



African American women in opera and the dilemma of representation

Anita Gonzalez

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In this article, I examine strategies employed by African American women singers to negotiate and resist racialized stereotypes within operatic and musical theatre traditions from the late 19th century to the present. Through case studies of Abby Mitchell and Catarina Yarborough, I analyze how Black women vocalists used performance style, character interpretation, image-making, and geographic mobility to pursue artistic careers within industries shaped by blackface minstrelsy and entrenched racial hierarchies. Mitchell's performances reveal the constraints placed on Black women whose artistry was often framed through tropes of servitude, while Yarborough's international career demonstrates how racial ambiguity and operatic exoticism enabled alternative pathways to visibility, even as they required strategic distancing from Black identity. I further consider Audra McDonald's 21st century interpretation of Mama Rose in *Gypsy* as a contemporary intervention that reclaims vocal intensity, rage, and presence as expressions of African American womanhood. McDonald's performance reframes a white-authored role to evoke the historical exclusions of Black performers, particularly those associated with the Theater Owners Booking Association circuit. I conclude the article with a discussion of *Finding the Light*, a newly commissioned opera initiated by Louise Toppin and Marquita Lister, which brings the lives of Mitchell and Yarborough into dialogue with the experiences of contemporary Black women vocalists. By producing and shaping their own narratives, Toppin and Lister model a future-oriented strategy for reimagining representation in opera. Collectively, these case studies demonstrate how African American women have used vocal performance not only to navigate systems of exclusion, but also to assert agency, authorship, and humanity within—and beyond—canonical performance traditions. **Keywords:** African American women performers, opera, musical theatre, racial representation, blackface minstrelsy, vocal performance, performance historiography.

Introduction

Narratives about the history of Black performance in the United States locate its origins in vernacular performance styles such as 18th and 19th century ring shouts, call-and-response singing, and musical virtuosity expressed through woodwind and stringed instruments. Each of these complex song-and-dance traditions incorporated aspects of African performance that were transported into New World settings by enslaved workers who shared cultural knowledge within plantation settings. Through processes of shared harmonics, shape singing, and communal celebrations, African Americans invented new tonalities that transformed musical genres in the United States (Stephens and Helton).

The performance ingenuity of African Americans was later (after 1840) ridiculed by blackface troupes like the Virginia Minstrels, who began to circulate a performance style called minstrelsy. Minstrel representations were dispersed first through traveling troupes and, by the early 20th century, through sheet music in which African Americans were depicted as simplistic idiots with a passion for the plantation. Performances mythically located Black people as field workers and house maids who flourished in the southern states of the country. The genre of blackface has been much-analyzed as a social construct, a template for musical revues, a racist invention, and a uniquely American popular theatre genre. Eric Lott describes the tradition as a working-class expression of racial

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angst, while Robert Toll, in one of the earliest analyses of the genre, takes a more historical approach. He writes about the cultural impact of minstrelsy on the development of American nationalism. A compilation of primary texts edited by Annemarie Bean, James Hatch, and Brooks McNamara has shed light on the complex intersections of race and gender inherent in the performance texts. And finally, more recent scholarship by Chinua Thelwell investigates the role of minstrelsy in shaping representations of Black people in transnational contexts. Thelwell specifically attributes the development of apartheid in South Africa, in part, to the international circulation of minstrel stereotypes. In this essay, minstrelsy serves as a backdrop to the aspirations of African American women vocalists who have been circumscribed by the stereotypical representations of minstrelsy well into the 20th century.

As minstrelsy gained popularity, it functioned as a genre through which the ridicule of African Americans became normalized. However, later in the century, during the 1860s and 1870s, Black performers adopted the genre themselves. “Negro impersonators” imitated white performers and became complicit in the continued promulgation of performances that, while based upon simplistic characters, were steeped in Black vernacular inventions. Errol Hill and James Hatch write: “Theatre historians have routinely excused black minstrel troupes in the 1860s and 1870s for wearing blackface, using ‘darky’ dialect and presenting southern stereotypes” in part because such depictions, though demeaning, showcased Black virtuosity while diminishing Black ingenuity (Hill and Hatch 108). This notion that performers are able to display ingenuity within an ostensibly demeaning genre becomes important as I consider disruptive performances by the above-mentioned African American women vocalists.

In his award-winning essay “The Black Below: Minstrelsy, Satire, and the Threat of Vernacularity”, Douglas Jones discusses how the disruptive potential of Black performers surfaced within minstrel performances. He maintains that, for African Americans, the minstrel tradition was a generative genre for demonstrating authenticity, performing virtuosity, and creating social networks across Black communities: “Despite its racist degradations and grotesqueries, the minstrel stage appealed to Black performers and entrepreneurs because it offered them work other than the drudgery African Americans were accustomed to as well as outlets for their creativity” (132). Manipulation of a stereotypical performance genre to accommodate Black virtuosity was essential if performers were to earn money through their artistry and survive within the white imagination. Stereotypes generated by blackface performance styles would continue to haunt Black performance for at least the next 100 years. It was not until the 1960s that more humanistic depictions of African American culture would truly emerge. Nevertheless, African Americans throughout the 19th and 20th centuries continued to perform in ways that would demonstrate aspects of their humanity through song, dance, and character interpretations.

For women performers, residues of minstrelsy manifest in representations of Black women as the servile “mammy” maids or the over-sexed “jezebels”. The mammy was an overweight caretaker who raised white children and served meals within the plantation house, while the jezebel was a loose woman who used her sexuality to control men. She was immoral and imprudent. She was presumed to prey upon innocent white men as she sought their favors. A third stereotype, that of the angry black woman, was canonized as “sapphire”—a variant of the jezebel who talked back and ridiculed her master (Jim Crow Museum).

In this article, I consider how three African American women vocalists who perform within the operatic canon strategically navigate their careers, responding to stereotypical preconceptions about their performance capabilities with ingenuity. Each of the artists experienced social and economic barriers to their advancement in the performance industry, and each attempted, with varying levels of success, to craft careers and individual performances that would communicate the breadth of their humanity. Abby Mitchell performs the hackneyed trope of a plantation slave in an experimental film by Lee De Forest, but later crafts a career that culminates in an iconic performance of the opera *Porgy and Bess*. Catarina Yarborough reimagines herself as an Egyptian princess in the opera *Aida*, while Audra McDonald performs the traditional role of Mama Rose in the musical *Gypsy* with a depth of interpretation that evokes centuries of disenfranchisement. Finally, two contemporary opera singers, Louise Toppin and Marquita Lister, rewrite the script by producing and performing in a new work titled *Finding the Light*.

Each of the stereotypes above—“mammy”, “jezebel” and “sapphire”—impacted the careers of the artists I discuss below. African American singers Mitchell, Yarborough, and McDonald refused to be limited by stereotypes of women, even as they worked in commercial venues. Throughout their careers, they performed material written by white or European authors yet still expressed their humanity. I selected these artists for this article because

their careers and performance histories are linked to operatic performances. Two of the historical singers have become characters in a contemporary opera libretto titled *Finding the Light*, which seeks to illuminate strategies used by African American singers to validate themselves and operate within a spotlight of visibility on national and international stages.

Abby Mitchell subdued by Lee De Forest

In this section, I analyze a film performance by Mitchell, an early 20th century vocalist. Mitchell was best known for her captivating onstage singing performances; however, her submissive gestures in an experimental film by De Forest illustrate challenges in resisting aesthetic norms. African American artists like Mitchell struggled to maintain their careers in part because they needed to find employment within an industry that understood Black women only through the lens of prevailing archetypes. Women working within commercial venues were rewarded for diminishing the power and impact of their personalities. In De Forest's film, Mitchell succumbs to stereotypical imaginations about how she might best be depicted.

Mitchell (1884–1960) was an African American musical theater and opera performer of mixed-race heritage (Black and Jewish) who used her singing performance to carve a career for herself within the racial constraints of the first half of the 20th century. She is associated with the success of her husband, composer William Marion Cook. Their relationship was sometimes stormy, but their continuing business association was lucrative for each of them. Her husband, classically trained and raised within an elite Black social sphere, composed musicals that were presented on Broadway in New York and eventually played at Buckingham Palace in London. His compositions grounded an emerging community of Black musical theater artists, and his production *In Dahomey* (1903) is considered to be one of the first musicals to be produced and toured by an African American. Scholar Daphne Brooks maintains “the core creators of *In Dahomey* were united by a single passion to experiment with form and a dedication to advancing the field of black theatrical performance to new levels of innovation and imagination” (222). While the actress's relationship with her husband launched her career, by the early 1900s, their marital relationship began to deteriorate. Cook's “eccentricity” included fits of temper, destruction of his wife's personal belongings, and physical abuse. By 1908, Mitchell was divorced. Nevertheless, her professional association with Cook had bolstered her career, and despite their separation, she continued to use his name while performing on her own for four more decades (Black 432).

While the divorce marked a shift in Mitchell's career, she was able to modify her “image” by adopting the persona of a Gibson Girl, a society type popular between 1890 and 1920. Gibson Girls represented well-bred cosmopolitan women who were youthful and fashionable (Seniors). Mitchell, who was light-skinned as a result of her mixed-race heritage, began representing herself as a Gibson Girl offstage during her performances as the Indian princess Minnehaha in the production of *Red Moon* (1908) (Peterson). Her self-identification as a Gibson Girl helped her somewhat transcend stereotypes of Black women within New York's social landscape.

Black women's ability to change their image is a strategy that becomes significant for many Black artists seeking recognition within a biased, Euro-American commercial theater market. Some artists shifted their image by integrating popular icons into their performance practices, while others moved outside the country in order to take advantage of alternative international social and political landscapes. Yarborough, whom I discuss later in this article, opted to pursue her career internationally, while Mitchell worked within United States paradigms to advance her artistry. Both singers attempted to dismantle stereotypical imaginations about their capacity as vocalists and performers.

Mitchell is important in opera history because she was the first to interpret the song “Summertime” in the opera *Porgy and Bess*, which was composed by George Gershwin in 1935. The song has become a classic role for Black women opera singers since its first presentation. In the opera, Clara's character first sings the song as a lullaby to her child, after which the song is reprised several times within the show. Mitchell's original performance was accompanied by Gershwin himself. However, her iconic performance of “Summertime” was preceded in her career by depictions of down-and-out characters who matched circulating expectations about Black people in servitude.

Inventor and electrical engineer De Forest recorded one of these servile moments in an experimental film produced in 1922. De Forest was interested in experimenting with how sounds could be recorded for the newly-emerging film industry. He developed a mechanism called Phonofilm that changed the way audiences were able to hear and interact with the moving image (Adams). One of his investigations led to a documentation of Mitchell's voice that has made her performance accessible 100 years later. Because this recording communicates both visual

and aural performance, the viewer is able to see how Mitchell adjusted her presentation to fulfill the directorial requests of the white filmmaker.

The singer performs two songs within eight minutes of recorded materials. The raw footage of *Abbie Mitchel: The Colored Prima Donna in Songs of Yesterday* offers several insights. Throughout the clip, the actress changes her expressive gestures from those that are joyful, open, and free to postures that are sullen, downtrodden, and lacking in vitality. I postulate that the actress diminishes her performing persona and adjusts her presentation style to conform to De Forest's stereotypical imaginations about how a Black woman should be portrayed.

The material that Mitchell performs is "Mighty Lak a Rose" and "My Old Kentucky Home". Both songs were part of the popular music genre of "coon songs" meant to capture nostalgic memories of an imaginary South (of the United States) where previously enslaved workers honor their masters and exist within a pastoral utopia. Songs were circulated through sheet music with covers that popularized these stereotypical images during the early 20th century. De Forest's directing of the film, although based on normalized societal interpretations, impinged on Mitchell's ability to freely express her vocal talents.

The first song she performs, "Mighty Lak a Rose", was written in 1901 with lyrics by Frank Lebby Stanton and music by Ethelbert Nevin. Mitchell enters the set dressed like a Black "mammy" in a sackcloth dress. She sings:

Sweetest little fellow, everybody knows
Don't know what to call him but he's mighty like a rose
Lookin' at his mammy with eyes so shiny blue
Make you think that heaven is comin' close to you.

In this first rendition of the song, the actress smiles and beams. She stretches her arms skyward as if calling upon the heavens to bless the child and the day. Throughout most of the verses, she appears jubilant while seated on a tree stump. In the second rendition of the song (which is actually the last segment of the film clip), her demeanor has changed completely. Even though Mitchell remains framed within a medium shot, her manner is subdued, and she keeps her gestures close to her body, looking up once during the course of the song. Her taming diminishes her stature.

There is a similar transformation in the second song. This time, Mitchell sings the lyrics of "Old Kentucky Home" (composed by Stephen Foster in 1852):

The sun shines bright in the old Kentucky home,
'Tis summer, the people are gay;
The corn-top's ripe and the meadow's in the bloom
While the birds make music all the day.
The young folks roll on the little cabin floor
All merry, all happy and bright;
By 'n by hard times comes a knocking at the door
Then my old Kentucky home, Good-night!

In this coon song, the words idolize rustic southern lifestyles where "people are gay" and rolling on a cabin floor is a good thing. While some have argued that the song is an anti-slavery abolition song, its melodies evoke the sweet sentimentality of other Foster songs like "Suwannee River" and "Camptown Races". The performance history of Foster's songs is deeply tied to the minstrel tradition (Lubet and Lubet). The songs were regularly disseminated and amplified through the stereotypical minstrel tradition, and Mitchell's performance was meant to amplify that canon.

"Old Kentucky Home" is repeated in the film clip three times. First, the actress appears standing in front of the shack door with a wooden barrel placed near her. Her right hand is wedged in her pocket, and she looks straight forward, singing into the camera. She uses minimal gestures to accentuate the meaning of the lyrics. In the second take, Mitchell enters from offstage and inspects the slave shack before she begins to sing. This time, she makes no gestures. As the framing widens, the viewer is able to see the plantation house high on the hill in the distance as well as a water pump and a tree covered with Spanish moss. It is in the final take that the actress's responses to the director's wishes are most visible. The recording maintains the medium-shot, yet this time Mitchell slumps over with an obvious downward gaze that makes her appear even more downtrodden and beaten. She maintains her downward focus and subservient slump throughout the entire song. The director likely encouraged Mitchell to

adopt a performance persona that would match his perception of how an African American would appear within a plantation setting. Even though Mitchell sang as a professional performer, she was diminished by iconography and directing that negated her ingenuity. Her transcendence of the limiting stereotypes of the film's iconography reveals her professional will to succeed in an industry where her humanity was expressed through the lens of servility.

However, Mitchell, like many Black artists, was able to craft her own path to success within the restrictive imaginary that defined her work, establishing herself as a consummate musical theater artist later in her career. By the time she appeared in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, some sectors of the United States commercial performance industry were ready to accept more realistic depictions of Black Americans. Even though the opera *Porgy and Bess* promulgated some enduring stereotypes—Black people as a disenfranchised, gambling, murderous underclass, for example—the Gershwin opera placed Black singers within a genre that had been previously inaccessible to African Americans. Over the course of her career, Mitchell expanded her repertory to include classical opera, Negro art songs, and popular music sung for a cross-section of audiences. Even though she achieved some success in these genres, Mitchell was, for most of her career, considered to be a low-brow, popular theater performer who worked within the commercial limitations of a racist theater industry.

Catarina Yarborough embraces international exoticism

Yarborough (aka Jarboro, 1898–1986) was an African American singer who deliberately crafted her career to achieve international fame. She elected to build her reputation outside of the United States, where European audiences embraced the exoticism of Black American talent. Her operatic roles, performed in Moscow, Europe, and throughout the United States, established her as an exquisite vocal artist capable of mastering European singing styles. Yarborough's overseas engagements burgeoned after she appeared at the New York Hippodrome in 1933 as the first African American operatic singer to perform on that stage. In her performance, she excelled in the role of the Egyptian queen Aida in Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Aida*. Notably, in addition to being recognized for the quality of her voice, she was praised for the way her skin tones complemented the fictional role (she was of African American and Native American heritage). Often, her voice was compared to Italian opera singers who, at the time, were considered the epitome of the operatic tradition.

Born in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898, Yarborough attended Catholic school, where her mother encouraged her to sing. At the age of 16, she appeared in *Shuffle Along* (1921), a historic all-Black Broadway musical co-authored by the songwriting duo Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake that launched the careers of many African American artists. The production, with its loose storyline, followed in the tradition of revue-style entertainments that harkened back to the early days of Black minstrelsy. In 1924, she migrated to Europe, where she lived for seven years.

Yarborough's strategy for success differed from that of Mitchell in that she embraced the stereotype of the tragic mulatto onstage while enacting the role of the jezebel in her public persona. Within the racial context of the mid-20th century, the role of Aida was considered one of the few opportunities suitable for an African American, and Yarborough, by interpreting this character, was able to establish herself as a tragically noble figure. Aida, in the opera of the same name by Verdi, is an enslaved Ethiopian princess who, in Egypt, is caught in a deadly love triangle. She dies tragically in the vault of a tomb. Because the opera is set in the Middle East, Yarborough was able to capitalize on her racial ambiguity by stepping into a role that would give her a sense of stature and importance.

Lucy Caplan writes about the importance of a Black woman singing this role by comparing Yarborough's success in the part to Mitchell's ambition:

The vocalist Abbie Mitchell held a "long-cherished ambition" of singing the role; one critic, upon hearing her in recital, was so impressed that he resorted to all capital letters: "WHAT AN 'AIDA' THIS WOMAN WOULD MAKE!" Yet Black women were able to sing the role in full only if they attained positions with the Drury Grand Opera Company, a small-scale company established by African American impresario Theodore Drury that featured mostly Black singers and staged *Aida* in 1903, 1906, and 1930. Before Jarboro's 1933 debut, however, no major opera company in the United States offered this role to a Black singer. (Caplan 89–102)

Yarborough took full advantage of the opportunities implicit in her association with the role. She adorned herself in glamorous jewels, necklaces, and bracelets. The dark, husky timbre of her voice elicited praise. *Time* magazine described her as "tall and good-looking, dark enough to need no makeup in the role of an Ethiopian slave" (*Time*),

and her physical form, coupled with the sensuality of her demeanor, contradicted the servile, overweight “mammy” archetype that defined Mitchell’s later career.

After her 1933 debut at the Hippodrome, Yarborough met her impresario, Alfredo Salmaggi, who was an immigrant from Italy. As a producer, he was interested in the novel and the spectacular and became renowned for producing large-scale opera shows at bargain prices, thus undercutting his competitors. For example, he arranged for *Aida* to tour to Soldier’s Field in Chicago, where he placed 45,000 people in the stands (Freeman). Salmaggi was instrumental in building the persona that helped Yarborough to step away from the negative stereotypes associated with her negritude.

As her career progressed and her European tours increased, Yarborough began to “pass as white”, fully adopting the identity of an Italian singer and claiming Italian roots. Blackness both authenticated Yarborough’s performance and rendered it transgressive. Through her continued association with Salmaggi, she was able to immerse herself in Italian food and culture, destabilizing her Blackness. She began to transform herself into her own interpretation of a European opera star, speaking Italian or French at every opportunity, surprising those who might situate her within her African American past. While Yarborough is to be lauded for managing her career effectively, there is no doubt that her total immersion in the role of the Ethiopian princess was a deliberate attempt to distance herself from prevailing assumptions about the purported inadequacy of the Black singing voice. Yarborough disrupted the narrative by placing herself at the center of an operatic world, even as she minimized her connection to her Black heritage. She even changed her name to Catarina Jarboro to more closely align her ambitions with her newly formed image, and this racial passing was somewhat successful.

Yet the scourge of racism could not be completely avoided. In the early 1930s, Yarborough was offered membership in the Metropolitan Opera company, but when the administrators at the Metropolitan Opera company learned she was African American (and not Italian), they withdrew the offer. Later, they reconsidered their stance and made a repeat offer of membership. Yarborough refused (Staton). Despite the challenges inherent in her career, the singer remained a role model for many who aspired to break the glass ceiling of social expectations for African Americans. Inspired by the magnitude of her achievement, other African American singers imagined what the scholar Josh Kun calls an “audiotopia”—a musical pathway toward imagining a different social world through musical virtuosity (Kun 22–3). Their aspirations for audiotopia through musical performance were only partially achieved. If Mitchell built her career within a primarily segregated world in which producers utilized her vocal talents for roles demonstrating servitude and disenfranchisement, then Yarborough created her own imaginary world where she could present herself as non-Black—as a French/Italian/Ethiopian exotic. By moving her talents away from “home” with its unique North American stereotype, she was able to achieve more than her predecessors.

Yarborough returned to New York City in 1942 to perform in the Town Hall for a benefit on behalf of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. At this performance, she appeared both in front of and in support of her racial peers. Reviews from this performance focus more on her voice than her skin color. While the program is described as “a pleasant contrast because there were no hackneyed spirituals”, this time, the critic responded to the actual quality of her singing voice, noting: “Miss Jarboro was in good voice and though placement was not always preserved, it revealed growth in breadth of tone throughout its scope, since her recent debut concert. A natural nasal resonance, one of its chief assets, was conspicuously in evidence” (Diton). Ten years after her performance at the Hippodrome, and after a decade of immersing herself in European singing aesthetics, Yarborough was able to perform in 1942 in the United States with a voice deemed appropriate by white audiences. Yarborough successfully used her voice to validate white aspects of her identity.

Audra McDonald vocalizes presence

McDonald is a 21st-century actress and singer. Although she is primarily known for her work in musical theater and on Broadway stages, she has also performed on television and in opera. Unlike Yarborough and Mitchell, she makes her resistance to racism public, and her career is defined by her willingness to resist racial stereotyping in casting. She deliberately crafts her stage interpretations to underscore the breadth of her humanity. In *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, a compilation of essays about Black feminist sound, Brooks describes “Black women performers and musicians as intellectuals—as figures who innovated sonic, visual and kinesthetic styles that documented and served as catalysts for transformation in cultures of modernity [...]” (9). Brooks’s publication focuses on the labor and ingenuity of Black women inventing sounds which circulate and challenge racial and social barriers. By

“curating” the sonic, they were “devising ways of moving through the world against the tide of their perpetual subjugation” (16). McDonald manifests this approach to performance through her character work.

Recently, in 2025, she appeared in a groundbreaking and controversial production of the musical *Gypsy* (PBS) on Broadway, where she interpreted the character of Mama Rose. *Gypsy* first premiered on Broadway in 1959 and was written by book writer Stephen Laurents, with lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. The music was composed by Jule Styne. It enjoyed four Broadway revivals, and the 2025 production was a fifth iteration. The featured character of Gypsy Rose was previously embodied by Angela Lansbury (1974), Tyne Daly (1989), Bernadette Peters (2003), and Patty LuPone (2008). The McDonald version opened in November 2024. Notably, the African American choreographer Camille Brown developed the movement score for the production. The plot of the story revolves around an ambitious stage mother who relentlessly promotes the careers of her daughters, June and Louise, whom she pushes to be vaudeville stars. Everyone must make sacrifices to achieve their personal goals.

The controversial aspect of her performance centered around her performance of the number “Rose’s Turn”, which occurs near the climax of the story. In the song, Mama Rose laments the departure of her last daughter from the vaudeville circuit, questioning her own complicity in her daughter’s decision. Theatre critic Charles McNulty from the *Los Angeles Times* describes the song thus: “The result was, if not a religious experience, then a spiritually transfiguring one. There was something at once sacrificial and redemptive in what McDonald was channeling in her art, and I left the Majestic Theater feeling reborn”.

McDonald’s interpretation of the song is raw and raging. In an online post, a vocal coach named Adam Davenport wrote extensively about her performance. In particular, he analyzes how McDonald animated the stage during engagements at the 2025 Tony awards (78th Annual) on 8 June at Radio City Music Hall. Over 10,000 users read and responded to his post. He wrote:

It’s not that others haven’t sung this song with their own talent and contribution to the lineage—they have. But she made it feel new, timely, necessary. Like the song had always been waiting for Audra to perform it at precisely this moment in time.

Her phrasing, physical intensity and vocal shifts give the performance a sharper edge. It feels less like a breakdown and more like a buildup to something defiant. That shift makes the number resonate like an indictment rather than a desperate plea. While the song traditionally functions within *Gypsy* as a climactic breakdown for the character Rose, Audra’s rendition transcends the narrative function of the show. Her performance is a landmark moment in live musical performance. It transcends genre, generation, even the material itself. (Davenport)

McDonald’s performance differs substantially from the performances of her predecessors. Davenport supports this assertion, asking “What if this song was never about your neurotic showbiz mom? What if it’s about every person who’s been sidelined, unseen, overwritten?”

I also attended the Broadway production of *Gypsy* in 2025, and what impressed me about McDonald’s performance was the intensity of the actress’ interpretation. Instead of offering a polished, capable mother, she depicts Rose as a woman at the end of her rope. She is the epitome of the “angry black woman”, fighting for her need to be heard and acknowledged by a system that continually ostracizes her. The role of Rose, under her skillful artistry, becomes about more than a disenfranchised stage mom. Her Rose is a woman fighting outside the Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA) circuit for a crack in the system where she can have her children and find success. The TOBA was a network of venues that only booked Black actors. It was colloquially known as the “Tough on Black Actors” because of its discriminatory practices that limited access to white-owned venues (Elam and Krasner; Scott 3). The 2025 production of *Gypsy* evoked the TOBA circuit because the production included multiple Black cast members. Consequently, the context of the story shifted to one in which the white managers depicted in the story repeatedly tell Mama Rose’s daughters that they cannot have access to the legitimate vaudeville stage. Through her interpretation of a well-known role in the Broadway repertory, McDonald effectively altered the narrative of the work to express the vitality of an African American. McDonald, like Mitchell, shifted the nuances of her performance to amplify the perspective of a Black woman while resisting patriarchal tropes embedded in the performance script.

Louise Toppin and Marquita Lister rewrite the script

The challenge of writing material appropriate for African American women who want to thrive on the operatic stage continues. Some performers are producing new works that can shift this paradigm. One new production,

supported by Opera America in collaboration with Opera Ebony, will feature two living opera singers, Toppin and Lister, whose careers have included performances of Clara from *Porgy and Bess* (a role originated by Mitchell) and *Aida* (a role popularized by Yarborough). Toppin (*Louise Toppin*) has received critical acclaim for her operatic, orchestral, and oratorio performances in the United States, Europe, Uruguay, Scotland, China, England, Japan, and Spain. She is currently a professor at the University of Michigan and is known for her advocacy of African American composers and their works. Lister (*Marquita Lister*) has sung with major opera companies such as the San Francisco Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Grosses Festspielhaus in Salzburg, La Scala in Milan, Arena di Verona, Deutsche Oper Berlin, Opéra Bastille in Paris, and Michigan Opera Theatre, to name a few. Together, the well-regarded singers have commissioned a new operatic work that brings their personal lives and experiences into dialogue with historical African American opera singers.

Because each of the opera singers has experienced racism over the course of their career, they have decided to contribute to the opera repertoire by commissioning other African American women artists to write their stories. The performers will use aspects of their own life histories and interweave them with incidents from Yarborough and Mitchell's lives. Drawing from archival materials, they have worked with writers to construct a story that reflects their lived experiences in the opera ecosystem. As collaborating producers, they are hopeful that the new work, once complete, will be performed by the artists and other African American women who seek relevant interpretations of African American histories and lifestyles.

By promoting and producing their own work, these two artists reimagine how Black women present themselves onstage. They defy restrictions of the stereotypical imaginary and write an alternative future for Black women artists. Even though the two singers have performed some of the most popular roles in the opera canon, they see the need for better representations of their humanity onstage—representations that are written by, for, and about their own multifaceted experiences as African American women. As 21st-century artists, Toppin and Lister work within a producing infrastructure where mechanisms exist to commission African American artists who will write from a cultural perspective that was not possible in the 20th century. While stereotypes continue to circulate, artists with resources are now able to intervene in dramatic storytelling processes.

Images matter because it is through public representations that policies are developed. Repeated depictions of African Americans and others as incompetent or simplistic deny the complex heritage and rich contributions of those who have shaped the United States economy. The cultures of the United States were established by multiple ethnic communities.

Conclusion

In this article, I have highlighted efforts by African American women to use vocal performance as a way of asserting humanity and building success within a theatrical and social landscape where stereotypes about Black women's capacity prevail. Shifting the narrative requires artists not only to push the boundaries of their art forms through aesthetic manipulation of existing material but also to create new performance works within the genre. Writing new narratives about Black experiences that feature Black vocalists and their aesthetics will enable the circulation of new archetypes, ones that more aptly showcase the ingenuity of Black expressivity.

Historical contexts that circumscribe African American performance have led to a series of social and economic barriers for artists working within commercial genres. The genre of minstrelsy, in particular, created enduring negative personas associated with the Black underclass. During the late 19th century and early 20th century, African American women were linked with the imaginary mammy, jezebel, and sapphire or angry Black woman. The women I discussed in this article, Mitchell, Yarborough, McDonald, Toppin, and Lister, each challenged these stereotypes in their performances and built successful careers for themselves through a variety of innovative approaches. Mitchell and McDonald manipulated their on-stage characters in the United States to better demonstrate their humanity; Yarborough opted to work in Europe, where differing racial paradigms enabled her to develop an alternative Italian identity; and Toppin and Lister decided to manage their own legacy by self-producing their life story. Collectively, these artists demonstrate how African American women in opera navigate representation. They respond to the dilemma of racial stereotyping by refusing to accept circulating notions about their identity. Instead, they reimagine themselves as artists who are capable of writing—through performance and production—complex interpretations of Black womanhood.

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