign service during the first twenty-five years of the Cold War. Dudziak notes that in 1953, U.S. ambassador to India Chester Bowles requested that black foreign service officers be assigned to India, but none were. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 59.


13. Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 21, 32; the speaking tour was sponsored by
the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which was later revealed as a front organization for the CIA. Dudziak notes that in 1948, Randolph was arguing vigorously for the desegregation of the armed services; Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 85–86. Randolph’s lifelong membership in the Socialist Party also likely influenced his anticommunist stance.

14. On Sampson, see Laville and Lucas, “The American Way,” 565–90. A “Round Table” published in the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1952 presented arguments from readers in favor of and against Sampson as an international representative of African Americans. Those in favor cited her business accomplishments and stature as a community leader, while those opposed described her as out of touch with the black community. One “con” comment linked her to the *Porgy and Bess* tour, also being sponsored by the State Department; this commenter argued: “The United States is looking for hired advocates who will represent the U.S. in a favorable light to the world and forget the multitude of wrongs suffered by Negroes in the U.S.” and sarcastically summarized the government’s ideal black representatives as “‘Cullud’ folks, segregated, underpaid, fish eatin’, and immoral.” This caustic link between Sampson and *Porgy and Bess* was credited to “newspaperman, Pittsburgh, Pa.,” and the author might well have been Joseph D. Bibb, who penned other fierce criticisms of *Porgy and Bess* in his column that year. “Round Table,” *PC*, 26 July, 1952, 18.

15. For example, Sampson dutifully distanced herself from Robeson; when asked, she characterized him as part of “a lunatic fringe.” Laville and Lucas, “The American Way,” 571.

16. As historian Gerald Horne points out, “for generations, blacks, like Frederick Douglass, had traveled abroad in order to rally support against racism and barbarism at home,” while by contrast, “the Cold War junkets of Sampson, Redding, Rowan, et al. represented a relatively new development: blacks traveling abroad—on behalf of the U.S. government—to cover up racism and barbarism at home.” Horne, “Who Lost the Cold War?,” 613–26.

17. The *New York Times* similarly described her as “one more living answer to the canard, spread by Moscow and beloved by many non-Communists elsewhere, that it is American policy to keep the Negroes as a helot class.” Laville and Lucas, “The American Way,” 571.


chartered—but did not fund—ANTA as a national theatre in 1935. Quickly super-
seded by the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Theatre, ANTA languished
until the late 1940s, when it began producing plays.


Emergency Fund appropriation set aside $2.592 million for trade fairs and $2.250 mil-
lion for dance, music, theatre, and sports (the majority of the funds in 1954–55 were
spent on artists rather than athletes). Prevots, Dance for Export, 11.


26. Vindicated by Porgy and Bess’s resounding success overseas, the State Depart-
ment sought to expand its performing arts sponsorships. In 1956 Congress authorized
the funds as a permanent program. An Operations Coordinating Board (OCB), com-
prised of the head of the USIA (the undersecretaries of state and defense), represen-
tatives from the CIA and National Security Council, and the special assistant to the
president (C. D. Jackson during the Eisenhower administration) controlled expendi-
tures for these cultural sponsorships. While ANTA and discipline-specific advisers
established peer-review panels to choose performers and performances and the State
Department chose the locations where they would perform, the OCB exercised final
control over which artists were chosen to represent the United States overseas. Prevots,
Dance for Export, 8, 13, 41. See also Taylor, “Ambassadors of the Arts,” 58–61, 64–66.
The bureaucrats in charge of the program carefully monitored participating artists, re-
serving the right to deny funds to a “known loud-mouth, an alcoholic, a communist or
even a party liner,” a threat carried out against the Symphony of the Air in 1956 when,
in the words of one, “it was clear that we did not have the types that could be counted
upon to be good representatives abroad,” and a Middle East tour by the orchestra was

27. Prevots, Dance for Export, 21.


Agency, “Modifications by USIA to the Staff Study Prepared by State with Respect
to the Proposed Tour of Porgy and Bess in the Soviet Union and European Satellite
Countries,” White House Office, National Security Council Staff: Papers, 1948–1961,
OCB Central File Series, Box 15, File 6, EPL.

30. Von Eschen, Satchmo Blows Up the World; for “moral authority of the nation,” see
180–81.

31. Interview with Clyde Turner conducted by Alan Taylor, 15 December 1987, 10,
RBA; Alma Blackmon to Robert Breen, 28 January 1957, Box F29, “Robert Battle,”
RBA. While Davis and Breen did engage in discussions with the Metropolitan Opera
about presenting Porgy and Bess there, the overseas dates in West Berlin and Vienna
made scheduling and ownership of the production untenable for the Metropolitan
Opera. New York City Opera was an exception to an otherwise segregated opera
world; Todd Duncan, the original Porgy, debuted there in *I Pagliacci* in 1945. Marian Anderson became the first African American to sing a leading role at the Metropolitan Opera on 7 January 1955. See Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 498.


34. Most critics did, however, refer to *Porgy and Bess* as a “folk opera.”


36. For the Catfish Row set and costumes, see photos in Box F120, Photographs 3 of 3, Folder “Prod. Photos of Robbin’s Funeral,” RB F120.28, RBA. For the Kittiwah Island set, see photo in *Look*, 9 September 1952, Box F107 (2 of 2), Scrapbook “Display of Photos, Letter, Posters,” RBA.

37. John McCurry quoted in Don Cook, “‘Porgy,’ a Hit Abroad, Won’t Be Here before Late ’53,” *New York Sunday Herald Tribune*, 28 September 1952, *Porgy and Bess* Clipping Files, NYPL-BR. Breen’s press materials also boasted of this approach, informing reporters and critics that this production “is unique in that it is approached from a ‘drama’ rather than a conventional ‘opera’ point of view. The concept is one of unity and cohesiveness in the entire production, acting, dancing, singing, scenic and costume design, lighting, orchestral approach, atmosphere and timing, all elements blending so harmoniously that every detail complements the whole.” See three-page press summary in Box F116, “Some Press Stories,” RBA.


39. Interview with Dorothy and John McCurry, conducted by Alan Woods, 14 December 1987, 10, RBA. Truman Capote, who accompanied the *Porgy and Bess* tour overseas and wrote a series of *New Yorker* articles and a book about his observations, described the scene even more graphically: “He grips her to him, gropes her buttocks, her breasts; and ends with Bess raping him—she rips off his shirt, wraps her arms around him and writhes, sizzles like bacon in a skillet.” Capote, *The Muses Are Heard*, 175.

40. Undated memo to cast from Blevins Davis and Robert Breen, Box F22 Pt. 1, “P&B Misc.,” RBA.

41. Interview with Marilyn Putnam and Alyce Webb, conducted by Alan Woods, 14 December 1987, 7, RBA.

research included trips to libraries to examine pictures of “black quarters in Southern towns” and a trip to Charleston, but no available evidence reflects a special study of the work of Horace Pippin. Roth was a painter, however, and might well have been influenced by Pippin. Alpert, The Life and Times of “Porgy and Bess,” 163.


45. Placing articles could include writing articles outright, as with an article that appeared with Doll’s byline in the *New York Herald Tribune* during the first leg of the domestic tour. See Doll, “Folk Opera Capacity in Washington.”

46. Bill Doll to Blevins Davis and Robert Breen, 13 February 1953, Box F5 Pt. 1, “P&B 1952, 2,” RBA. Doll was nothing if not thorough; during this period, he sent out more than 3,200 pieces of mail to every possible media outlet, from big city dailies to “all the small papers in commuting area” of New York City.


48. A three-page handwritten list of black clubs in Harlem, Brooklyn, and Queens to target with publicity materials included entries for black sororities and fraternities, bridge clubs, the Beautician’s Club, black college clubs, nurses clubs, black churches, NAACP branches, and the Negro Actor’s Guild. Materials relating to strategies for targeting black audiences located in Box F5 Pt. 1, “P&B Public Relations—USA Chicago,” “P&B Public Relations—USA—Chicago Promotion,” “P&B Public Relations New York Harlem Campaign,” and “P&B Public Relations USA Pittsburgh,” RBA.


360 • Notes to Pages 201–3
52. Blevins Davis and Robert Breen to “Each Member of the Porgy and Bess Company,” 9 March 1953, Box F22 Pt. 1, “P&B Misc.,” RBA.


55. According to a news item in Variety, “American-sponsored Red-White-Red network broadcast a complete tape-recorded performance of [Porgy and Bess]. During the run of the folk opera, the State Department–operated network was permitted to place microphones in the auditorium.” “Porgy Aired in Vienna,” Variety, 5 November 1952, in Porgy and Bess clipping file, NYPL-BR. On the film, see Box F22 Pt. 1, “Promotional—Sally Ployart,” RBA.

56. Arthur Gelb, “Critics May See Moscow ‘Porgy,’” NYT, 6 December 1955, Box F106 (2 of 4), unmarked scrapbook—international tour coverage in U.S. papers, RBA.


58. For “endless picture taking,” see Georgia Burke, “The Porgy and Bess Story, 1952–53,” Equity, May 1953, 14. Vast amounts of publicity material and photographs are located in RBA. For newspapers and magazines in the United States, Breen also delivered a steady stream of material for gossip columns; a press agent reported to the staff with the show in Europe that “it looks like we will be in a position to use a lot of gossip items about the company” and requested: “feed them to us as frequently as possible.” Warner Watson to Rose Tobias, 24 January 1955, Box F5 Pt. 1, “Public Relations Jan. 1955,” RBA.


60. “‘Porgy and Bess’—The Passionate Story of a Girl and Three Men,” Box F116, “Some Press Stories,” RBA.


63. “The Artists in ‘Porgy and Bess,’” Box F116, “Some Press Stories,” RBA. A fourth handout summarized the Porgy and Bess tour to date and promoted Breen’s “plans for developing a musical repertory company, which would be the only one of its kind.” The handout promised “it is not inconceivable that the company bringing Porgy and Bess to this city will remain together as a unit for years to come.” See “‘Porgy and Bess’—A Real World Traveller,” Box F116, “Some Press Stories,” RBA.

64. “The stage is a genuine description of life in the Negro quarter, Catfish Row, in the port Charleston in South Carolina” decreed an Oslo critic, and in Warsaw, a reviewer thanked Everyman Opera Company for providing Polish audiences with evi-


thusiasm over ‘Porgy and Bess’; First Night of Gershwin’s Opera in the Volksoper performed by American Negro Artists,” *Wiener Kurier* (Vienna), 8 September 1952, translation, *Porgy and Bess* clipping file; both in NYPL-BR. A few critics also argued that Gershwin had captured and transmitted “a race’s soul.” A Santiago review imputed Gershwin’s accomplishment to the fact that the composer “also belonged to a persecuted race,” while a London critic attributed his insight instead to “prolonged and thorough study.” Magdalena Vicuna, “Gershwin’s Music Reveals a Race’s Soul,” *El Debate Santiago*, 27 August 1955, Box F16 Pt. 2, “Santiago Translations,” RBA. A London reviewer also pointed out that “Gershwin, son of a father who had known life in a Russian ghetto, was certainly the man to feel a natural and deep compassion for the poor creatures of his story.” See Geoffrey Tarran, “It Started 17 Years Ago, but Gershwin Opera Still Rocks the Stage,” *Morning Advertiser* (London), 15 October 1952. For “prolonged and thorough study,” see Mosco Carner, “The Arts,” *Time and Tide* (London), 18 October 1952; both Box F107 (2 of 2), in Scrapbook “Display of photos, letters, posters,” RBA. For “the action would seem,” see “Porgy and Bess at the Theatre Beaulieu.” For “a naïve realistic theatre,” see “Gershwin’s ‘Porgy and Bess’ at the Volksoper,” NYPL-BR. For “what sensual tension,” see Friedrich Luft, “American Folk Opera ‘Porgy and Bess,’” RIAS Radio Commentary (Berlin), translation in *Porgy and Bess* clipping file, NYPL-BR.


72. Interview with Joseph James, conducted by Alan Woods, 13 December 1987, 4,

Notes to Pages 210–11 • 363
RBA; corroborated by photos of cast, still in makeup and costume, greeting audience members behind stage curtain.

73. Woods interview with Lillian Hayman, 6.

74. “Annex ‘A’ Detailed Development of Major Actions,” White House Office, National Security Council Staff: Papers, 1948–61, OCB Central Files Series, Box 57, OCB 091. Yugoslavia (File #1) [February 1954–November 1955], EPL. Wilva Breen reported to State Department employee Mary Stewart French that “the magnificent Riddlebergers gave a reception for Belgrade society at which the Company captivated everyone—not only with their exquisite charm in going around and getting into conversation with everyone—but also by solo singing of classics and group singing of spirituals—which was almost hypnotic.” Wilva Breen to Mary Stewart French, 23 June 1955.

75. For “when they stepped off,” see Burke, “The Porgy and Bess Story, 1952–53,” 13. For “by the time the cast was ready,” see Sutton, “From Catfish Row to the Kremlin,” 37. For “one Warsaw shop owner,” see Dorothy McCurry to Robert and Wilva Breen, Box F5 Pt. 2, “P&B Untitled (Poland—1956),” RBA. Cast members caused similar consternation in a “bustling” Leningrad store, where “business came to an abrupt standstill” at their entrance. See Sutton, “From Catfish Row to the Kremlin,” 37. For “I had people,” see Woods interview with Dorothy and John McCurry, 16. For “stared at and exclaimed,” see Margaret Neeson, “Milan Gives Warm Acclaim to Opera ‘Porgy and Bess,’” CNC, 6 March 1955, 13C. For “the people of this town,” see Rose Tobias to Robert Breen, 11 December 1954, Box F27 3 of 3, “P&B Public Relations Yugoslavia Zagreb,” RBA. A letter from a Polish fan gushed: “Oh! Black People! So very lively! I want to see you so much, friends of all humanity.” Gabriel Da Browskig to Porgy and Bess cast, 24 January 1956, Box F5 Pt. 2, “P&B Untitled (Poland—1956),” RBA. For “everyone knew we were from ‘Porgy and Bess,’” see Burke, “The Porgy and Bess Story, 1952–53,” 14.

76. For example, the local newspaper in Yorktown, New York, picked up an item from a Saturday Review story describing the cast’s “visit to a [Leningrad] church where one of the members of the cast, when asked to talk, broke into song, with the rest of the cast joining in, until handkerchiefs were waved all over the church to express thanks and admiration. There was also a jam session in a Leningrad nightclub with the Russians joining in singing ‘White Christmas’” and “an impromptu Russian-American songfest” at the embassy reception following the Moscow opening. Nationally syndicated newspaper columnist Art Buchwald, who traveled with the tour for a short time, reported: “Not only was the opera wonderfully received, but the cast at every opportunity sang impromptu at nightclubs and at parties in both Zagreb and Belgrade. In Zagreb, at the mayor’s party, the cast sang Christmas carols and a Yugoslav choir sang peasant songs.” Bertram Taylor, “Music and Musicians,” Yorktown (N.Y.) Herald, 9 February 1956. Taylor drew on Sutton, “From Catfish Row to the Kremlin,” 37; Saturday Review’s account of the Leningrad nightclub “jam session” also included the detail that “Jerry Laws led the comrades around the floor singing ‘When

77. For “they sang in churches,” see Burke, “The Porgy and Bess Story, 1952–53,” 15. Noting the grim conditions in the refugee camps, she described how “women in the Company gave their lipsticks and powder, and the men, candy and gum, anything they had in their bags or pockets to brighten the lives of these refugees from Eastern Europe.” For “at a Meeting with the mayor,” see Wilva Breen to Mary Stewart French, 23 June 1955. For “we were usually notified,” see McClean, “Prestige, Status, and Role in a Status Group,” 11. For “the cast members, most of whom were highly trained singers,” see Woods interview with Joseph James, 6. Some performances were less formal than others, as when a drunk Ned Wright regaled Venetians with late-night arias in perfect Italian; see Woods interview with Dorothy and John McCurry, 5.

For “discovered after long experience,” see McClean, “Prestige, Status, and Role in a Status Group,” 11, 14.


81. “‘Porgy’ Makes a Hit,” NYT, 23 December 1954. The Worcester (Mass.) Gazette similarly noted: “Russian Communist propaganda has encouraged the belief that United States culture is decadent and that the 19th century stereotypes of American Negroes are accurate. This show and its performers refuted both points.” “Cultural Ambassadors to Our Friends Abroad,” Worcester (Mass.) Gazette, 27 December 1954, Box F106 (1 of 4), Scrapbook “P&B International 1954–55,” RBA. The Milwaukee Journal described “the talented, well-educated and prosperous Negro actors in the Gershwin opera” as “Cultural Commandos” who “did much to overcome the impression that Negroes in America are a persecuted race.” See Eklund, “U.S. ‘Cultural Commandos’ Abroad,” RBA.

82. “‘Porgy’ Wins New Friends,” Kansas City Star, 7 May 1955; see also, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Make Friends,” Stockton (Calif.) Record, 12 May 1955. Not only editorialists but also newspaper readers applauded Porgy and Bess’s Cold War work; see “‘Porgy and Bess’ Good American Advertisement Abroad,” Norfolk Virginian-Pilot, 9 February 1956, and letter to editor offering a donation to Everyman Opera for their good work in Russia in Saturday Review of Literature, 18 February 1956; all in Box F106 (104), Scrapbook “P&B International 1955–56,” RBA.


from the United States had accomplished in one evening what the Voice of America could never do in a lifetime.” “American Opera Wins Warm Response from Yugoslavia,” Casper (Wyo.) Tribune-Herald, 11 January 1955. Similarly, the Boston Herald bragged: “Stuffed shirt, double talk diplomacy is not part of the American character (at least we like to think it isn’t). Show ’em how we do it; show ’em what we’ve made; show ’em how we sing—this is how to win friends and preclude battles.” “Ambassador Gershwin,” BH, 23 December 1954. All in Box F106 (1 of 4), Scrapbook “P&B International 1954–55,” RBA. For “has crowded around them,” see “Heart-to-Heart Diplomacy,” New York Daily Mirror, 27 December 1955; for “not strictly American,” see “Just a Minute,” Manhattan (Kans.) Mercury, 24 February 1956; both in Box F106 (104), Scrapbook “P&B International 1955–56,” RBA.


nist similarly asked: “just why was it necessary to send as our representatives the inhabitants of water-front slums, making their livings by crap-shooting and the ‘oldest profession’? How can Europeans who do not know anything about us think them anything but typical—especially presented under our own State Department’s banner?” See Ina Gillespie Grotte, “U.S. Should Put Best Foot Forward,” HC, 8 March 1956. For “the Ruskies will have a chance,” see “Jazz Age Diplomacy,” Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 8 December 1955. All in Box F106 (104), Scrapbook “P&B International 1955–56,” RBA. This particular editorial writer also disavowed any African American influence on genuine American culture, since “long ago we recognized the so-called Americana of the jazz age is nothing but imported Africana, which we are now powdering and shipping back to its point of origin branded with the fiction Made In The USA.”


89. For “when will the colored people of America,” see Hicks, “We Don’t Need
‘Porgy and Bess,’” 9. In his weekly Afro-American column two weeks later, Hicks described Porgy and Bess as “the crap shooting musical which is delighting the bigots on Broadway and putting the colored race to shame” and roundly criticized Rev. Adam Clayton Powell for sending out a letter urging people to attend the show. See James L. Hicks, “Big Town,” AA, 18 April 1953, 9; Rogers, “Rogers Says: Porgy and Bess Draws Further Criticism as Insulting to Negroes,” 8; Joseph D. Bibb, “Catfish Row: ‘Porgy and Bess,’ with Its Musical Lore of Craps and Dope, Should Not Be Sent to Europe,” PC, 26 July 1952, 8. For “nobody will consider,” see “A Claim That Reaches to Absurdity’s Rock Bottom.” For “the persistent feeling,” see “Backstage on ‘Porgy and Bess,’” CD, 15 October 1955, 2. Amsterdam News reader Henry Andrews also referred to Tobacco Road in defending Porgy and Bess; he argued that “native whites” were not “getting riled up” over Tobacco Road or other unflattering onstage depictions. Andrews, “Says ‘Porgy and Bess’ Portrays an Era.”


91. For “the play is furnishing jobs,” see “A Claim That Reaches to Absurdity’s Rock Bottom,” RBA. For “a better vehicle,” see “Europeans’ Interest in Negroes ‘Profound,’” PC, 20 September 1952, 2; George S. Schuyler, “The World Today,” PC, 16 August 1952, 5; and Ollie Stewart, “Report from Europe,” AA, 4 June 1955, 4. For “for the next few years,” see Ollie Stewart, “Report from Europe,” AA, 4 June 1955, 4. The Amsterdam News also couched criticism of the show within fulsome praise for its performers, noting in an editorial: “We are glad the Russians like our actors and singers and the brand of entertainment that they were prepared to give them. Our repeated praises go out to the many talented members of the troupe who are doing their bit to bring about a better understanding through American songs and showmanship. We just hope the Russians don’t get the wrong idea. ‘Porgy and Bess’ represents top flight entertainment by some of our most capable professional artists, but the story it tells is not exactly the side of American life that is the most representative.” “Catfish Row’ in Russia,” NYAN, 7 January 1956, 12. For “rarely gets the chance,” see M. D. Cartwright, “Oscar for Human Dignity,” NYAN, 18 April 1953, 16. For “the heavenly singing,” see Joseph D. Bibb, “Catfish Row; ‘Porgy and Bess,’ with Its Musical Lore of Craps and Dope, Should Not Be Sent to Europe,” PC, 26 July 1952, 8. In the same column, Bibb decried the opera’s roles as “disgraceful and demoralizing” and the opera itself as “a vehicle of shame, sorrow and disgust.” In a later column, he reiterated that “not even the splendid singing and the superb acting could destroy the plot of the story,” which
entailed “crap-shooting, dope-dealing, crimes, and murder.” Joseph D. Bibb, “‘Calhoun’s New Role’: ‘Calhoun’ of Amos ‘n’ Andy No Longer Hailed as a Lawyer,” PC, 8 November 1952, 8. Bibb also predicted that *Porgy and Bess* would backfire as propaganda, encouraging “Crafty Reds” to “headline and highlight the economic conditions behind Catfish Row and the causes underlying the tragic figures.” Bibb, “Catfish Row; ‘Porgy and Bess.’” For “forward thinking colored people,” see Hicks, “We Don’t Need ‘Porgy and Bess.’”


94. During the Little Rock crisis, Armstrong declared “the way they are treating my people in the South, the government can go to hell.” Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights, 66. See also Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World*, 63.

95. For “we have befriended,” see Box 9, “Misc. items pertaining to Porgy and Bess, 1950s,” DHP. Warfield, William Warfield—My Music and My Life, 132–33. Woods interview with Lillian Hayman, 9. Woods interview with Joseph James, 9. While James might well have spoken against the U.S. government in the Cairo forum, I have found no other evidence for it beyond his recollection.

96. For the Soviet demand to tone down the scenes between Bess and Crown, see McLean, “Prestige, Status, and Role in a Status Group,” 10. For the relaxation provided by travel, see ibid., 7. For cast members getting on each other’s nerves, see “by the time we reached Prague, we were jumpy from having been so close together as a group for so long my good nature was being stretched to breaking point,” in ibid., 15. For Breen’s assistance to cast members, see Wilva Breen to Mary Stewart French, 9 August 1955, Box F22 Pt. 1, “State Department,” RBA; Wilva Breen to Warner Watson, 15 May 1955, Box F5 Pt. 1, “P&B Personnel spring 1955,” RBA. Warner Watson to Dorothy Heyward, 24 May 1955, Box 4, “Warner Watson, 1951–1957,” DHP. For Joseph James, see Joseph James to Robert Breen, undated, Box F22 Pt. 1, “Joseph James,” RBA. For the marriage of Thigpen and Jackson, see “A Social Note from Moscow,” Life, 6 February 1956, Box F106, Scrapbook “P&B International,” RBA. An Associated Press report on the Thigpen-Jackson marriage described “2,500 spectators jammed inside and outside the Russian Baptist Church. The 45-minute, double ring
ceremony was translated phrase by phrase into English by an interpreter for Intourist, the Soviet travel agency, who stood beside the pastor, the Rev. Alexi N. Karpov. Soviet and U.S. newspaper and newsreel cameramen recorded the event under blinding lights.” See Roy Essoyan, “Sportin’ Life Weds Serena in Moscow,” in Box 9, Folder 180.01.03.01-39, “Clippings re: foreign productions of Porgy and Bess 1950s,” DHP. Other tour marriages included Elizabeth Foster and Italian stage carpenter Giovanni Esposito (who together later parented actor Giancarlo Esposito) and Lorenzo Fuller and translator Haya Murray. After the tour, Gloria Davy remained in Italy and married a La Scala director. See Woods interview with Dorothy and John McCurry, 18, and Woods interview with Marilyn Putnam and Alyce Web, 13.

97. For overseas salaries, see “Salary List Week Ending December 18, 1954,” and for U.S. salaries, see “Salary List for Week Ending April 24, 1954,” in Box F36, “Salary Lists Jan. 2, 1954–Dec. 25, 1954,” RBA. For paying for hotel rooms, see McLean, “Prestige, Status, and Role in a Status Group,” 6. Many chose, when possible, to get apartments or otherwise live apart from the rest of the company, with whom they spent so many waking hours; see Woods interview with Dorothy and John McCurry, 4, and Woods interview with Joseph James, 3. For the two-week unpaid vacation, see Woods interview with Dorothy and John McCurry, 4–5. For opportunities for European travel, see ibid., 15–16, and Woods interview with Joseph James, 14. For appreciation by overseas audiences, see Woods interview with Clyde Turner, 11–13.


99. For London, see “Colored Peoples in Britain; Housing, Employment Show Vital Aspect of Status,” ADW, 7 July 1953, 2. For restaurants, see Woods interview with Marilyn Putnam and Alyce Webb, 14, 16. For “we’d come from performing” and hotel incident, see Woods interview with Lillian Hayman, 10.

100. For Angelou quote, see unidentified clipping, RBC Box F106 (3 of 4), Scrapbook “Israel 1955,” RBA. For Breen’s plans, see Doll, “Folk Opera Capacity in Washington”; Alpert, The Life and Times of “Porgy and Bess,” 185–86; and Stewart, “An American Opera Conquers Europe,” 94; untitled, Jet, 23 September 1954; “Premiere in Paris for Blues Opera,” NYT, 3 September 1954, both Box F106 (1 of 4), Scrapbook

101. For State Department briefing, see McLean, “Prestige, Status, and Role in a Status Group,” 8. Perhaps echoing this advice, one cast member shared an opinion—which Truman Capote characterized as “prevalent” among the entire cast—of Russian reviews: “Sure it’s nice they write okay things, but who cares? It’s not what the Russians think. It’s the stuff they’re hearing about us back home. That’s what counts.” See Capote, The Muses Are Heard, 180–81. Alternatively, the cast member who uttered this remark might have meant that positive publicity in the United States would help further the performers’ careers after the tour was finished. For “we were briefed not to say,” see interview with Coreania Hayman Carter conducted by Alan Woods, 16 December 1987, 16, RBA. For Ellington, see Von Eschen, Satchmo Blows Up the World, 135; for Gillespie, see ibid., 34.


106. Breen was not quite ready to be done. Six months later, he was attempting to plan another overseas tour for Porgy and Bess, this time to Asia. His colleague Paul
Szilard, a manager at the New York City Ballet, reported that problems of logistics and expense were standing in the way, but he added: “At this time, with the racial question so much in prominence all over the world, it would be good propaganda to bring the excellent PORGY AND BESS negro cast to these countries, which are anxious to know the truth about the great progress made by negroes in this country.” Paul Szilard to Robert Breen, 17 December 1956, in Box 9, “Letter to Robert Breen concerning a proposed tour of Porgy and Bess in Asian countries,” DHP.

107. For the request for official recognition of the cast, see Dale O. Smith to Robinson McIlvaine, 29 April 1955, White House Office, National Security Council Staff, Papers, 1948–61 OCB Central File Series, Box 14, OCB 007, [Cultural Activities] (File #1) [April 1954–June 1955], EPL. For “you well know,” see Robert Breen to Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Allan Lightner Jr., 31 May 1956. Breen similarly urged Special Assistant to the President Maxwell Rabb: “What with the Montgomery, Alabama, and Miss Lucy incidents being headlined in the world press, this chance for recognition of the American Negro artists should not slip by. On our travels abroad it has been hinted here and there that the American Negro artist is considered as perfectly all right as a ‘cultural ambassador’ abroad, but that he is still, perhaps, a second-rate citizen back home. An invitation to be briefly greeted by the President at the White House would do a tremendous job in national and world press in concretely showing how valued these American Negro artists are.” Both letters in Box F27 (1 of 3), “P&B Public Relations—Government Officials,” RBA. For the Montgomery bus boycott’s international impact, see Branch, Parting the Waters, 178–79, 183.

INTERLUDE: CHARLESTON, 1940–1969


2. Hutchisson, DuBose Heyward, 186.

3. For Waring’s efforts to keep Heyward in the spotlight, see Dorothy Heyward to Thomas Waring, 23 September 1952, and Thomas Waring to Dorothy Heyward, 9 April 1953, both in Box 4, “Thomas R. Waring, 1925–1929,” DHP. T. R. Waring, “The Forgotten Man,” Newsweek, 27 July 1959. Waring also praised writers who got it right, as when he wrote to New York Times arts writer Bosley Crowther: “As a friend and fellow townsman I have been trying to keep his name in the proper place, and welcome such references as yours.” Thomas Waring to Bosley Crowther, 9 November 1954, in Box 5, “Credits and Billing, 1935–1959,” DHP. For “my pleasure in the grand reviews,” see Dorothy Heyward to Robert Breen, 2 July 1952, in Box 5, “Credits and Billing, 1935–1959,” DHP. For Dorothy’s letters to reviewers, see Box 5, “Credits and Billing, 1935–1959,” DHP. For “if it should happen to fit,” see Dorothy Heyward to Thomas Waring, 28 April 1953 in Box 4, “Thomas R. Waring, 1925–1929,” DHP.

4. On Cheryl Crawford’s production, see photostat of agreement dated 25 May 1942
between Century Play Company, Theatre Guild, and Cheryl Crawford, which requires Crawford to acknowledge in all published materials and advertisements that *Porgy and Bess* is “founded on the play *Porgy* by DuBose and Dorothy Heyward” and always refer to “George Gershwin and DuBose Heyward’s *Porgy and Bess*. See also Dorothy Heyward to Robert Breen, 2 July 1952, where she blames Crawford for setting the precedent of dropping Heyward’s name, which has “done DuBose an irreparable injustice”; both in Box 5, “Credits and Billing, 1935–1959,” DHP.

5. Dorothy Heyward to Dr. Fisher, 22 May 1958. See also Dorothy Heyward to Timothy Seldes, 9 July 1957, where she writes that she has been working on her *Porgy and Bess* stories “thinking that their day might come with the production of the Goldwyn movie or with the publicity that would surely come with the fourth ‘International Tour’—this one to go all the way around the world.” She was also mindful of the competition: “For some time I have been hearing that Truman Capote was planning a play about the ‘Porgy and Bess’ Company behind the Iron Curtain. Yesterday the Breen menace was added to the Capote menace. Breen wrote that Houghton-Mifflin had requested him to write a book about P&B to be ready for the first production of the picture.” Both in Box 3, “Timothy Seldes, 1957–1958,” DHP.

6. Timothy Seldes to Dorothy Heyward, 19 May 1958, in Box 3, “Timothy Seldes, 1957–1958”; Katharine S. White to Dorothy Heyward, 21 July 1953, and other correspondence in Box 5, “New Yorker magazine, 1953–1956”; both DHP. See also Audrey Wood to Dorothy Heyward, 18 November 1955, on pitching Dorothy’s account of the Moscow premiere of *Porgy and Bess* to the *New Yorker*; for “I am quite sure,” see Dorothy Heyward to Audrey Wood, 12 June 1956; all in Box 4, “Wood, 1955–1957,” DHP. Story manuscripts in Box 10, Box 31, Box 32, and Box 33, DHP.

7. Dorothy Heyward to Katherine S. White, 15 July 1953; sending “Anybody Here Know Porgy?” in Box 5, “New Yorker magazine, 1953–1956,” DHP.


12. Waring marshaled other African American voices to similarly justify the show’s racial subject matter, paraphrasing cast member John McCurry (“He added that the two murders and other violence in ‘Porgy and Bess’ should not be considered a blanket indictment of Negroes any more than the theme of ‘Don Giovanni’ could be called an insult to all Italians”) and Morgan State University professor R. Hayes Strider.
13. A Staff Correspondent, “‘Porgy and Bess’ May Run Indefinitely,” CNC, 18 April 1953, in Box 8, “Photocopies of clippings from the Amsterdam News (a black NY newspaper) about the play Porgy, 1960s,” DHP.


15. For Whitelaw’s role in the city’s cultural life, see Yuhl, A Golden Haze of Memory. For “people who were against it,” see Robert Whitelaw to David H. Stevens, 24 April 1952, 1177/21-197-7, 1952, CAA-DST. In 1957 Dorothy wrote: “About 25 years ago an attempt was made by the Dock Street Theatre. It was to have been an outdoor production. The Director was already on the ground when protests from the white citizenry caused the cancellation of the project.” Dorothy Heyward to Robert Molloy, 22 December 1957, DHP.


18. Bryan Collier, “Dock Street Theater to Stage DuBose Heyward’s Play, ‘Porgy,’” Charleston News and Courier, 8 May 1952, in Box 7, “Photocopies of play reviews, later 1920s to 1952,” DHP. For other references to Porgy being an annual tourist-drawing event, see Robert Whitelaw to David H. Stevens, 24 April 1952; Archie F. Hess to Dorothy Heyward, 1 February 1954, in Box 8, “Photocopies of clippings from the Amsterdam News (a black NY newspaper) about the play Porgy, 1960s,” DHP; Bryan Collier, “Dock Street Plans to Make ‘Porgy’ Summer Attraction,” CNC, 11 May 1952, in Dock Street Correspondence 1952–1953, CAA-DST.

19. On the $25,000 cost, see Robert Whitelaw to George Freedley, 4 April 1952, in 1177/21-197-7, 1952, CAA-DST; on other fund-raising appeals, see Maxwell Hahn to Robert Whitelaw, 5 March 1953; Lina Abarbanell to Robert Whitelaw, 6 January 1953; and Robert Whitelaw to Lina Abarbanell, 3 March 1953; all in 1177/21-197-8, 1952–1953, CAA-DST.


22. “Famous ‘Porgy’ Finally Comes Home, Will Be Presented in Charleston,” NYT, 14 March 1954, in Box 8, “Photocopies of clippings from the Amsterdam News (a black NY newspaper) about the play Porgy, 1960s,” DHP.


24. Collier, “Dock Street Theater to Stage DuBose Heyward’s Play, ‘Porgy.’” See also Robert N. S. Whitelaw to Dorothy Heyward, 15 April 1952, Dock Street Correspondence 1952–1953, CAA-DST, where Whitelaw reports: “So far I have the complete approval of what I am sure is a good negro committee. I have also talked about it to a product of the Karamou Theatre, Emmett Lampkin, and he is enthusiastic about it and will be able to give valuable technical assistance.”

25. Rowena Tobias to Dorothy Heyward, 19 February 1954, in Box 8, “Photocopies of clippings from the Amsterdam News (a black NY newspaper) about the play Porgy, 1960s,” DHP.


27. John S. Dudley to Robert Whitelaw, 21 April 1952, in Dock Street Correspondence 1952–1953, CAA-DST.


29. Monthly Meeting of the Board of Governors of Dock Street Theatre, Inc., Charleston, S.C., 8 February 1954, CAA-DST.

30. Rowena Tobias to Dorothy Heyward, 19 February 1954, in Box 8, “Photocopies of clippings from the Amsterdam News (a black NY newspaper) about the play Porgy, 1960s,” DHP; Monthly Meeting of the Board of Governors of Dock Street Theatre Inc., 8 March 1954, CAA-DST.

31. Monthly Meeting of the Board of Governors of Dock Street Theatre Inc. 8 March 1954, CAA-DST.


34. Rowena Tobias to Dorothy Heyward, 17 March 1954, in Box 8, “Photocopies of clippings from the Amsterdam News (a black NY newspaper) about the play Porgy, 1960s,” DHP, and “Seating ‘About Face’ Shocks 14 Members of ‘Porgy’ Cast,” CNC, 21 March 1954.

35. Rowena Tobias to Dorothy Heyward, 17 March 1954; and Rowena Tobias to Dorothy Heyward, 27 March 1954, in “Photocopies of clippings from the Amsterdam News (a black NY newspaper) about the play Porgy, 1960s,” DHP; Special Meeting of the Board of Governors of Dock Street Theatre, Inc., Charleston, S.C., 16 March
1954; Special Meeting of the “Porgy” Committee, Charleston, S.C., 22 March 1954, in Dock Street Correspondence 1953–1954, CAA-DST. If the Dock Street board distrusted Clement, he also distrusted them: “Clement said past dealings with the Dock Street Theatre indicated ‘lack of sincerity,’ and suggested exploitation of the Negroes for Dock Street’s interests.” See “Clement Says That ‘Pressure’ Led to Negro Boycott of ‘Porgy’ Cast.”

37. “Clement Says That ‘Pressure’ Led to Negro Boycott of ‘Porgy’ Cast”; “‘Porgy’ to Play Charleston, City of Its Birth,” Jet, 11 March 1954, 62. In another newspaper article, Clement said he was advised by attorneys that the state’s segregation law was “designed to prevent physical familiarity such as at dances and at beaches and that there was nothing in the law dealing with seating arrangements.” He also cited examples of integrated audiences at sporting events at County Hall that had aroused no protests. See “Clement Says He Has No Apology in ‘Porgy’ Case,” CNC, 18 March 1954.
38. “‘Porgy’ Is Abandoned Here,” CNC, 18 March 1954.
40. Dorothy Heyward to Robert Molloy, 22 December 1957, in 180.01.01.01(W)02-01, DHP.
41. Lau, Democracy Rising, 148–52.
43. Ibid., 90.
44. Ibid., 24; Drago, Charleston’s Avery Center, 181.
46. Ibid., 25, and Drago, Charleston’s Avery Center, 181; ibid., 176, and Baker, Paradoxes of Desegregation, 26; ibid. 25, 27.
47. Baker, Paradoxes of Desegregation, 28, 22.
48. Ibid., 34.
49. Clark, Echo in My Soul, 37–39.
50. Lau, Democracy Rising, 129. At this same time, the state of South Carolina introduced a system of standardized testing of teachers to determine their pay. Given that, because of segregation, most black teachers had received inferior educations than their white counterparts, this served to preserve a system where most white teachers continued to earn higher salaries than most black teachers. As Baker notes:

The results of the salary campaign in Charleston offer an early indication of how the end of caste restrictions increased the importance of class within the city’s black community in ways that whites used to conceal a continuing pattern of racial inequality and discrimination. Charleston’s white leadership pointed to the performance of the city’s talented tenth to legitimize a system of determining salaries that prevented most African Americans from earning pay that equaled that of whites. Although five times as many whites as blacks were in the highest salary range in

Notes to Pages 245–48 • 377
1948, when one African American in Charleston became the highest-paid principal in the city, the *News and Courier* published a profile of him to publicize what Wood called “the absence of discrimination.” (Baker, *Paradoxes of Desegregation*, 44–45, 60–61)

52. Ibid., 128, 130; Clark, *Echo in My Soul*, 81.
54. Ibid., 98, 101–2.
55. Ibid., 124–25.
56. In a subsequent article, John Bennett claimed that Heyward “selected ‘Cabbage Row’ for its picturesque squalor and perfect adaptability to his purpose” and transported it to the waterfront; “from pure fancy he created the beautiful room from which the hurricane was watched by the shivering occupants of ‘Catfish Row,’ a specimen of classic architecture to which ‘Cabbage Row’ never aspired.” See John Bennett, “Porgy and Catfish Row,” *CNC*, 4 February 1951, Vertical File 30–04, “Heyward, DuBose, ‘Porgy and Bess’: Related Articles,” VF-SCHS.
58. John Bennett, “Porgy Once at Least Worked for His Living,” *CNC*, ca. March 1951, in Box 7, “Photocopies of play reviews, late 1920s to 1952,” DHP.
62. Dorothy Heyward to Robert Whitelaw, 25 August 1959, in Box 4, “Robert N. S. Whitelaw, 1950–1959,” DHP. Of Smalls’s attempted murder prosecution, she wrote to Thomas Stoney: “Where was Sammy’s mother then and all his twenty-six brothers and sisters?” Dorothy Heyward to Thomas Stoney, 17 July 1959, DHP. See also a letter to Waring in which she asks: “But where the dickens were they all when the chief of detectives made his long and thorough hunt for information?” Dorothy Heyward to Thomas Waring, 12 July 1959, DHP.
63. Thomas Waring to Dorothy Heyward, 10 July 1959, in Box 4, “Thomas R. Waring, 1925–1929,” DHP.
64. Dorothy Heyward to Thomas Waring, 6 July 1959, and Thomas Waring to Dorothy Heyward, 8 July 1959, both in Box 4, “Thomas R. Waring, 1925–1929,” DHP.
65. Thomas Waring to Dorothy Heyward, 8 July 1959.
66. Dorothy Heyward to Thomas Stoney, 17 July 1959. Waring also referred to her derisively as “painted and smart-aleck.” Thomas Waring to Dorothy Heyward, 10 July 1959.
68. Thomas Waring to Dorothy Heyward, 26 October 1959, in Box 4, “Thomas R. Waring, 1925–1929,” DHP.
69. Thomas Waring to Dorothy Heyward, 27 July 1959, DHP.
70. Dorothy Heyward to Thomas Waring, 15 July 1959, DHP. She similarly wrote to Thomas Stoney: “Charleston seems quite set on believing that ‘Porgy’ is a true story while it is, of course, pure fiction. Porgy was an honest, faithful Negro while, as you remember, Sammy Smalls was not.” Dorothy Heyward to Thomas Stoney, 17 July 1959, DHP. Dorothy remained convinced that people in Charleston had vastly overestimated the wealth that Porgy and Bess’s success had brought her. She admitted to Stoney: “He has, of course, been a bonanza to us—but not of the proportions of the rumours going around Charleston.” She told Waring: “I suppose it is the rumour that I am coining money from ‘Porgy and Bess’ that has aroused the Smalls to make a claim. I, too, had expected to coin money and was flabbergasted when my income tax was larger than the Goldwyn handouts—which leaves me with just about the same amount of money I had before the movie sale.” Dorothy Heyward to Thomas Waring, 15 July 1959, in Box 4, “Thomas R. Waring, 1925–1929,” DHP.
71. Dorothy Heyward to Thomas Waring, 12 July 1959, DHP.
72. Dorothy Heyward to Thomas Waring, 6 July 1959, DHP. In another letter to Waring, she wrote: “Sammy was, as you know, a petty criminal and only his inability to shoot straight saved him from being a murderer.” Dorothy Heyward to Thomas Waring, 15 July 1959, DHP.
75. Ibid., 151–56; Fink and Greenberg, Upheaval in the Quiet Zone, 132.
76. Honey, Going down Jericho Road, 300.
77. There are a number of useful historical studies of the strike. Steve Hoffius offers a brief overview of the events leading up to and during the strike, with excerpts from interviews with key participants and a reflection on the disillusionment and mixed legacy many former strikers felt ten years later. Gordon Keith Mantler examines the strike as an SCLC campaign and focuses on the role of black women as activists and leaders. Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg tell the story primarily from the perspective of organized labor and explore how the strike merged labor and civil rights activism. And Stephen O’Neill and Steve Estes see the strike as a turning point in local race relations, a final disruption to the gradualism and white paternalism that had long gov-


82. Estes, “Strike toward Freedom”; Fink and Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*, 137.


84. Fink and Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*, 141, 143–44; Mantler, “Black, Brown and Poor,” 391.

85. Fink and Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*, 142.


**CHAPTER 5**


2. Goldwyn told a reporter: “It is a privilege as well as a great responsibility to be the man who is bringing the story of the South to the screen. I’ve been dreaming of it as a movie for the last 10 years.” See Hazel K. Johnson, “Mammoth ‘Porgy and Bess’ Has Even Producer Excited,” *ADW*, 8 July 1958, 1.


6. Lawrence Langer to HWF, 8 February 1956, in “Porgy Route,” Box 64, “Porgy and Bess,” TGC.

7. Historian Thomas Cripps describes the influence of white southern sensibilities on Hollywood moviemaking through “every studio’s cadre of Southern white coun-
selors who provided advice on local color and racial etiquette” and the recommendations of the Production Code Administration (PCA), which producers had established to act as an internal censor to shape the content of Hollywood films. For examples of the PCA forcing filmmakers to change potentially controversial racial elements in films during the 1930s, see Cripps, Making Movies Black, 9–11. Cripps argues that “the effect of this institutional system was to impose on whites an imagery that was ever more irrelevant to the actual changing status of African Americans. As war and depression and Southern soil exhaustion brought black and white Americans together in cities, whether in breadlines or federal projects gangs, movies persisted in old habits.”

8. Ira Gershwin claimed that more than ninety potential producers had expressed interest in making a Porgy and Bess film, including Harry Cohn, who wanted to use a white cast in blackface with Al Jolson as Porgy, Fred Astaire as Sportin’ Life, and Rita Hayworth as Bess. See Berg, Goldwyn, 478. See also “Bids for Pix Rights to ‘Porgy ’n’ Bess’ Hit New High in Filmland,” CDD, 16 May 1957, 18.

9. For publicity materials, see Berg, Goldwyn, 487. For Nash, see “‘Porgy and Bess’ Script Writer Clarifies Text,” CDD, 14 January 1958, 18. To Nash’s insistence that “‘Porgy’ does not require any improvement,” the uncredited Defender writer added drier: “Many people differ with this statement.”


Notes to Pages 263–64 • 381


15. A. S. “Doc” Young, “Race Row Denied in ‘Porgy-Bess’ Set Fire,” LAS, 3 July 1958, A1, A4. Young vigorously denied the implication, writing that “there has been no organized campaign against Negroes against the picture, and the idea, even the insinuation, that Negroes could have had something to do with the fire is, as virtually every Sentinel reader can verify, unthinkable.” See also “‘Porgy and Bess’ Occupies Largest Indoor Movie Set,” LAS, 9 October 1958, A14; Berg, Goldwyn, 482–83; and Jesse H. Walker, “Theatricals,” NYAN, 12 July 1958, 15.

16. Mamoulian was actually the second director attached to the Porgy and Bess film; Goldwyn had initially hired Robert Breen, who subsequently sued Goldwyn.
for fraudulently convincing him to sign away his rights to the film in exchange for promised coproducer status and shared artistic control. Breen lost. “$3 Million Suit Hits Goldwyn on ‘Porgy’ Film,” Los Angeles Times, 11 April 1959, 3; “Director Loses $805,000 Suit in ‘Porgy’ Case,” CDD, 27 March 1963, 3; “‘Porgy and Bess’ Next Goldwyn Motion Picture,” ADW, 10 May 1957, 1; Jesse H. Walker, “Theatricals,” NYAN, 6 July 1957, 14; “Breen Loses in Suits; Sam Goldwyn Pleased,” Variety, 27 March 1963, 18. One month before he fired Mamoulian, Goldwyn told a UPI reporter: “Rouben Mamoulian is the director and to me the director is the chief. If I have an idea about something I discuss it privately.” See Johnson, “Mammoth ‘Porgy and Bess’ Has Even Producer Excited,” 1.


During the weeks of reconstruction, director Mamoulian tried to impose on the film ideas that had not gone over before. Goldwyn argued for strict adherence to the original Gershwin score; Mamoulian wanted to use the jazzier arrangements that Breen had used in his production. The director also said the script begged “for more visual and action build up” and that the production should not be shackled to the set. He often made snobbish remarks about Goldwyn’s lack of understanding, even his inability to read. Not until the director hired his own press agent did Goldwyn fire him. (Berg, Goldwyn, 484–85)

22. Fujiwara, The World and Its Double, 225–26. Fujiwara’s comparison of a reshooting draft of Richard Nash’s screenplay with the finished film reveals that “although Nash’s script had retained Heyward and Gershwin’s caricatured demotic form—‘dat,’ ‘de,’ ‘wid,’ ‘nuttin’,’ ‘I knows,’ ‘I hates,’ and so on—the film that was made shows a consistent tendency to replace these forms with their standard English equivalents. So, for example, Bess says to Crown, ‘You don’t look almost dead,’ instead of ‘You ain’t looks most dead.’” Fujiwara, The World and Its Double, 225.

23. Goudsouzian, Sidney Poitier, 161; “Pearl Wins Her Battle to Strip ‘Porgy’ of Dialect,” CDD, 4 September 1958, 4A; “Pearl Bailey Protests Dialect in Porgy & Bess,” LAS, 18 September 1958, A13. One Pittsburgh Courier article described Preminger as beginning each day of shooting by consulting with his leading actors: “He asked if anything seemed out-of-line or distasteful. When they all spoke their piece, shooting began. The following day they checked the rushes. Mr. Preminger demanded their approval of each and every scene. In this way, he and Mr. Goldwyn felt they were not producing a film to please themselves, but one that would please all theatergoers and one that the Negro performers felt also carried the right feeling. It was not done in a sense of appeasement, but in a sense of good taste.” This account is dubious, for several reasons: it appears in none of the available biographies or autobiographies (Goldwyn, Preminger, Poitier, Bailey) of those involved with making the film; the Courier was notably friendly toward the film—it published only positive news and opinion and no articles on any of the controversies surrounding Poitier or Whipper; and the final line (“it was not done in a sense of appeasement”) echoes Goldwyn’s air of defensive certainty in the face of criticism of the opera’s racial politics. According to costumer Irene Sharaff, Bailey refused to wear a bandana “because it smacked of Aunt Jemima.” See Berg, Goldwyn, 482.

24. Goldwyn was turned down by a number of accomplished screenwriters, including Paul Osborn, Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, Sidney Kingsley, Clifford Odets, and Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee. He also pursued Elia Kazan, Frank Capra, and King Vidor to direct the film. See Berg, Goldwyn, 478, 479, 481–82. For Dorothy Heyward’s anxiety, see Dorothy Heyward to Audrey Wood, 9 August 1957, in Box 4, “Wood, 1955–1957,” DHP.


30. A month before the June 24th New York City premiere of _Porgy and Bess_, Columbia Pictures, the film’s distributor, had sold $100,000 worth of group-sales tickets to organizations, including at least one black church. Individuals could order ad-


33. During a “stand-in,” activists would stand in line for tickets and, when they were refused, go to the back of the line and try again. According to film historian Thomas Doherty, “The stand-ins clogged lines, confused ticket sellers, frazzled ushers, angered moviegoers made late by the delays, and in general disrupted the smooth flow of a schedule-sensitive business.” Another direct-action technique involved white activists buying two tickets and attempting to enter the theater with an African American guest. For explanation of the “stand-in” and an account of antisegregation activism against movie theaters, see Doherty, “Race Houses, Jim Crow Roosts, and Lily White Palaces,” 196–214. See also Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 155–63.


“Porgy and Bess” was not produced with enmity towards a people or with the desire to bring injury or disadvantage to their historic progress. This is not, nor was it intended to be, a picture depicting the Negro of today. Any idea that it is, is shocking to common sense. “Porgy and Bess” is a great contribution to the music and drama of the world. A superb venture of a race of people into the realms of the arts. An achievement in make-believe which has been successful in conveying to the world the poignancy of the drama and the magnificence of the music that have made “Porgy and Bess” a symbol of American creative greatness. In presenting this motion picture version of what was to me the fulfillment of a dream and the facing up to a challenge, I attempted to eliminate the pain and anguish which had emotionally dogged some of our citizens when “Porgy and Bess” was part of the legitimate stage. To me it’s a motion picture of proud people and my pride in presenting it is immeasurable. (Isadora Rowe, “Izzy Rowe’s Notebook,” PC, 31 October 1959, 18)


41. For a reference to *Porgy and Bess* as “a ‘burlesque-type’ opera [which]—no matter how talented the artist or sublime the melody—does not overcome the fact that millions of Negroes are denied equality of opportunity in the country,” see “Need for a Manifesto to Congress,” *CDD*, 16 January 1960, 10. For a review of Gwendolyn Brooks’s *The Bean Eaters* that cites *Porgy and Bess* as the kind of cultural fare producers put forth while claiming they can’t find “any stories or poems being written about Negroes which allow them to cast Negroes in a heroic light on the screen,” see Frank London Brown, “Book Review,” *CDD*, 21 July 1960, A13. For a description of a panel discussion on “The Negro and the Theatre from ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ to ‘Dutchman’” that characterizes *Porgy and Bess* and other works as having “placed the Negro before the public as a stereotyped individual never really revealing him as a real person capable of rising above his poverty and his lowly positions,” see Earl Calloway, “Music News,” *CDD*, 19 March 1966, 14. For a book review that castigates Claude Brown’s memoir, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, as being, like *Porgy and Bess*, on “the best seller lists, and makes masses of money because he says what the white public wants to hear,” see Gertrude Wilson, “Who Is This Man?,” *NYAN*, 17 September 1966, 9. For an article on black theater in the schools that suggests “all-white showings” of *Porgy and Bess* and other white-authored, black-cast shows so that “white America can see how bad these plays really are and how insulting they are not only to the black race but to the human race,” see Loften Mitchell, “Static in Integrating Educational Theatre,” *NYAN*, 26 August 1967, 19.

42. Knight, “‘It Ain’t Necessarily So That It Ain’t Necessarily So,’” 341. Knight sources this quote as coming from an interview that Ellington conducted in 1964 and required to remain unpublished until after his death.

43. Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 102–4. Cruse, an aspiring playwright himself, could not resist a jab at Hansberry when he noted that “the film *Porgy and Bess* had its Broadway and neighborhood run, and hundreds of working-class Negroes (whom Miss Hansberry claimed she wrote about in *Raisin*) lined up at the box office to see this colorful film ‘stereotype’ of their people.” He also declared that “if the Negro creative intellectuals actually had any real aesthetic standards of their own, Hollywood could not have made this film at all” and insisted on performers’ “moral obligation at all times to give up immediate comforts and privileges for long-range objectives.”


45. Gerber’s first tour began in mid-June 1958 at Pitt Stadium, presented by the Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera, and was slated to run for seventeen weeks; see Jesse H. Walker, “Theatricals,” *NYAN*, 10 May 1958, 14; Izzy Rowe, “Izzy Rowe’s Notebook,” *PC*, 19 April 1958, 18; “‘Porgy and Bess’ at Pitt Stadium,” *PC*, 7 June 1958, 17; “‘Porgy and Bess’ to Open 13th Civic Light Opera,” *PC*, 14 June 1958, 14; and Samuel P. Perry Jr., “‘Porgy and Bess’ with Cab Calloway Rates Critics’ Rave,” *ADW*, 31 Au-

46. Robert Breen to Maurice Huisman, 31 December 1968, Box F8 Pt. 1, “Porgy and Bess—S. Davis ’66-on,” RBA.


in Chicago; see Ziggy Johnson, “Zig and Zag with Ziggy Johnson,” CD, 11 June 1960, 19. A 1966 benefit at a Queens church featured “a cast of stars that will stage excerpts” from the opera; see “Porgy and Bess at Carter AME,” NYAN, 17 December 1966, 30. In Chicago, a local black opera singer performed excerpts from *Porgy and Bess* on the televised Chicago Festival, while a concert version of the opera closed the fourth annual WLIB Festival of Negro Music and Drama at Carnegie Hall; see “For Week of Sept. 8th–Sept. 14th,” CDD, 9 September 1967, 23, and “‘Porgy and Bess,’ to Close WLIB Festival,” NYAN, 16 February 1957, 12. The locally cast production was staged by Gerber and took place at Atlanta’s Theater of Stars in 1974; see “‘Porgy and Bess’ Slated for Theater of Stars Aug. 6–11,” ADW, 4 August 1974, 12; and Portia S. Brookins, “‘Porgy and Bess’ to Open at Civic Center,” ADW, 28 July 1974, 7.

50. For references to these touring productions, see “Pittsburgh Singer in ‘Porgy and Bess,’” PC, 30 July 1966, 7A; “Virginia State College Does ‘Porgy and Bess’,” CDD, 31 December 1966, 22; Sadie Feddoes, “Please Be Seated,” NYAN, 18 May 1974, A12; and Brookins, “‘Porgy and Bess’ to Open at Civic Center,” 7.


52. Clippings relating to these overseas productions located in Box F8 Pt. 1, “‘Porgy and Bess’—S. Davis ’66-on,” RBA. Program for New Zealand Opera Company production in author’s possession.


54. Cue, 27 May 1961; Morning Telegraph, 15 May 1961, 4; both in *Porgy and Bess* Collection, Box 5, Theatre Collection, Museum of the City of New York.


56. For “as we ride toward Berlin,” see Jerry Tallmer, “Across the Footlights; ‘Porgy’ at the City Center,” untitled clipping, 7 May 1964, Box F8 Pt. 1, Folder “Porgy & Bess City Center 1961 Reviews,” RBA. For “against the somber background,” see “Gershwin at City Center,” Wall Street Journal, 8 May 1964, 14. For “there’s a lot of talk these days,” see untitled clipping, Morning Telegraph, 8 May 1964, in *Porgy and Bess* clipping file, NYPL-BR. For “Catfish Row was not a housing project,” see Perdita Duncan, “Music in Review; ‘Porgy and Bess,’” NYAN, 16 May 1964, 16.

390 • Notes to Pages 281–84


62. For “out of Broadway” and “sadly accommodating,” see Daniel Webster, “Opera or Not, ‘Porgy’ Is Coming,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 27 June 1976, in “Porgy and Bess—Philadelphia ’76,” HGOA. For “this production is no mere revival,” see “Porgy and Bess Update: Complete Casts, Production Details, Houston Date Changes, and National Tour Confirmed,” Houston Grand Opera Company press release, 13 May 1976, HGOA. For “the dances and crowd numbers,” and “we want to do it,” see UPI, “Porgy and Bess as Gershwin Dreamed,” *Russoville (Ind.) Republican*, in Box PR-36, “Porgy and Bess Reviews ’76,” HGOA. For “said the early cuts” and “not a revival,” see Ridley, “An American Classic Reclaims the Stage.” In this interview, Gockley also characterized Gershw in as “perhaps a little too easily manipulated, too conciliatory.” For operating costs, see Doug Watt, “‘Porgy’: Too Rich to Survive,” *New York Sunday News*, 16 January 1977, in Box PR-36, “Clamma Dale,” HGOA. For the report that it had
earned back its investment, see Ann Holmes, “All’s Well with Dale and HGO,” *HC*, 16 November 1976, in Box PR-36, “Porgy and Bess in New York,” HGOA.


65. In the same interview, O’Brien echoed Kimball when he described Porgy as a universal figure who “could be any color, he’s an Everyman, broken at the knee, a victimized man left in a dusty corner of life who manages to be a spiritualist, a person with hope and guts.” Arthur Bloomfield, “At Last, ‘Porgy and Bess’ as Gershwin Wrote It,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 June 1977, in “Porgy and Bess—Europe,” HGOA. For “a far more powerful and less passive figure,” see Ridley “An American Classic Reclaims the Stage.”

66. Ridley, “An American Classic Reclaims the Stage.”


70. For “tinged with the deepening,” see Holmes, “A Summertime Ornament.” For “if we are going to enjoy,” see Lowens, “After All, ‘Porgy’ Is Only an Opera.” For “there’s no use pretending,” see Gottfried, “A Promise Kept.”


72. For “the inhabitants of Catfish Row,” see Arthur Bloomfield, “A powerful ‘Porgy and Bess,’” San Francisco Examiner, 22 June 1977, in Box PR-36, “Porgy and Bess national tour,” HGOA. For “no one judges,” see Roth, “‘Porgy’ Houston Opera’s Latest Hit.” For Todd Duncan, see Ridley, “An American Classic Reclaims the Stage.”

73. For “if there be any,” see Speight Jenkins, “‘Porgy’ Is Alive and Well in Philly,” New York Post, 14 July 1976, “Porgy and Bess Reviews 1976–77,” HGOA. For “I admit I was one,” see Lauretta Thistle, “Porgy and Bess Terrific as Opera,” Ottawa Citizen, 14 September 1976, in “Porgy and Bess—Toronto ’76,” HGOA. For “somehow, that isn’t as annoying,” see Gottfried, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Is Back.” For “the less hectic climate,” see Fraser, “Porgy and Bess Back as Powerful Folk Opera.” For “audiences have been growing,” see Coe, “Opera of Novel Inspiration.”


76. For “I never thought I’d sing,” see Kit van Cleave, “Clamma Dale,” Essence,
December 1976. See also Bob Micklin, “Clamma Dale: Bess Is Some Woman Now,” Chicago Daily News, 6 April 1977, which reports that Dale feared that the HGO production would be a “racist put down,” but when she was convinced she would have sufficient artistic control to shape the part, she agreed to perform it. Both in Folder, “Clamma Dale,” HGOA. See also Howard Kissel, “Broadway Black Theater: Good-natured Politics,” 11. When asked in one interview if she was a feminist, Dale replied: “Oh, dear, no titles, please. I am a woman, feeling free, honest, and would like to live my life as I do. I’m not interested in belonging to an organization that sometimes doesn’t allow you to think. Please don’t link me with them.” Charles Ward, “Clamma Dale—Like Bess—Has Put It All Together,” HC, 1 July 1976. For “Bess is a gorgeous creature,” see Robert Baxter, “Her Bess Ranks with the Best,” Camden (N.J.) Courier-Post, 14 August 1975; and Micklin, “Clamma Dale: Bess Is Some Woman Now”; all in Box PR-36, “Clamma Dale,” HGOA. For “I love Bess,” see Baxter, “Her Bess Ranks with the Best.” For “she’s tired of babysitting Crown,” see Ward, “Clamma Dale—Like Bess—Has Put It All Together.”

77. On the professional struggle of African American opera singers, see Oby, “Equity in Operatic Casting as Perceived by African American Male Singers.”


79. Norton began the commission’s public hearing into the matter by remarking: “I find it very hard to believe that Duke Ellington, for example, who composed classical music, could not have met the requirements for ‘Porgy and Bess,’ as difficult as they might be.” See “Comm. Norton Blasts Musician Hiring Practices on Broadway,” New York Voice, 1 October 1976; and Nikki Grimes, “Broadway Orchestras: A Pit of Discriminatory Hiring,” NYAN, 1 January 1977, D8; both in Box PR-36, “Porgy and Bess in New York,” HGOA.


Broadway Orchestras,” NYT, 26 September 1976; and “Broadway Bias Charge,” Newsday, 26 September 1976; all in Box PR-36, “Porgy and Bess in New York,” HGOA.


Notes to Pages 299–303 • 395
1. “School Music Supervisor to Play Porgy,” CNC, undated, ca. fall 1969, in Vertical File 30-04, “Heyward, DuBose, ‘Porgy and Bess’: Ephemera and Reviews,” VF-SCHS; Leonard Traube, “Charleston Gets Itself Plenty of Somethin’ in Bow of ‘Porgy and Bess,'” Variety, 1 July 1970, 1; Barbara S. Williams, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Gets Enthusiastic Homecoming,” CNC, 26 June 1970, 1A, 9A; “Demand Is Heavy for ‘Porgy’ Tickets,” CNC, 27 June 1970, 1B; Jack F. Roach, “Permission to Stage ‘Porgy’ to Be Sought,” CNC, 8 October 1970, 1B; Robert P. Stockton, “Daughter of ‘Porgy’ Author Is Still a Charlestonian,” CNC, 26 June 1970, 1B. Audience enthusiasm was not restricted to the curtain calls, as “spontaneous applause greeted the opening scene, each soloist, and the exciting chorus as they carried the moving story of Catfish Row to its exciting conclusion. When the final curtain went down, the audience rose to its feet as one to pay tribute to the noble work of both cast and orchestra. The sustained applause continued for at least six curtain calls, as the cast repeatedly bowed and accepted the accolade.” Claire McPhail, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Has 1st Local Production,” CNC, 26 June 1970, 11C.


9. “‘Porgy and Bess,’” CP, 9 February 1977; “‘Porgy and Bess,’” CNC, 15 February 1977; Leroy D. Singleton Sr., “Glad It’s Gone,” CNC, 11 February 1977. The Post even offered the dubious argument that “Charleston’s black community has a valid grievance in that it has not been adequately represented over the years in the cultural and artistic life of our city. What better vehicle to begin the correction of this than Charleston’s very own opera.”

This page intentionally left blank
Bibliography

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Abilene, Kans.
   Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library

Charleston, S.C.
   Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston
   *Porgy and Bess*

South Carolina Historical Society
   Carolina Art Association Dock Street Theatre Collection
   Dorothy Heyward Papers
   DuBose Heyward Papers
   Vertical Files on DuBose Heyward and Dorothy Heyward

Columbus, Ohio
   The Jerome Lawrence and Robert Lee Theatre Research Institute, Ohio State University
   Robert Breen Archives

Houston, Tex.
   Houston Grand Opera Archives

New Haven, Conn.
   Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University
   Theatre Guild Collection

New York, N.Y.
   Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Division at Lincoln Center
   *In Abraham’s Bosom* clipping file
   *Lew Leslie’s Blackbirds* clipping file
   *Porgy and Bess* program files, clipping files, photographs
   *Porgy* program files, clipping files

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library
   Vertical files on DuBose and Dorothy Heyward, *Porgy*, and *Porgy and Bess*

Theatre Collection, Museum of the City of New York
   *Porgy and Bess* Collection
PUBLISHED PRIMARY SOURCES


BOOKS


Bibliography • 405


**ARTICLES AND ESSAYS**


Johnson, Michael P. “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators.” *William and Mary Quarterly* 58 (October 2001): 915–76.


Index

Abdul, Raoul, 294–95

Abyssinia, 83, 182


African American middle class, 10, 16, 35–36, 38, 64–65, 77, 82, 89, 127, 136, 146, 164–69, 189, 203, 219, 275

African American music: as national sound, 9, 145–47, 155, 157, 159, 179; folk music, 125, 143, 147, 149–50, 158, 162–63; white claims to, 146, 148, 173–76, 179–81; notable black composers of, 149–50; white expectations of African American musicians, 158, 160, 162, 213–14. See also Gershwin, George: and African American music; Spirituals: as authentic African American music


Albert, Donnie Ray, 295–96

All God’s Chillun Got Wings (O’Neill), 103, 116, 332 (n. 63)

American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA), 195–96, 231, 243

Amos ’n’ Andy, 9, 15, 222–24, 262, 292, 297

Angelou, Maya, 228

Atkinson, Brooks, 93, 143, 153, 231

Attles, Joseph, 201, 240–41

Authenticity, racial, 1, 3, 4, 6–7, 51, 96,

Avery Normal Institute, 65, 243, 247–49, 308–9
Ayer, Katherine, 172–73
Ayler, Ethel, 211, 225

Bailey, Pearl, 267–68, 271, 273
Baker, Josephine, 194, 225–26
Baldwin, James, 1
Ball, William, 281–82
Barnes, Irving, 214, 229–30
Belafonte, Harry, 264, 277
Belasco, David, 82, 110
Bennett, Gwendolyn, 97
Bibb, Joseph, 220, 222–23

Black musical theatre, 5, 82–83, 85–86, 95, 100, 111, 118, 158, 164, 295, 328 (n. 27). See also Abyssinia; Blackbirds revues; Shuffle Along

Black Swan Records, 164
Blake, Eubie, 85
Bledsoe, Julius, 96, 116–17, 158
Boden, Frank, 230–31
Bookman, The, 31, 39, 48, 317 (n. 32)
Breen, Wilva, 203, 211
Bregenz Festival, 300–301
Brice, Carol, 283, 297
Briggs v. Elliot, 249
Broun, Heywood, 40–41, 43, 47–48
Brown, Anne, 152–53, 161, 167–69, 172–73
Brown Fellowship Society, 63, 65
Browning, Irving H., 121–22
Brown v. Board of Education, 232, 249, 254
Bubbles, John, 169–70, 280
Bumbry, Grace, 299
Burke, Georgia, 203, 212, 230
Burke Industrial School, 246–47, 254
Burleigh, Harry T., 147
Cable, George Washington, 16, 31
Calloway, Cab, 185, 202, 204, 211, 268, 277, 280
Calvin, Floyd, 98, 146
Capote, Truman, 205
Carmen, 110
Carmichael, Stokely, 276–79
Carolina Art Association, 235, 241–43
Carter, Jack, 97
Cartwright, Marguerite, 222, 263
Charleston Symphony Association, 305, 307
Chesnutt, Charles, 31–32, 42
Choraliers, 307–9
Civil rights protest (civil rights movement), 7, 11, 171–73, 188–90, 214, 216, 221, 223, 226, 232–33, 259, 261, 270, 274, 276–79, 283, 290, 294–95, 386 (n. 33). See also Charleston: civil rights activism in; Montgomery bus boycott
Civil War, 10, 17, 31, 34, 53, 66, 132, 138, 247
Clark, Emily, 49
Clark, Septima Poinsette, 64, 142, 235–36, 247
Clarke, Hope, 300–302
Clement, Arthur J., 235, 243–45, 249
Coe, Richard, 290, 294
Cold War, 8–9, 183, 187, 192–93, 195, 204, 210, 214, 232–33; and African American civil rights, 191–93, 214, 226, 233; Smith-Mundt Act, 195
Coleman, Warren, 168, 178, 227
Conference of Southern Writers, 33
Connelly, Marc, 150
Cook, Will Maron, 5
Crawford, Cheryl, 182, 198, 238
Crawford, Joseph, 229
Creamer, Henry, 86
Cruse, Harold, 275–76
Cullen, Countee, 38, 42–43, 46, 98–99, 118, 162
Cultural propaganda, 187, 195, 201, 215, 220, 358 (n. 26), 365–67 (nn. 80, 81, 84)
Dale, Alan, 95, 110
Dale, Clamma, 295–97
Dandridge, Dorothy, 267, 271
Davis, Blevins, 185, 195, 198, 204, 211, 227–28, 263
Davis, Sammy, Jr., 267, 271, 277, 280
DeMille, Cecil B., 262
Dial, 27, 108–9
Dock Street Theatre, 308; plans for production of Porgy, 235, 237, 241–44; cancellation of Porgy by, 244–46, 251
Doll, Bill, 202–3
Downes, Olin, 156, 161–62
Dunbar, Paul Laurence, 5
Duncan, Todd, 150, 152–53, 161, 166–71, 173, 178, 293, 299
Dvořák, Antonín, 147–48, 179
Eisenhower, Dwight D., 187, 191–95, 204, 225, 232–33
Ellington, Duke, 174, 179–80, 197, 229, 275, 298
Elmore v. Rice, 248
Elzy, Ruby, 152, 166, 168–69, 172–73
Emancipation, 6, 11, 53, 55, 57, 63–64, 66–67, 72, 247
Emperor Jones, The (O’Neill), 27, 36, 78, 86, 116
Estes, Simon, 299, 302
Eugenics, 15–16
Fauset, Jessie, 36
Federal Theatre Project, 89–90, 195
Fields, Mamie Garvin, 10–11, 134, 137, 236, 245, 247
Fisk Jubilee Singers, 150, 158, 160–62
Folk and folklore, 17, 26, 35, 105, 124, 131, 147, 155, 168, 176, 181–82, 190, 221, 273; *Porgy and Bess* as folk opera, 5, 146, 148, 151, 154, 178, 180–81, 206–7, 220, 263, 276, 293; *Porgy* (1927 play) as folk play, 75, 93, 101, 109; comparisons of *Porgy and Bess* to other folk operas, 168, 206, 231–32, 292–93, 295. See also African American music: folk music
Folly Island, S.C., 143, 201
Foster, Leesa, 281
Foster, Stephen, 148

George H. Doran Company, 39, 41, 175
Gerber, Ella, 280–81, 288, 296, 305
Gershwin, Ira, 1, 124, 143, 206, 238–39, 263
Gibbs, Elvira, 250–52
Gilpin, Charles, 78
Glasgow, Ellen, 41
Gockley, David, 286, 287–88, 290, 296, 298
Goldberg, Isaac, 175
Goldman, Sherwin, 288, 298–99
Goldwyn, Samuel, 10, 262–70, 272, 274, 387 (n. 38)
Granger, Lester, 263–64, 272
Great Migration, 6, 13, 18–19, 49, 81, 86, 119, 125, 127, 133–35, 141, 289, 340 (nn. 14, 16)
Green, Paul, 115
*Green Pastures, The*, 86, 150, 162, 181
Guillaume, Robert, 283
Gullah, 26, 58–59, 81, 103, 106, 127, 177, 301, 310, 321 (n. 14)
Haiti (Saint Domingue), 64, 69–70
Hall Johnson Choir, 150, 195
Hammond, Percy, 79–80
Hancock, Dean Gordon H., 223
Hansberry, Lorraine, 275
Harlem, 5, 39, 73, 88, 109–10, 112, 119, 121–22, 162, 169–70, 198, 200, 203
Harlem Renaissance, 8, 17, 36, 41, 83, 110
Harleston, Edwin A., 136
Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins, 31
Harvey, Georgette, 97, 151, 169
Hayes, Roland, 85, 158–61, 163
Hayman, Lillian, 211–12, 225, 227
Heyward, Dorothy Hartzell Kuhns, 9, 26–27, 51, 75, 91, 95, 104, 106, 113, 128–29, 142, 177, 201, 235, 240–41, 243, 272, 308; and family of Samuel Smalls, 237, 249–50, 252–54, 379 (nn. 70, 72); and billing for *Porgy and Bess* productions, 237–39; and her late husband’s literary reputation, 237–40, 253–54; short stories and essays about *Porgy and Bess* by, 238–39, 254; responses to criticism of *Porgy and Bess*, 239; and *Porgy* production in Charleston, 244–46

Hicks, James L., 219–20, 222

Houston Grand Opera Company, 10, 284–92, 295–300, 307–8; framing and promotion of Porgy and Bess (1976), 285, 287–90

Hughes, Langston, 38, 41, 223

Hutcherson, Leverne, 230, 280

In Abraham’s Bosom (Green), 16, 78, 82, 85, 87, 96; significance of in relation to Porgy (1927 play), 114–17; critical response to, 115–17, 336 (n. 88); and Pulitzer Prize, 116–17

Jackson, C. D., 192, 194, 210, 217

Jackson, Earl, 227

James Island, S.C., 11, 176, 250, 310

James, Joseph, 225–26

Jenkins Orphanage Band, 89, 103–4, 133, 207, 309, 332 (n. 65)

Jessye, Eva, 97, 99, 305; as choral director for Porgy and Bess (1935), 97, 151, 182–83

Jim Crow. See Segregation

Johnson, Hall, 150, 174, 179–82

Johnson, J. Rosamond, 178

Johnson, James Weldon, 160, 176

Johnson, Rosa, 235, 237, 253, 310

Jolson, Al, 50, 76–77, 120, 148, 263

Joplin, Scott, 5, 284

Julius Rosenwald Foundation, 138

Kahn, Otto, 95

Kimball, Robert, 288–89

King, Martin Luther, Jr., 255–56, 266, 274, 276, 278–79. See also Civil rights activism; Montgomery bus boycott

Ku Klux Klan, 15–16, 134

LaMarre, Hazel, 268

Langer, Lawrence, 109, 263. See also Theatre Guild

Leonardos, Urylee, 240–41

Leslie, Lew, 85–86. See also Blackbirds revues

Lewis, Theophilus, 49–51, 84, 164

Lister, Marquita, 301

Little Theatre movement, 87–89, 115, 328, (n. 28), 329 (n. 29), 335 (n. 85); African American little theatres, 87–89; long-term impact of, 87–89, 329 (n. 34); influence on professional theatre, 101, 332 (n. 59)

Locke, Alain, 13, 36, 50

Long, Avon, 280

Lulu Belle, 82, 86, 109–10, 112–13


MacDowell Colony, 27

Mace, Jed, 200, 228

MAD magazine, 276–79

Mamba’s Daughters (DuBose Heyward) 27, 34, 48, 127

Mammy (mauma), 15, 26, 43, 67, 71, 77, 86

Mamoulian, Rouben: as director of Porgy (1927 play), 87, 92–93, 103,
108–9, 121; as director of *Porgy and Bess* (1935), 151–52, 156–57, 180, 201, 286; as director of *Porgy and Bess* (1959 film), 265, 267

Mantle, Burns, 109, 111

Marshall, Larry, 295, 297
Matthews, Eddie, 152
Matthews, Ralph, 167, 170, 174, 181
McClendon, Rose, 116

McCurry, John, 200
McDaniel, Hattie, 189, 222
McDonald, Audra, 303
McFerrin, Robert, 264
McLean, Joy, 211, 213, 225
Mantle, Burns, 109, 111
Marshall, Larry, 295, 297
Matthews, Eddie, 152
Matthews, Ralph, 167, 170, 174, 181
McClendon, Rose, 116

McCurry, John, 200
McDaniel, Hattie, 189, 222
McDonald, Audra, 303
McFerrin, Robert, 264
McLean, Joy, 211, 213, 225
Mantle, Burns, 109, 111
Marshall, Larry, 295, 297
Matthews, Eddie, 152
Matthews, Ralph, 167, 170, 174, 181

Metropolitan Opera Company, 156, 198, 223, 261, 299–300

Micheaux, Oscar, 13
Mills, Florence, 85
Miscegenation, 76, 101
Mitchell, Abbie, 116, 152, 169–70
Mitchell, Arthur, 300
Mitchell, Loften, 302
Montgomery bus boycott, 188, 221, 232–33, 274, 373 (n. 107). See also Civil rights activism
Mosley, Robert, 295
Mosquito Fleet, 19, 57–58, 321 (n. 11)

Moultrie, Mary, 237, 255–56

Nash, N. Richard, 263, 265

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), 9, 38, 42, 120, 192, 248, 262, 264–65, 267, 274; Charleston chapter of, 136–38, 243, 245, 248–49, 255; and teacher-salary campaign in Charleston, 136–37, 248, 377–78 (n. 50); and voting-rights campaign in South Carolina, 248; and school desegregation in South Carolina, 248–49, 255; and 1963 desegregation campaign in

Charleston, 255. See also Charleston: civil rights activism in

New Deal, 191
Newman, Frances, 41, 46
New South, 17
Norton, Eleanor Holmes, 298–99
Nunn, Trevor, 300

O’Brien, Jack, 286–87, 289, 293
O’Neill, Eugene, 27, 36, 78, 95, 103. See also *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*


Ovington, Mary White, 42–44, 47–48


Perry, Lincoln Theodore Monroe

Andrew (Stepin Fetchit), 15, 292, 297
Peterkin, Julia, 28
Peters, Brock, 267–68

Plantation fantasy, 4, 6, 78, 190

Poetry Society of South Carolina, 27, 29, 32–33, 131


*Porgy* (1925 novel), 6–7, 9, 15–20, 22, 24, 27–28, 30–34, 37, 39–41, 44, 46–49,


Porgy and Bess: casting requirements for, 8, 145, 179, 284, 299, 302; music recordings of, 188, 202, 261, 277, 280; continued U.S. performances of since late 1950s, 261, 277, 280–81, 296, 299–303; international productions of, 281, 300–301; Metropolitan Opera Company 1985 production of, 299–300; Charleston Symphony Association 1970 production of, 305, 307–9, 396 (n. 1)


Mamoulian, 267, 383 (n. 20); cast members attempt to mitigate stereotypes, 268, 272–73, 384 (n. 23); publicity and promotion in black press, 269–70; antisegregation protests at southern screenings of, 270–71. See also Black press: coverage of Porgy and Bess (1959 film); Black press: criticism of Porgy and Bess (1959 film); Black press: support for Porgy and Bess (1959 film)

—1961 production (City Center Opera Company): as opera or musical theatre, 281–83; critical reaction to, 281–83

—1965 production (City Center Opera Company): controversy over casting of, 284; critical reaction to, 284

—1976 production (Houston Grand Opera): transformation from musical theatre to opera, 259, 261, 284–88, 290–92, 294, 296, 298; New York engagement of, 285; national tour of, 285, 290; and references to contemporary racial politics, 285–87, 289–97; set and costumes of, 286; staging of, 287; critical responses to, 287, 290–95; finances of, 288; white response to black criticism of, 293–94; cast members discuss show’s relationship to black community, 295–96; controversy over orchestra hiring, 297–99

Preminger, Otto, 263, 267–68, 272, 275

Price, Leontyne, 185, 203–4, 230, 268, 296–97, 301

Provincetown Theatre (also Provincetown Playhouse), 82, 101, 103, 115–16


Racial uplift, 8–9, 141, 160, 190, 219, 222–24, 247–48, 323 (n. 30); “The Negro in Art” Crisis series, 37–38; and African American performers, 77, 82–85, 89–90, 110, 159, 167, 169, 230, 264, 275; and support for performing arts, 83–84, 89, 163–66, 273; and opera, 145, 149; and home ownership, 165–66. See also African American cultural representation; African American performers: as ambassadors to white world; Spirituals: and African American uplift

Randolph, A. Philip, 13, 50, 95, 191, 193

Reconstruction, 4, 17–18, 32, 134, 158; in Charleston, 56–57, 63, 66, 68–71, 309

Reviewer, The, 29, 49

Reynolds, James, 229

Rinehart, Mary Roberts, 41

Robertson, Stanley, 266

Robeson, Paul, 85, 150, 158, 161–62, 225, 299; in Porgy, 117; U.S. government harassment of, 193–95, 225–26

Rogers, J. A., 220, 274

Rosenfeld, John, 230–31, 283

Roth, Wolfgang, 199
Rowe, Isadora, 227, 265–66, 268, 272
Run Little Chillun (Johnson), 150, 180–81
Sampson, Edith, 194
Saunders, William, 256
Schuyler, George, 38
Scott, Hazel, 225–26
Sharecropping, 16, 134
Show Boat, 82
Shuffle Along, 85
Sissle, Noble, 85, 267
Slavery, 4, 6; resistance to, 61–62, 322 (n. 21); work and hiring out, 53, 56–57, 61, 67; and African cultural influence, 58–60; religion in, 59–60; and violence and punishment, 60–61, 69–70, 322 (n. 18); and education, 62–63. See also Charleston: slavery in
Smallens, Alexander, 151, 226
Smith, Alice Ravenel Huger, 131
Smith, Andrew, 296
Smith, Daniel Huger, 60, 71
Social Darwinism, 4, 34, 95
Society for the Preservation of Old Dwellings, 130–31, 133
Society for the Preservation of Spirituals (SPS), 103, 131, 139–41
Sondheim, Stephen, 303
Soudeikine, Serge, 157
Soul of Black Folk, The (Du Bois), 148, 159
South (region), 6, 20, 35, 76, 110, 117, 223, 232, 237, 242, 246, 249, 261, 263, 271, 283
Southern literature, 27–29, 31–33, 35, 49. See also Conference of Southern Writers
Spingarn, Joel, 37
Spirituals, 133; used in Porgy (1927 play), 81, 91–93, 104, 117–18, 128, 145–46, 156, 158, 162; used in Broadway theatre, 87, 158–59, 162; as authentic African American music, 117–18, 148, 173, 147–48 (n. 29); concert and recital presentations of, 124, 146–47, 150, 158, 161, 348 (nn. 30, 31); relationship to Western classical music, 124, 159–60, 162; and African American uplift, 146, 158–60, 342 (n. 9); expectations for performance of, 160, 162. See also Society for the Preservation of Spirituals
Steinert, Alexander, 151–52
Stewart, Ollie, 185, 187
Stono Rebellion, 69
Stowe, Harriet Beecher, 6, 42, 45, 275
Thigpen, Helen, 227, 231
Throckmorton, Cleon, 103, 107, 128
Tibbett, Lawrence, 161, 167
Till, Emmett, 188, 221, 225
*Tobacco Road*, 220–21
Tobias, Rose, 202
Tobias, Rowena, 242, 244
Tommasini, Anthony, 301–2
Toomer, Jean, 32–33
*Treemonisha* (Joplin) 5, 284, 291, 298
Truman, Harry S, 187, 191, 193–95, 204
Tyler, Veronica, 283

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Stowe), 6, 275
United Daughters of the Confederacy, 15, 28

Van Vechten, Carl, 161
Vaudeville, 78, 81–82, 85, 98, 108
Verner, Elizabeth O’Neill, 131

Verwayne, Percy, 97
Vesey, Denmark, 59–60, 70, 309–10, 321 (n. 15)

Walker, Aida Overton, 8
Walker, George, 83, 182, 224
Waring, J. Waties, 248–49
Waters, Ethel, 87
Whipper, Lee, 267
White, George, 85
White, Walter, 9, 32, 38
Whitelaw, Robert N. S., 235, 241–44
White supremacy, 15–16, 20, 22–23, 64, 76, 103, 114, 134–35, 140, 216, 219, 224, 237
Whitney, Salem Tutt, 94, 98–100, 111, 123–24
Williams, Bert, 83, 182, 224
Wilson, Frank, 96–97, 120, 150
Wise, Ethel, 172–73
Wolfert, Ira, 217
World War I, 26, 134
World War II, 191, 247; and African American civil rights, 7, 189, 191

Young, A. S., 273–74
Young, Stark, 108

Ziegfeld, Florenz, 82, 85