Marked Territory:
*Assemblages of The Black Female Subject in 19th Century Visual Art and Verdi’s Aida*

Carla Chambers

Studies in Comparative Literatures and Arts

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Faculty of Graduate Studies, Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario

© 2018
Dedication

To my dream team: Bob, Zachary, Lillian, and Gabriel and to black women everywhere.
Abstract

The relevance of Giuseppe Verdi’s opera, *Aida* within the Western operatic canon, contemporary opera, and other forms of theatre performance affect contemporary discourse around equity and inclusive representation in the performing arts. This thesis considers the intertextual representations of the black female subject in Giuseppe Verdi’s *Aida* (1871) from the narrative and musical texts, to the visual text in performance. This thesis expands musicological considerations of *Aida* to include intersectional frameworks of feminist, critical race, and postcolonial theories. Additionally, using art history and cultural criticism it purposefully situates operatic performance as a form of visual culture. In this sense, the stage is the frame through which the components of the black female as Other in *Aida* are seen as assemblages of conventional representations of the black female subject derived from nineteenth-century European art. The methodology applies what Toni Morrison theorized as the “Africanist presence” and Abdul R. JanMohamed’s framework of the Manichean allegory to analyze and critique the ways in which perceptions of the racialized woman materialize from a trajectory of marginalized images of black femaleness in Western visual art. The discussion is an exploration of how these translate to the stage through costume, performativity, and performance as assemblages reified through the artistic practice and operatic performance of *Aida*. This thesis also considers the intersectional positionality of the performer in the role of “Aida” and how, the actor, as creator and viewer of cultural capital, becomes a catalyst to subvert or reinforce the “Africanist presence.”
**Table of Contents**

**DEDICATION** ........................................................................................................................................... II

**ABSTRACT** ............................................................................................................................................... III

**LIST OF FIGURES** ................................................................................................................................. V

**CHAPTER ONE: ESTABLISHING THE INTERDISCIPLINARY IN AIDA** ......................................................... 1
    INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................................................. 1
    EXOTICISM AND BOURGEOIS OPERA ........................................................................................................... 3
    BOUDIEU, LACAN, AND JANMOHAMED GO TO THE OPERA ................................................................. 7
    POWER AND POLITICS IN THE PRODUCTION OF AIDA .................................................................................. 11
    NEGOTIATING VERDI ..................................................................................................................................... 20
    INTERDISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS OF AIDA ...................................................................................................... 23
    ASSEMBLAGES OF BLACK FEMALENESS IN OPERA .................................................................................... 26

**CHAPTER TWO: HYPER-VISIBILITY AND THE BLACK FEMALE SUBJECT** ............................................... 30
    CHIAROSCURO AND BEGINNINGS OF POLITICAL BLACKNESS ............................................................. 31
    THE PERFORMANCE OF PERVERSIVE BLACKNESS ...................................................................................... 37
    THE AFRICANIST PRESENCE, EMBODIED ..................................................................................................... 42
    MAKE ALL OTHERS BLACK ............................................................................................................................ 46
    ISOLATING BLACKNESS ................................................................................................................................. 48
    SCHEMAS OF BLACKNESS ............................................................................................................................. 51

**CHAPTER THREE: MUSICAL CHIAROSCURO AND THE IMAGINED SPACE OF NARRATIVE** .............. 55
    CHIAROSCURO FEMINIZING THE VOICE .......................................................................................................... 56
    FOREBODING BODIES IN FORBIDDEN LOVE ............................................................................................... 64
    EXTENSIONS OF IDENTITY, DETERRITORIALIZING THE SELF .................................................................. 68
    READING, SPACING, AND PERFORMATIVE BLACKNESS = WHITE SELFHOOD ........................................ 71

**CHAPTER FOUR: THE PERFORMANCE SPACE OF THE OPERA THEATRE** ........................................... 81
    "WHY DON’T THEY JUST HIRE A BLACK SINGER?’ ..................................................................................... 86
    BLACK FEMINIST GEOGRAPHY OF AIDA ....................................................................................................... 89
    THE SCALE OF BLACK FEMALENESS ............................................................................................................ 92
    THE ROLE OF AIDA: A SITE OF MEMORY ....................................................................................................... 95

**CONCLUSION** .......................................................................................................................................... 98
    INTERVENTIONS AGAINST THE OPPRESSIVE GAZES ................................................................................ 100
    AFFIRMING A DISCOURSE BEYOND THE OPPRESSIVE GAZE ................................................................... 104

**WORKS CITED** ......................................................................................................................................... 108

**ENDNOTES** .............................................................................................................................................. 114
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fig.</th>
<th>Image Description</th>
<th>Artist/Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Lady Elizabeth Murray &amp; Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay (1778)</td>
<td>Johann Zoffany (1733-1810)</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Olympia (1863) Édouard Manet (1832-1883)</td>
<td></td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Reading the Cards (1899) Harry Roseland (1867-1950)</td>
<td></td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Les quatre parties du monde soutenant la sphère céleste (1872) Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux (1827-1875)</td>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Scene from Aida Act 2: “The Triumphal March” production by Opera du Québec (2009)</td>
<td></td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Shirley Verrett, as “Amneris” (left) and Virginia Zeani as “Aida” (right)</td>
<td>Source: <a href="http://www.virginiazeani.org">www.virginiazeani.org</a></td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Portrait of a Moor (undated) Circle of Edwin Long (1829-1891)</td>
<td></td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Hui He as “Aida” and Carlo Guelfi as “Amonasro” in Aida.</td>
<td>Source: Metropolitan Opera Achieve (2010)</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Grace Bumbry, as “Venus” in the 1961 Bayreuth production of Tannhäuser</td>
<td>Source: <a href="http://www.bibliolore.org">www.bibliolore.org</a></td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>La Naissance de Vénus (1879), William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905).</td>
<td>Source: WikiCommons</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Leontyne Price, in her final Metropolitan Opera performance as “Aida” (1985)</td>
<td></td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter One: Establishing the Interdisciplinary in *Aida*

*Introduction*

The incorporation of and interplay between arts in opera invites an interdisciplinary contemporary discourse (Levin 2). Disciplines like media studies, literature, sociology, history, and economics augment the opera’s intertextual form towards more robust criticism, but also can enhance theatrical experience for the viewer (4-5). For the artistic practice for the performer, the delivery of dramatic performance of narrative through vocal music enables the opera singer to present a unique artistic experience that engrosses the audience within a dramatic rendering replete with a range of affective potentials. The opera singer interprets a role with skill sets informed by the spaces of the opera such as musicianship that is cultivated in educational and performance institutions, and interpretation that develops within the imagined space of the narrative. In order to unearth a fully embodied performance, the opera singer undertakes a process of negotiating the world of the dramatic narrative, with the singer’s own lived experience as framed through the cultural spaces in which operas are conceived and performed (Knowles 14). The performer must decide the extent to which they become engulfed within the fictional realm of experience (Jaeger 122). What I am suggesting is that part of the process of performance practice is for each participant to channel various perspectives of social experience through mimesis to achieve the desired dramatic moment. However, the process of interpretation, the artistic and social agency of the artist, is influenced by the social context within which these activities take place (Jaeger 124-25). I suggest that the context of a dramatic performance affords the imagination of the performer, as creator and viewer, a materialized, multi-dimensional space to project and perceive new political perspectives on lived realities. Therefore, as it functions in the social space of culture, the performing arts are a method of
expression that shapes new multiplicities of lived experiences within society.

In her essay, “Embodiment and Presence: The Ontology of Presence Reconsidered,” Suzanne M. Jaeger discusses how the notion of “presence” in performance theory is an exchange between the performers and audiences within a singular empathic experience and that this occurs through the bodily schema (134). A term Jaeger borrows from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the bodily schema is the synthesis of bodily perception and cognition as it relates to the context of being present. She further states that the performing body works in conjunction with the poetics of the space to infuse the performance with meaning (Jaeger 134). Jaeger’s insights illuminate how the corporality of performing arts such as opera elicits a dynamic, reciprocating and self-perpetuating process of creating meaning in relationship to the affective potentials within the contexts which they take place (122). Whether adapted from an existing or a newly created story, opera requires and employs musical themes that evoke cultural signifiers and archetypes realized through the traditional theatrical elements of stagecraft and mimesis (Hutcheon 115). I suggest that the affective potentials in opera are initiated through the symbiosis of various disciplines of adaptation in the institutional context of the opera house, where the core of the music is the singing voice and the dramatic narrative is enacted through the body of the singers acting on stage. The visuality of the dramatic performance of the bodies on stage, along with the spectators, the musicians, the directors, and all other participants in the production of an operatic work interpret the embodiment of the work through perceptions shaped by cultural positionalities (Jaeger 132). I intend to show how in a white supremacist patriarchal society, the body of the black woman in art is perceived as a “metaphysical alterity (JanMohamed 65),” a representation of the ambiguous space that exists between the Self and the Other. Julia Kristeva calls this space abjection, “a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond
the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (1). I argue that this cultural meaning is ascribed to black women in the imagination of the viewer, and it predetermines how black women are seen as objects for capitalist consumption, or imperialist exploitation. I also wish to present that, simultaneously, the perceived abjection of black women in artistic spaces demonstrates how the agencies of black women are unseen in social spaces because of the veneer of stereotype that is imposed on their bodies through racist and sexist imagery perpetuated in visual culture of art and theatre.

Jaeger’s analysis suggests that in whatever subjective ways a fictional work is interpreted, the parameters that distinguish the “reality” of the fictional world are still anchored to conventional cultural meanings (125; Hutcheon 115). My purpose is to cultivate a multifaceted discourse on opera as a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary artistic practice grounded in narrative whereby, the relationships between the musical and theatrical staging conventions in opera interpret the black woman in two embodiments: the racialized Other and the black female subject. However, I will emphasize the significant function visuality plays in the operatic work by considering opera as a form of visual culture on the continuum of Western visual culture. Then, I will engage in an analysis of the musical and visual elements to understand how they work in tandem to unify the visual, dramatic narratives that pre-determine the positionality of black women’s bodies in performance. I contend that visuality in staging situates the operatic work as cultural capital so that when depictions of race, gender, and class drive the narrative, they enhance social hierarchies within the field of opera that parallel and re-establish boundaries of other social fields in social spaces.

**Exoticism and Bourgeois Opera**

Theodor Adorno, in his essay “Bourgeois Opera,” spoke to the ongoing challenge for
opera to maintain social relevance in the mid-twentieth century suggesting that the visual
customs of opera lean toward bourgeois ostentation. This ostentation is rooted in the display of 
material power, that is power over objects (land, money, consumer goods etc.) for the public gaze. The unfolding of opera is one form of ostentatious production that creates a genre of hyper-real mythologies expressed on stage and mitigated through the musical and the libretto texts (Adorno 30). Adorno also acknowledged significant semiotic shifts in interpretations of operatic narratives, particularly when the exotic “Other” is a central figure in the text; he argues that these characters become fodder for bourgeois self-indulgence. Adorno states, "It is precisely because opera, as a bourgeois vacation spot, allowed itself so little involvement in the social conflicts of the nineteenth century, which it is able to mirror so crassly the developing tendencies of bourgeois culture itself” (Adorno 36). In other words, the disregard of social conflicts in Europe during the early twentieth century ultimately became deeply entrenched within Western bourgeois culture. Building upon Adorno’s observations, this thesis proposes that this indifference is produced through methods of psychological detachment from particular effects and implications of social conflicts related to the colonization of non-European cultures, especially as it pertains to hierarchies of power and class. Pierre Bourdieu argues that disregarding the sociological impacts of art, is a “systematic 'reduction' of the things of art to the things of life, a bracketing of form in favour of 'human' content” the effects which are "barbarism par excellence from the standpoint of the pure aesthetic” (Bourdieu, Distinction, 61). In other words, the meanings of a work of art are not limited by its form, but to limit meanings of an artwork to its form undermines its power. Bourdieu’s view that the limiting of form to favour particular “human” content (in this case those of social or political ideologies) in art constrains its potential, suggesting that art has an ontological function in a society because the potentialities
of art are enough to be catalysts for actualities in society. Therefore, I will analyze how the form and content in visual art influences the body politics of the Giuseppe Verdi’s (1813-1901) opera *Aida* (1871) and its relevance to contemporary culture in the way it is produced, accessed, and disseminated.

The basis for this thesis is how Western visual art and opera has commoditized the racialized female subject and the implications this has for black women in opera. When exploring the parallels between visual incarnations of the black female subject as “Other” in the visuality of art and the lived experiences of black women opera singers (hooks 21), I will begin by referring to cultural theorist bell hooks who states that, “[e]xploring how desire for the Other is expressed, manipulated, and transformed by encounters with difference and the different, is a critical terrain that can indicate whether these potentially revolutionary longings are ever fulfilled” (22). This “desire for the Other” concurs with Adorno’s view, previously stated, that cultural productions like opera, are aimed at fulfilling a particular longing for pleasure. These longings disturb the status quo by blurring the lines between classes that are defined primarily by race, then gender, and making sexual exploitation more accessible through racism (Weheliye 13). In this way, whether forbidden or permissible, art materializes the hidden spaces in the imagination, making them possibilities for lived experiences in society (hooks 22).

Hence, opera demands deeper consideration beyond its unified form. First, because it is multidisciplinary: music, drama, visual art, and literature—second, opera is an interdisciplinary practice that involves a multi-faceted process of adaptation, filtered through numerous methodologies and perspectives, all of which are affected by the cultural milieu (Hutcheon 44-45). To re-establish its relevance, opera analysis requires pulling apart, examining, and repositioning all components of a single work in order to contextualize the work in its totality.
The purpose of contextualizing opera in this way is to better identify and understand how and where the black woman is the ultimate encounter with difference in a white supremacist and capitalist patriarchy, but also, how artistic conventions work to make this difference strange in representations of the black female subject.

The opera of focus for this thesis is *Aida* because it has been widely performed since its debut and is a mainstay in the operatic canon. Most importantly, it is replete with intersections of class, gender, body and racial politics in its production, narrative, and performance. These linkages are contained within various binary conflicts that anchor its plot, creating clear Manichean oppositions between depictions of the metaphorical “self” and the “other.” The story takes place during an unspecified time in antiquity where Egypt is at war with Ethiopia. The central character, Aida, is an Ethiopian princess who has been taken captive by Egyptian armies and enslaved by the princess of Egypt, Amneris. Radamès, the young Egyptian Captain of the Guard, has been commissioned to lead an attack against the Ethiopian armies, led by Aida’s father King Amonasro of Ethiopia. A love triangle further complicates the story. While Radamès and Aida are secretly in love, Amneris is in love with Radamès. When Radamès chooses Aida over Amneris and his post as Capitan of the Guard, he is caught, branded a traitor and sentenced to death by entombment. Aida, having lost everything she had to live for, follows Radamès into the tomb where together they await certain death. Broadening the scope of analysis of *Aida* beyond the musical score, I examine what I deem to be the beginning of assessing and evaluating the particular “reduction of the things of art to the things of life (Bourdieu *Distinction* 44)” for the black female performer as it occurs in *Aida*. Bourdieu writes that this reductiveness unnecessarily assumes that the form can only be “achieved by means of a neutralization of any kind of affective or ethical interest in the object of representation.” He further states that these
interests accompany a thorough understanding of how the things that make a work of art distinct, are drawn from its relationships to other forms, specifically but not limited to “references to the universe of works of art and its history” (Distinction 44). The research presented in this thesis examines the ways in which aesthetic or ethical interests in black people in for artistic works are neutralized and then conflated with their status as the racial Other in order to maintain the distinction of the operatic form as white European. By taking this approach, I aim to show the ways in which opera, contributes to established oppressive paradigms of social order and discipline for the black woman opera singer through multiple iterations of the racialized black female subject.

**Bourdieu, Lacan, and JanMohamed go to the Opera**

Bourdieu’s theories of “fields” and “symbolic power” are relevant to how these identities as performer and viewer converge for the black woman singing in an adaptation of Aida. Fields of power are defined as the space in which conventions that govern behaviours (habitus) interact with capital (personal resources) to produce various kinds of practices. Furthermore, fields are socialized territories that make up a social milieu and set the contexts from which meanings of various social practices are derived and understood (Bourdieu, Distinction 101). For Bourdieu, symbolic power is determined by two factors: symbolic capital, and symbolic efficacy. Symbolic capital is knowledge gained through processes of institutionalization. For instance, in music performance, this process of institutionalization might occur in the following sequence for the performer: formal education, practice, and professional performance. Symbolic efficacy is the degree to which said knowledge is grounded in, applicable to, or concretized in society or to cultural institutions. These factors legitimize a person or a thing to represent, influence, or impose power within the context of the field of power to which they have been legitimatized
Postcolonial theorist, Abdul R. JanMohamed identifies the novel as one institutionalizing catalyst. His theory of the Manichean allegory elaborates on the critical influences of the subtexts of narrative in literature on cultural imagination. He uses Lacan’s psychoanalytical frameworks of the Imaginary and the Symbolic orders to categorize two forms of the Manichean allegory (65). Within a given text, these categories can encompass the narrative or be moderated to enact specific interpretative functions. Of the Imaginary, he explains, “[t]he emotive, as well as the cognitive intentionalities of the ‘Imaginary’ text, are structured by objectification and aggression” (JanMohamed 65). Lacan defines the Imaginary order as primarily narcissistic, concerned with interpreting realities in relation to the Self even at the expense of the Other (Felluga Module II). The Symbolic order describes an allegory that identifies and creates objectivity within social structures through narrative and language (Felluga Module II). He describes the symbolic text as often, “more open to modifying dialectic of self and Other”(66). Authors of Symbolic texts use the individual and cultural difference to reflect and assess the efficacy and relevance on Europeans values and behaviours in contrast with non-Europeans (66). With narrative being integral to operatic performance, JanMohamed’s theory provides a fecund foundation for considering the dynamics of representation in visual art and artistic narrative on the imagination and how cultural meaning is made through the artistic narrative.

Here, it is important to briefly differentiate Bourdieu’s use of the term “Symbolic” to Lacan’s. I have described Lacan’s Symbolic order as characterized by the ability to interpret, understand and communicate the social symbols, rules, and functions to facilitate interpersonal interactions through narrative and language. Central to both theories is the importance of the semiotic recognition of difference in the building of psychic and social structures. Conversely,
symbolic power influences how the psyche experiences objectivity and subjectivity within particular fields of social power. The difference between the two uses of symbolic is that Lacan applied it to understand the creation of psyche in the individual and Bourdieu used it to describe the creation of social groupings.

For this reason, JanMohamed’s application of the Symbolic and Imaginary orders to his framework of the Manichean allegory reveals much about the functionality of the narrative texts in the social imagination. His analysis shows us the cyclic development of literature as both testament and catalyst for ways of being in society and in one’s imagination. It also alludes to a relationship between the individual and social psyches. Therefore, I suggest that symbolic power intertwines the Manichean allegory with the psyche in that the more defined the order (of the allegory or the psyche) the more symbolic power an individual or object is capable of possessing. In my analysis to come, I aim to show that this accounts for how narrative forms intervene in political discourse through dramatic performance in ways that visual art and literature leave to speculation. The detail of symbolism the allegory and the cultural predispositions of the viewing audience is significant to my discussion on the intersections of narrative and visual representations as they happen on and through the black woman in operatic performance.

Concerning the symbolic power of Aida, there are many facets to consider. But the foundation of my analysis is the symbolic power of the black female subject as the central character in the story. What is the cultural impact of centering the black female in this narrative? Through the role of Aida, I intend to show that the black woman in opera spaces provokes unique potentialities for empowering engagement within the hegemonic spaces of opera and cultural transformation. Additionally, the textual black female subject is equally provocative, but I will show how the visual context of representation regulates the legitimation and realization of
those potentialities for the kind of transformative interpretations of *Aida* that disrupt hegemony.

Bourdieu argues that legitimation within a field, such as “the opera world” (Alexander 131), is not an overtly propagandist process. Instead, “agents apply to the objective structures of the social world structures of perception and appreciation which are issued out of these very structures and which tend to picture the world as evident” (Bourdieu, “Social Space and Symbolic Power” 21). “The structures of perception” can be linked in various ways to the psyche as the Imaginary and Symbolic orders. However, Bourdieu’s insights also suggest that this agency of the psyche can be compromised if the perceptions required to adapt to the field of opera (which are formed by and filtered through the psyche and expressed through symbolic efficacy) are inherently oppressive. JanMohamed states that the Imaginary order is a framework rooted in narcissism that fetishizes difference, typically racial difference, as means of self-recognition (66). He further describes how the Imaginary order “dehistoricizes” and “desocializes” the conquered world through successions of reductive imagery or linguistic codes and builds stereotypes to create an affective sense of superiority in the white European imagination (JanMohamed 68, 84). In keeping with Bourdieu’s theory, the presentation of narrative in a dehistoricized way should diminish the symbolic efficacy and therefore the symbolic power of the work. Furthermore, if dehistoricized concepts, such as racial stereotypes, are implicated as “evidence” within a field, it negates the legitimacy of the social power of that field. I will show how *Aida* is often staged as a Manichean allegory of the Imaginary order that inevitably presents a challenge to artistic agency and the cultural legitimacy of black woman singers in opera performance. As one of the most widely performed operas from its inception to the present-day, *Aida* has maintained its symbolic power as tribute to Verdi’s genius. However, the symbolic power of the work of art itself is tied to the ways in which its visual interpretation
simultaneously supports and/or subverts white supremacist patriarchal hegemony (Guarracino 2). In opera performance of the twenty-first century, Aida’s symbolic power becomes more nebulous depending on how the staging relates to contemporary context of the performance.

**Power and Politics in the production of Aida**

As one of the preeminent opera composers of his time, Verdi’s operas can be seen as benchmarks of convention for operatic narratives both musically and dramatically. His symbolic power transferred to his operas and *Aida* is no different (Guarracino 3). Edward Said argued that as a composer, Verdi’s symbolic power employed groups of musicians, singers, and librettists to adapt this operatic work, but the process of production and adaptation of *Aida* demonstrated the symbolic power of opera to Europeanize the exotic Other (111). Verdi’s symbolic power is described in the following statement:

> In this way, the power of constitution, a power to make a new group, through mobilization, or to make it exist by proxy, by speaking on its behalf as an authorized spokesperson, can be obtained only as the outcome of a long process of institutionalization, at the end of which a representative is instituted, who receives from the group the power to make the group. (Bourdieu 23)

*Aida* was meant to convey a vision of Egypt that was acquiescent to a European populace that was fervently fascinated with and politically invested in the literal and figurative notion of the Orient (Gauthier and McFarlane-Harris 61.) Throughout European colonization, genre-specific novels, books, and art about the Orient were widely popular and disseminated throughout Europe and the colonies, shaping perceptions of the non-European. One of Europe’s most notable cultural events, France’s Exposition Universelle, replicated an entire street in Cairo for Egyptian Pavilion in 1867 (Mitchell 4). Of this Said writes, “These subaltern cultures were exhibited
before Westerners as microcosms of the larger imperial domain. Little, if any, allowance was made for the non-European except within this framework” (112). The notion of the Orient was fully realized through the culmination of the Eurocentric imageries created out of the fetishization of African and Asian nations to build the Orientalist aesthetic. As a result, there is significant debate on whether the depiction of Egypt in Aida is of an imperial power bringing another sovereign nation into subordination, or as a series of Orientalist tropes (Said 111). In his book Colonising Egypt (1981), Timothy Mitchell presents a thorough discussion on the socio-political impact of the concept of the Orient on nineteenth-century Egyptian culture that illuminates how strategic political alliances between the then Ottoman-occupied Egypt and Europe shifted the established rules of social conduct in Egypt (63). The Khedive of Egypt commissioned Aida in the first place to celebrate the opening of the Cairo Opera house. Said’s critical discussion of how the various activities that contributed to Aida’s creation show that the basis for his issues with the opera is in the complex political implications around the creation of opera as European cultural product or institution. In this, I propose that the cultural significance of opera in Europe made it a compulsory cultural product for subaltern cultures to adopt in order to assimilate successfully into European political legitimacy. Commissioning Aida as “Egyptian” opera was one method of institutionalization that legitimatized Egypt as an imperial power, as was opening an opera house in Cairo (Mitchell 17). Said also alludes to this sentiment, by acknowledging Egypt, as a territory of the Ottoman Empire, became “established as a dependent and subsidiary part of Europe” (Said 114). Recalling that symbolic power imposes and inculcates “a vision of divisions” and is “the power to make visible and explicit social divisions that are implicit” the spectacle of Aida, as well as its international acclaim, created a vision of Egyptian power legitimized by its burgeoning association with European hegemony. In this way, I argue
that *Aida* as an opera became both a symbol of elite artistic expression and globalized European hegemony.

Bourdieu’s second condition is that “symbolic efficacy depends on the degree to which the vision proposed is founded in reality” (22); this is where the symbolic power of *Aida* is misrepresented. Verdi employed a group of European, mostly French academics to help create a version of ancient Egypt that would be identified by Europeans as authentic (Locke 107; Guarracino 5). Verdi himself had never visited Egypt, showing disdain for their Imperialism and history of institutional slavery (Locke 108) and no Egyptians were recorded as consulted during the making of *Aida*. Thus, the staging of Egypt was dependent on the Orientalist trends of European mainstream culture of the period (Mitchell 10).

Scholarship around the production of *Aida* rarely considers Verdi’s cultural distance from the subject matter of *Aida* as problematic. Musicologists, John Drummond and Paul Robinson, were most critical of Said’s analysis of *Aida* and ultimately defer to Verdi’s compositional intentions over the staging (Drummond 11, Robinson 137). The third musicological analysis of *Aida* I consulted comes from Katherine Bergeron, who focused on the element of spectacle in *Aida*. I present these three particular criticisms by the musicologists above first because they are highly referenced, and second, to establish what I argue, is a clear ethno-cultural bias that leans toward racial bias prevalent in some of the key scholarship undertaken on *Aida*. The language of their criticism indicates a common sensibility that upholds hegemony in opera, the sensibility of form over content referred to by Bourdieu as “barbarism par excellence” (*Distinction* 44). The core arguments within their particular analyses trivialize the function of Orientalism and exoticism in the opera on the psyche of the viewer.

Throughout his essay, Paul Robinson maintains an acutely dismissive tone; he even goes
as far to say that Said’s reading of the work is “embarrassing” and suggests it lacks focus. On the contrary, Said’s focus is different, not lacking. It works from the perspective of one who is examining the cultural work of a musical work of art beyond the space of the opera house; and beyond the mind and social position of the composer. In rebuttal to Said’s argument that *Aida* exoticizes Egypt, Drummond comments that, “[i]t may well be that these works are part of a European desire to marginalize the Orient, but the argument needs to be made more persuasively, and more comprehensively than Said has managed to do in his discussion of *Aida* in *Culture and Imperialism* (11). His statement could be understood as “it may well be” that *Aida* is a racist depiction, but Drummond absolves himself of the emotional or intellectual labour of investigation how this may or may not be so. Robinson shares a similar sentiment proposing that a political analysis of *Aida* makes more sense if it is regarded “first and foremost as an Italian opera” and secondly as part of Verdi’s long tradition of creating political operas (Robinson 140).

Robinson and Drummond’s perspectives privilege form over content. It is fair to assume that the bulk of Verdi’s dramatic substance and Italian cultural perspective would be infused in the musical score, a skill for which he is celebrated (The Genius of Verdi). However, following Robinson’s approach, limiting the cultural reading of Verdi’s international works to an Italian perspective has many problems. First, and the most obvious, is that as a European nation, Italy is still subject to a Eurocentric worldview. In his book *Beyond Exoticism*, Timothy Taylor states, “it was not just space that was at issue; it was Europe in this new conception of space, Europe at the center with the New World and other places at the margins, the European self at the center with Others at the margins” (26). Moreover, I argue that Italy’s proximity to African nations through the transient yet ethnically diverse Mediterranean regions makes negotiating the politics of race through a Eurocentric artistic lens a precarious process (Guarracino 3, 12). This level of
nuance is unexamined in Robinson’s essay in which he describes Egypt as “Europeanized” and Ethiopia as “Orientalized” although both are African nations. The failure to acknowledge Egypt as an African nation, or to problematize its Europeanization highlights a contradiction that skews the historicized African presence in Europe and the colonial presence of Europe in Africa.

Although Drummond has repeatedly argued that Verdi would have had few artistic choices that would have subverted an Imperialist reading of the work (Drummond 10), Western music of the nineteenth century is replete with musical representations of the exotic or gendered other⁴ (Taylor 74). Consequently, Said argues that the entire opera, like much of the Oriental art of the period, was Orientalist because the use of the trope is combined with the thematic of imperialism and made a spectacle for the European gaze (112). Robinson’s statement particularly demonstrates the reductive attitude towards art criticism that JanMohamed says reinforces the economy of Manichean oppositions and keeps these oppositions firmly entrenched within the cultural imagination. Instead of analyzing the broader cultural meanings in the artwork, he revalidates the Eurocentric form by positing that Verdi likened Ethiopia to Italy, and Egypt to Austria, which Verdi viewed as an imperialist threat to Italian sovereignty. Robinson considers Aida part of a collection of similarly anti-imperialist political operas (Robinson 140). Even if this is the case, it is equally possible that Verdi used his operas subversively to comment on or critique imperialism. In the instance of his opera I Lombardi, Verdi did make a statement about Italian political sovereignty (Robinson 140). However, within a Eurocentric context, texts that use the non-European “Other” as an allegorical device of European politics are at risk of objectifying the Other to the service of European colonialist narcissism (JanMohamed 65). I see this is as a crucial consideration for analyzing Aida because it is an explicitly fictional tale about non-Europeans produced through a European white supremacist institutional context. As
JanMohamed argues, this method of storytelling often minimizes the cultural impact of the Orient/Occident dichotomy on colonized peoples (65).

Bergeron also considers the complex politics around the creation of the opera to be about creating the spectacle of a work that would convey Egypt’s burgeoning political significance to Europe (151). However, Bergeron takes only a slightly different approach than Drummond suggesting, “What would happen to our view of the opera if we were to begin not with the composer, but with the spectacle itself? […] as a particular staging of Egypt” (151). Bergeron seems to be presenting a novel proposition, but instead of limiting the reading of Aida to the genre, she limits Aida to the conceptual notion of “spectacle” in the spirit of realism in dramatic narrative. She eventually contends that spectacle in Aida is “a question not of the new order of Egypt, but of the operatic spectacle itself: the new order of realistic representation” (Bergeron 159). Bergeron implies that the social politics of Egypt and the realism in representation are mutually exclusive outcomes. Moreover, she assumes that the superficiality of the spectacle she analyzes are illegible to the viewer, and thus being overlooked. In actuality, what is being overlooked is, this “particular staging of Egypt” operates and actualizes as a particular perception of Egypt, and for Said, is a false one at that. The irony is that Said begins his critique acknowledging Aida as an imperialist “visual, musical, and theatrical spectacle” (112).

Bergeron seems to ignore that Said shares a similar starting point to reading the work but had a different interpretation. I identify two issues within Bergeron’s proposition that demonstrate how the colonialist imagination JanMohamed writes about interferes with acknowledging an individual perspective of the Other. First, she disregards how opera uses visuality to narrate the story with musical and dramatic performance to reify subtext. She eventually returns her focus to the musical structure to fulfill the interpretation of subtext, as if it
somehow negates what is seen in the opera space (153). Secondly, Bergeron’s reading of the work favours aesthetic elements of spectacle, which disregards the perspective that a more in-depth, non-Eurocentric interpretation of the work may not find the spectacle merely superficial, but dangerous, or even violent. As I have pointed out, Said’s ideas on the cultural implications of *Aida*, as opposed to musicological ones, are reinforced by the opera’s methods of production and spectacle. Early in the chapter Said pointedly states: “*Aida’s* grandeur and eminence, although evident to anyone who has seen or heard it, are complex matters about which all sorts of speculative theories exist, mostly about what connects *Aida* to its *historical and cultural moment in the West*” (112 emphasis mine), and less about its cultural impact in moments thereafter.

Bergeron, Drummond, and Robinson all attempt to use the historical production activities to explain *Aida’s* anti-Imperialist sentiments, along with a formalist reading that comes across as ambivalent. Their defense of the supposed intentions of the original creators is characteristic of a systematic avoidance of engaging any “analysis of the domination, manipulation, exploitation, and disfranchisement that are inevitably involved in the construction of any cultural artifact or relationship” (JanMohamed 59). Contemporary scholars have the advantage of hindsight that allows a broader engagement with, and a more in-depth analysis of, the cultural impact of a work of art. Instead of embracing this opportunity to explore a fuller more nuanced breadth of opera’s influence, Bergeron, Drummond, and Robinson ignore how representation in artistic narratives such as *Aida*, can function to disseminate socio-political ideologies especially those that favour formalistic Eurocentric readings. By emphasizing that the music and the political spectacle are the basis for a formalistic reading as opposed to the marginalizing effects of the overall process and product of adaptation (Hutcheon 15), they prove Said’s argument that spectacle in *Aida’s* staging is a cunning tool of European dominance
through indoctrination.

In understanding the politics influencing production, part of the symbolic power of *Aida* is realized through the order of its Manichean structure. By commissioning an “Egyptian” opera, not only did the setting of *Aida* meet one significant criterion for a Manichean allegory, but it was also poised to become a masterwork of this model. Rebuttals to Said’s observations overlook the basis of his critique that JanMohamed illuminates: Orientalism and other colonialist forms of hegemony are ubiquitous and economical by design. JanMohamed asserts:

> [E]ven a writer who is reluctant to acknowledge it and who may indeed be highly critical of imperialist exploitation is drawn into its vortex… The writer is easily seduced by colonial privileges and profits and forced by various ideological factors…to conform to the prevailing racial and cultural preconceptions. (63)

So while Verdi was known to be highly critical of European colonial conquests and was staunchly anti-imperialist, he was not above using racial epithet, as is noted with his calling his opera *Otello* his “chocolate project” (André, Bryan & Saylor 12). Perhaps it is easier to believe that the power of Verdi’s artistry overrides his subjectivity to the systemically racist hierarchy within which he lived and occupied the highest social and political spaces than to understand how he could be susceptible to the vortex of colonial privilege, ideology, and exploitation. I propose that this approach to opera criticism and a belief in pardoning the problematic social manifestations of works of art based on the supposed noble intentions of creators greatly limits the possibilities for opera to thrive in contemporary contexts.

Two musicologists that engage broader readings of *Aida* are Christopher R. Gauthier and Jennifer McFarlane-Harris. While they also acknowledge that Said’s analysis downplays the ways in which the imperialist portrayal of the Egyptians in *Aida* more closely resembled
European imperialism, they expand into a more insightful synthesis of the musicological and historical readings of the work that achieves sociological findings. They include analysis of other modes of representation that the music supports, such as the Ethiopians’ racialized portrayal as the savage “Other” or negates the Egyptians presented as white (57). This black and white dichotomy that is imposed by whitewashing the newly “civilized” Egyptians illuminates the pervasive influence of European-style cultural hegemony on North African colonies (65). Even as Gauthier and McFarlane-Harris concur that Verdi’s criticism of Egypt’s imperialist agendas is evident in Aida’s libretto, (Verdi’s politics also successfully contextualize the musical score to imply corresponding cultural implications of the work) this does not negate that the fascination with the Orient conflated European stereotypes of the foreign “Other” with any exoticized artistic representations present in Aida. My primary criticism of their analysis is that it deflects critique of the far-reaching influences of European imperialism and colonialist ideologies on African nations, especially in performance for European audiences. Therefore, thus far, the musicological analyses of Aida may challenge Said’s focus on Egypt’s exoticization, but they are diffident to directly address Said’s overarching problem with the work: since Aida was envisaged through a lens of white European imperialist aesthetic, in what ways does it serve white European hegemony? The central examinations of this thesis are the implications and effects of the colonialisit paradigm Aida was created within on the work, and how the black female subject works as a device through which colonial dominance is (re)enacted and problematizes the black woman as an operatic performer. I will analyze Aida first within, and then beyond the social milieu of its creation toward a contemporary reading that reconsiders and repositions Aida beyond its colonial inheritances.

Accordingly, in keeping with an interdisciplinary approach to studying Aida, my
musicological analysis will be in context to relationships to musical style and idiom to other cultural theories. I pose the following question: if cultural understandings of a work of art expand into previously unexplored perspectives for analysis, how must current contemporary interpreters examine their treatments of racialized bodies and marginalized cultures in artistic spaces and narrative? How is the black female subject significant to hegemonic narrative forms? Integral to this thesis is understanding the ways in which cultural hegemony facilitates reductions of meaning in works of art and how reductive representations in artworks facilitate cultural hegemony. If artworks are geared towards self-indulgence or social class mobility, as opposed broader social engagement or critique, what ideological iterations, conflations, and distinctions are possible in spaces where this art is created, presented and represented? This study is not meant to be a strident indictment of Verdi or the other creators of Aida, but to examine how entrenched social ideologies make their way in the conceptual underpinnings of works of art, performing arts practice, and make meanings in contemporary culture.

*Negotiating Verdi*

Musicologists concur that the intention for Aida was to create thoroughness in cultural authenticity in order appeal to both the European audiences and Khedive’s wishes for an “Egyptian opera.” However, even after composing Aida, Verdi himself had never visited Egypt. Again, musicologist Ralph P. Locke suggests that as Verdi and his collaborators conceived the story, they sought to draw parallels between the themes of ancient imperial Egyptian with European imperialism of his time (135). He also comments on Egypt’s imperial reach of that time, but he diverts from the discussion that this reach was heavily influenced and arguably initiated by Europe’s colonial interests. Mitchell stated that the formations of these political ties were to subvert the refusal of Egyptians to “present itself like an exhibit.” As a result, “[t]he
The colonizing process was to introduce the kind of order….that was to provide not only a new disciplinary power but also the novel ontology of representation” (xiv). Additionally, Locke suggests the following about exoticism in *Aida*, “portrayals of social injustice in Europe could most palatably be presented on stage by disguising the Europeans as Egyptians and by emphasizing the historical fact that ancient Egypt was, unlike the Europe of Verdi’s own day, slave society” (108-9). I agree that Europeanizing the Egyptians made their presence more palatable to Eurocentric audiences, but I propose that the function of this method of representation had less to do with distinguishing modern Europe of the nineteenth-century from ancient Egypt and more to do with positioning Europeans as the master narrators and facilitators of culture through cooptation. I have discussed earlier the problems with using the non-Europeans as literary devices. To this I add that the institution of chattel slavery during the transatlantic slave trade and beyond, the resulting racial oppression, and pervasive fetishization the non-European “Other,” drove the expansion of European territories through colonization (McClintock 25). Therefore, I challenge Locke’s view: Europe was indeed a slave society during Verdi’s time, with black bodies functioning as symbols of servitude. The fact of slave society within the racial body politics of patriarchy that positions women as “Other” then, it follows that the protagonist, Aida, is presented within enslavement, oppression, and territorialization as the default context (McClintock 26). However, as Verdi centred the role of Aida by giving her music that allows her to be recognized, through this characterization, he makes specific political statements about the rights to agency and autonomy that imperialism and racist patriarchy prohibit. As a black female protagonist, Aida’s plight illustrates this injustice. By the middle of the nineteenth-century, abolition and anti-colonialism were common subject matters in visual art (Boime xiv), so it makes sense that Verdi, an ardent democrat and Italian nationalist would
contribute specifically to this cultural discourse through this particular work (Locke 112). Locke acknowledges the prevalent use of irony and alienation as an artistic device to incite more critical readings of artistic narrative works during the nineteenth century and he correlates this with Verdi’s other works with social and political themes (122). In the case of Aida, the portrayal of a black female protagonist, the inversion of a light/dark binary in the vocal tropes, somatic racialization and, strategic placements of musical exoticism in the score (Locke 113) are possible attempts at utilizing alienation tactics to mirror the horrors of European imperialism on the opera stage. Applying these tactics to the staging would position the opera in the Symbolic order of the Manichean Allegory, initiating a transformative cultural work. However, I propose that as an opera, Verdi’s methodology in creating the work was inherently flawed and could only conform to the system of white hegemony (Bourdieu, Distinction, 128; Alexander 226). With the contemporary reliance on the trope of the fetishized the Other (McClintock 188), Verdi’s core intentions were probably unrealized; the colonialist collective imagination of operagoers already misread the work.

With the practice of blackface already commonplace in European performing arts of the period (Taylor 21; André, et al 32), not enough consideration is given to the black Ethiopian presence and conventions of representation of black people in theatre performance. Thus, it can be seen how Verdi is sympathetic to the character of Aida and her fellow Ethiopians, but the sympathy for racialized Aida is diluted through the stigmas around blackness in theatre, extending out of social-political ideologies of race. Although Aida is fictional, referencing actual places in the plot historicizes the narrative. However, relying on stereotypes in representations has dehistoricized the story through conflicting semiotic meanings that inevitably arise with co-optation. Accommodating these problematic methods in the context of the systemically racist
field of opera, the actors become props in a spectacle of white hegemony.

**Interdisciplinary Analysis of Aida**

To analyze *Aida*, or perhaps any other opera, purely from a genre-specific, intradisciplinary standpoint oversimplifies the cultural work of opera. Since Verdi chose in *Aida* a black female as the central character, the hegemonic context of opera presents *Aida’s* visual narrative within a racially gendered hierarchy that is reiterated in opera spaces. The method of racialized staging re-ascribes the meanings evoked through the visual concepts of the black female subject onto the black woman in the social field of opera and, again in the broader society (Dallery 293). However, I will present the ways in which Verdi’s musical choices may be interpreted as subverting stereotypes of the black female subject, resulting in affirming experience for black women performers and spectators. These choices open opportunities to critically interrogate the connections between methods of artistic production and the meanings created out of method.

To establish the hegemony in opera performance this thesis critiques, I will discuss how the Western notions of race are anchored by blackness and whiteness as social constructs within systems of colonial oppression. A diametrical concept of black and white entrenched within Western cultural imagination both in Europe and the Americas reveal the beginnings of negative systemic associations with blackness emerged around the time of the transatlantic Slave trade (Pastoreau 134). Negative perceptions of blackness established Eurocentric political hierarchies on the notion of "pure" whiteness, which infiltrates visual, literary and social spaces of art production like theatres and galleries (Gilman 204). Additionally, some definitions of terms will anchor the forthcoming descriptions of racialized paradigms of European hegemony in the arts, and extensions thereof. I will define the “self” as an internalized understanding of one’s
individuation of consciousness, that is simultaneously a differentiation from and a relation to any other stratum of expression. “Identity” is the part of the "self" that forms out of one’s relationship to the surrounding environments. It is characterized by external articulations of the Self that correspond with a social contextual understanding of the Self (Butler 173). The terms “whiteness” will identify the white supremacist parameters for socialization defined by colonial Westernization where "whiteness" is the antithesis of "blackness" in both racial and metaphorical terms (Foster 80). While the first chapter includes some discussion of adherence to a strict gender binary in Aida, in-depth analysis of the nuances of gender performance in Aida is beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, for continuity, this thesis will frequently refer to visual representations of black women in art as "the black female subject" (Nelson 9). References to the actual female person in dramatic performance will be the term “woman” will be applied. The terms “womanhood” or “womanness” will refer to the individual whose gendered identity is described as such. Race in this thesis is to be understood visual, phenotypically, and primarily corporeal. The term "black" when referencing a person will refer to people of any nationality who are of African descent and have certain specific somatic characteristics such as skin complexions within a range of brown, with black or brown tightly coiled or curly textured hair (Foster 234-236). I will use the term "white" when applied to persons that includes Europeans, and persons of European descent whose cultures are primarily derived from a European historic and ethnic lineage. They have somatic characteristics associated with and including skin complexion in ranges lighter than those who would be somatically black, including closer to the actual colour white with naturally straight or wavy textured hair. Western culture will include the cultural milieu in countries of the Americas, Europe and other territories colonized by European powers. Western culture is also characterized by championing European-style hegemony by
imposing class hierarchies on colonized spaces and persons, and underpins class with notions and functions of race.

In its multidisciplinary form, opera analysis benefits from an interdisciplinary approach combining sociology, Western music, literature and visual art histories and criticisms. Studying representations of the black female subject in Western visual arts of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries and how these transfer in the operatic space, will work with JanMohamed’s Manichean allegory to understand the divergences and convergences of varying musicological and cultural readings of Aida’s narrative and how the black female subject is positioned therein. An exploration of the black female subject and the black woman in operatic performance will investigate the following:

1. How a marginalized female blackness presents in Aida
2. Why these kinds of presentations are recognized and accepted as convention,
3. The impacts and implications of representing the black female subject in Aida as a cultural artifact as opposed to an artistic characterization determined by the performer.

I argue that how bodies are visually interpreted and performed in art eventually determines how a trajectory of performance reconfigures in the social consciousness, and into marginalizing practices (Deleuze and Guattari 316) including culminations of racial performativity and material semiotics (Knowles 22). Additionally, just as bodies in society are “culturally coded through learned behaviours, habits, rituals and cultural practices that are internalized and naturalized,” race in Aida is enacted into being (Law 12; Knowles 35), hence it is performative (Ehlers 65-66). Therefore, when racial performativity and stereotyping are staged in Aida, they are borne out of reductive and vilified visual interpretations of difference translated with and marked onto, the performer’s body. These are interpretations presented as statements
that characterize and emphasize the pervasive strangeness of the Other. While difference may be benign on its terms, regarding its effect on power dynamics, what forms the basis of a colonialist reading of *Aida* is how difference is made “strange.” Without critique and when difference is made strange visually in art on stage, the binary tensions that undergird systems power in the Western culture, such as, normal versus strange, the Self versus the Other, whiteness versus blackness, good versus evil, male versus female, become imbued within art forms. These tensions work together as powerful mechanisms of expression in the development, establishment, and perpetuation of racial ideologies (JanMohamed 63). Some leading questions for this synthesis are as follows: what is implied in representations of the black female subject in nineteenth-century Western visual art? Are these implications being perpetuated through parallel, duplicate, or replicated images of the black woman in operatic context of *Aida*? How is the meaning of the performance work itself tethered to systemic Western colonialist tactics of adaptation that positions *Aida* as a Manichean allegory? Can performance of the role of Aida, provoke or disrupt colonialist representations of black womanhood?

**Assemblages of Black Femaleness in Opera**

To unpack these questions, I will consider the role of “Aida” in three contexts or fields of power: the corporeal or the space of the body, the imagined space of narrative and the performance space of the theatre stage. As previously mentioned, this chapter will explore the function of conventions of portraying the black female subject in Western visual art, where the positioning of conceptual blackness on the female body identifies whiteness in imagination and objectifies the black female body. I contend that as this negative concept of blackness translates and replicates throughout Western visual culture that projects a negative perception of race that is performed in opera (Morrison 6). An analysis of significant late eighteenth- and nineteenth-
century Western visual artworks will elucidate how Western notions of “blackness” converge with the female subject in art to form a racialized aesthetic that is also gendered. The historical trajectory of representing black bodies throughout the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western arts exposes the historical roots of systemic methods of exclusion and marginalization in the contemporary arts, including the performing arts (Nelson 9; Fleetwood 9; hooks 123). This course of study is pertinent to performance studies in order to understand how modes of power are exercised through, or imposed on, the physical bodies of individuals belonging to a particular characterized group in performance spaces. It also shows how conventions in opera narratives require discursive negotiations in contemporary performance (Uno Everett 24). As this kind of racial marginalization continues in contemporary opera (Midgette 2015), it has also been instrumental in maintaining opera as a form of high art cultural capital (Alexander 2000) and thus influences other mainstream forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, “Social Space and Symbolic Power” 23). As such, in its visuality, opera has provided a benchmark for other manifestations of body politics across the performing arts.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari discuss the multiplicity as a concept that has the dimension, the magnitude and is determined so that it affects various ways of being and knowing (8). They also present the concept of “assemblage” which is that culmination of many multiplicities that Deleuze and Guattari say cause “increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections” (8). I aim to establish how the visible, embodied stage performance of the role of Aida is an amalgamation of various multiplicities that create an assemblage of the black female. I consider the sources of these multiplicities racializing assemblages because the ways in which race, gender and social politics of opera spaces (both actual and imaginary) connect to form a particular assemblage of the role
of Aida and how these are articulated onto the female body in *Aida*. In expanding upon Deleuze and Guattari, cultural theorist, Alexander G. Weheliye speaks on how the productiveness of assemblages also causes productive articulations of race that become coded as natural (Weheliye 38). With regards to bodies in performance in *Aida*, I concur with one of Weheliye’s basic premises that race is not a biological category that has been politicized; it is political, disguised as biological (51). Therefore, central to the proceeding arguments is to show how it is not the actor that performs race, but the visible blackness marked on the flesh that performs race in the imagination. Weheliye asserts that flesh “represents one such racializing assemblage within the world of Man, and, consequently, it represents both a subject and an object of knowledge within black studies intellectual topographies” (50). Such connections will include how multiplicities such as gender and race form assemblages of characterization in visual art, and libretto, and how these are reconfigured when married with voice type and tonal qualities in the musical score. These multiplicities illuminate how the assemblages of the black female are constructed in *Aida*. I intend to use this part of the research to highlight current common practices that conform and, at times, constrain the operatic work within the Manichean allegorical paradigm and postulate possibilities for alternative methodologies of representation. I aim to accomplish two things: first, to propose ways in which *Aida* might be interpreted as an anti-racist and feminist work; secondly, presenting this history provides evidentiary value to the broader discussions of decolonizing and de-marginalizing contemporary performing arts and audiences.

Finally, using an ethnographic approach to analyze the space of the opera theatre, the third chapter applies Katherine McKittrick’s theories of Black feminist geographies and Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas around de-territorialization and stratification to dispel the myth of the recentness of black histories (McKittrick 97). By re-asserting the geographical presence of the
African diaspora in Verdi’s Europe, the Americas and throughout the Western musical world of the nineteenth century, McKittrick’s insights allow me to historically re-place/re-space black women as relevant contributors to the cultural fabric of Western art. I will also discuss methods of revealing and the merits of interrogating and challenging white supremacist spaces with what bell hooks calls “the oppositional gaze” towards the creation of more emancipatory spaces for artistic practice for black artists.
Chapter Two: Hyper-Visibility and the Black Female Subject

In her book, *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (2010), art historian Charmaine Nelson convincingly identifies and describes conventions that were utilized throughout the Western visual art canon to depict the black female. She presents how the aesthetic conventions of the visual arts of the nineteenth-century have a pattern of representing the black female subject as racialized, pervasive, and illicitly sexualized. This chapter is an analysis of select eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artworks to discern how a trope of black femaleness appears. I aim to show how a visual language of race is presented within Western artistic works and how the vast breadth of dissemination of works like those to be covered, influenced the social spaces of black people beyond the visual arts. Supporting this, Nelson asserts the following:

[Western visual arts] form an oppressive repository of stereotypical representations of black female subjects that the subjects themselves were forced to consume daily as they saw themselves imaged and imagined through white eyes and white social perceptions, in public and private spaces through elite and populist art practices alike. (5)

The “white eyes” and “white social perceptions” Nelson describes ultimately affected the ways in which black women could be spaced, and seen in those spaces. To validate how this occurs, the specific works to be analyzed are as follows: the sculpture *Les quatre parties du monde soutenant la sphere celeste* (1874) by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux (1827-1875), the paintings, *Lady Elizabeth Murray and Dido Belle* (1779) by Johann Zoffany (1779), Édouard Manet’s *Olympia and, Reading the Cards* (1899) by Harry Roseland (1867-1950).

*Les quatre parties du monde soutenant la sphere celeste* by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux subverts the light-dark dichotomy with racialized representations of female bodies. Yet, critical
opposition to the work revealed that insistence on placing black bodies and blackness as abject, or inherently oppositional, is embedded in the European imagination (Kristeva 1). A comparison of the paintings of the portrait of *Lady Elizabeth Murray and Dido Belle*, and Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* show how chiaroscuro in painting is used to enhance whiteness in the visual field of a painting. Since staging, costume, and the gesture are visual aspects of the performance of opera and other types of theatre (Knowles 29), I argue that the iconography created by works of visual art provided a paradigm for Euro-colonialist aesthetic standards in visual art (Gilman 7) that resurface in theatre performance. Conversely, an analysis of chiaroscuro in the painting *Reading the Cards* by American artist Harry Roseland provides a more humanized approach to depicting racialized people in nineteenth-century art. As a white artist of the post-antebellum period, Roseland’s black female subject eludes to a burgeoning subjectivity in social spaces in the post-slavery America.

**Chiaroscuro and Beginnings of Political Blackness**

Historically, symbolic dichotomies of light and dark, and white and black found throughout Western cultural narratives traditions are presented within a contentious and oppositional framework (Darlow 460; Pastoreau 134). By extension, Western iconography created a visual language where whiteness is represented as "good" and blackness is represented as "evil" that further contributed to establishing racially coded language (Boime 2). Chiaroscuro is an Italian compound word meaning "bright-dark" to describe the visual balance between light and shadow in paintings. In Western visual art of the Renaissance, chiaroscuro enhanced realism and naturalism in paintings by creating depth of perspective, visual balance, visual dominance, and affect (Osborne 221). One artist commonly associated with developing the technique is Michel Caravaggio (1573-1610) who used saturated colours and dramatic shadow to convey a
sense of depth, intensity of subject matter, and movement to his paintings. In religious iconography, Caravaggio, his many contemporaries, and successors, often applied chiaroscuro to enhance the contrasts of the divine, and the carnal (Osborne 202). From a technical standpoint, the goal of chiaroscuro is to bring out luminosity of colour and anything else exposed to direct light, as well to augment perspective to deepen tones that absorb light (Osborne 221). Rembrandt (1606-1669) is celebrated for mastering the technique and applying it for evocative purposes in his paintings (Osborne 964). Artists of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century periods utilized chiaroscuro to conceptualize character in representation; this effected depictions of racialized bodies (Boime 4). When depictions of black and white subjects shared the visual field in paintings, the use of chiaroscuro helped to foreground white bodies visually (Boime 18). White subjects dominate portrait paintings using dramatic directional light or are placed as the central source of light, rendering subjects with darker skin as part of the background. During the height of the transatlantic slave trade and enslavement of Africans in European colonies, the depictions of black people primarily showed them in servitude or enslaved (Honour 12). Thus, paintings throughout the eighteenth-century period either depicted this subjugation explicitly, or implicitly, by inundating black bodies in shadow so that at times they blended into the background, or adorning them with objects that exoticize their bodies. The black racialized subject becomes like an object that symbolizes white colonial wealth, power, and dominance.

One such example is a portrait of cousins of the eighteenth-century British aristocracy, *Lady Elizabeth Murray and Dido Belle* (Fig. 1). This piece represents the social presence of people of African descent in Europe but also contains many common icons imposed on the black subject as the exotic Other in visual art. Lady Dido Belle was clearly not a servant, but symbolism in the work shows her slightly below the aristocratic status of her cousin. The portrait
was considered progressive for the period because it showed the black, mixed-race Dido Belle in near equal stature to her white first cousin, Lady Elizabeth (Gerzina 95). Both women are portrayed in similar proportion and their smiling gazes fixed on the viewer connote subjectivity rarely given to black female subjects when included with a white counterpart. At the time this portrait was painted, black people were almost exclusively depicted in subjugation or abjection (Honour 50). Therefore, for a black female subject to be portrayed in such a way as Dido Belle was unusual. Still, explicit and implicit use of chiaroscuro subtly marginalizes Dido Belle's black body and privileges Lady Elizabeth's white body. The most obvious is Dido Belle's positioning

Fig. 1 *Lady Elizabeth Murray & Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay* (1778). Johann Zoffany (1733-1810) Source: Wikicommons
slightly behind her cousin. She appears to be moving slightly ahead of Lady Elizabeth but, to the eye of the viewer, they are occupying the same space, time, and are near one another. Thus, they should be lighted more similarly, but the shadows cast on Dido Belle's face are more congruent with the background, creating a contrast against her cousin's bright white skin; Lady Elizabeth appears to be glowing. The less obvious indicators of race are through iconography and gesture. Lady Elizabeth, naturally posed, holds a book in hand representing knowledge and enlightenment. However, Dido Belle’s finger is positioned coyly on her chin, while she awkwardly holds a bushel of flowers connoting, child-likeness and domesticity. She also is wearing an Indian turban, a common symbol of the "exotic Orient" which is irrelevant since Dido Belle’s mother was taken from a Spanish slave vessel in the Caribbean (Bindman & Gates xviii; Gerzina 88). It is in paintings that the conflation of non-Europeans as a homogenous group is commonly seen. The next works of art will begin to reveal how conflations like these contribute to the construction of race.

Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (Fig. 2) was painted in 1863, from the same period as *Aida*. The nineteenth-century viewer looked upon *Olympia*’s body as Othered by her femaleness, marginalized by the nature of her sexualized vocation. The work challenges notions of respectability around body politics of the period. With the centrality of *Olympia*’s white body on white sheets, all other colours and figures not only become background shadows, they enhance the luminosity of her form. In the book, *The Art of Exclusion* (1990) Albert Boime states that
Manet understood the racial discourse underpinning class distinctions in French society and therefore, “plays with the racial mythologies built around differences of skin colour” (4). Boime suggests that including the maid in the composition serves to “reverse traditional associations” of feminine marginalization “by identifying whiteness” on the body of a prostitute (4).

The presence of her black maid makes *Olympia* more acceptable: the implication here is being white and sexually transgressive is less severe than being black (Boime 4). There is a poignant parallel to Manet's choice of depicting a white female sex worker in the nude being served by her black maid to the depiction of Egypt, an African nation in *Aida*, as white. It recalls how the politics surrounding *Aida's* commission, creation, and subsequent positive reception are rooted in the notion of the exotic Other acquiescing to colonial conquest, or “civilization.” Like *Olympia*, the European colonialist powers, in this case, audiences, look past Egypt's racial
otherness to advance Imperialist interests (Said 111). Like the gaze of the white male, Europe is set on colonial expansion while Egypt boldly faces the colonizer, not with resistance but with "union" by assimilation (Gauthier and McFarlane-Harris 58). In *Olympia* we see how the presence of blackness is strategically positioned to absorb white European transgression and the black body is used, in sacrifice, to preserve a sense of white supremacy (Gilman 206).

Considering later representations of black and white women in the same visual field, American painter Harry Roseland (1867-1950) uses a more impartial manner for depictions of black women in everyday life. The painting, *Reading Tea Leaves* (Fig. 3), shows the black female subject’s equity through gesture and proportion. The contours of the physical features of the black female subject are foregrounded with her white counterpart because the use of chiaroscuro is applied to recreate the effect of natural lighting on the environment. Also, Roseland thoughtfully positions the black female subject toward the light source, making her face more defined with balanced light and shadows. The result is the bodies of both women appear to be naturalistic and equally subjective. There is

![Image](image-url)
a feeling of the two women sharing in a moment, as opposed to a power dynamic. In each painting, the presence of the blackness creates different meaning based on how chiaroscuro is used to mark the black body or light the white one. In the first two examples, the relationship between the light and dark shifts the visual balance of the painting so that the eye is drawn to white subject. Seeing whiteness diminishes the black subject, yet the presence of the black subject makes whiteness identifiable as dominant. When chiaroscuro is transferred to dramatic staging in such a way, the dimensionality of embodiment increases the metaphorical and oppositional perceptions of black and white in more palpable ways.

The Performance of Pervasive Blackness

It can be seen how chiaroscuro may be used for “naturalistic” depictions of racial difference to make race observable, quantifiable, and then representational in characteristics of physiological features. In a work like Aida, the black female body can specifically be perceived as excessive yet insignificant in proximity to whiteness. Representations derived from imaginations formed through distinctly qualitative biases inevitably distort the process of identification. Philosopher, Paul Ricoeur asserts that the formation of the Self begins through finding similarity or difference with the Other (Valdés 53). Northrop Frye states that social constructs are a natural part of human development that

Fig. 3 Les quatre parties du monde soutenant la sphère celeste (1872) Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, Source: Wikicommons
helps humans to negotiate their experience of the natural world, and ultimately to find a sense of place within it (Frye 3). In Carpeaux’s sculpture, *Les quatre parties du monde soutenant la sphère céleste* (Fig. 4), the African possesses a look of strength and defiance that breaks with nineteenth-century conventions that portray black women’s bodies as antithetical to their white counterparts (Nelson 158). Carpeaux relied heavily on a naturalistic and celebratory depiction of racial difference yet does so in a non-hierarchical way (Nelson 170). In his personal writings on the work, he expressed a desire "to show the coloration of the races" (Honour 259). The sculpture acknowledges all of the women as subjects, regardless of race. However, critics disparaged Carpeaux’s work through, and because of, the visual difference of the African woman, expressing disdain for the equal visibility of the racialized bodies. In 1872, art critic Paul de Saint-Victoire wrote that the female forms were, “neither man nor woman, all negresses” (Nelson 171). Another critic of the time, Paul Mantz, spoke of one of Carpeaux’s other works, a bust of white European artist, Jean-Léon Gérôme as “surprisingly lifelike,” that it “moves and breathes” (172). Yet, Mantz contrasts this to *Les quatres parties*, by resorting dehumanizing language, ascribing the piece as an “unhealthy, savage machine” (Nelson 172). Art historian Charmaine Nelson points out this use of disparaging language in connection with the nude body of the black female subject as she explores the question of why critics found racial difference between the representations “illegible” in the work (Nelson 173). Nelson writes:

Firstly, the critic’s choice of the word machine is a dehumanizing strategy that acted to objectify and dehumanize the female subjects. Secondly, the author’s use of term savage has obvious racial connotations similar to de Saint-Victoire’s previous comments. To de Saint-Victoire all four women were Negresses, to Mantz all were savages. (173)

Beyond the clear sexist overtones of these critiques, Nelson’s observations point to a perspective
that insinuates that blackness embodied a pervasive force against, and onto white bodies, which overrules gender difference. Nelson states, “Although the choice of words was different, the result was similarly the dehumanization of the female subjects through critiques that not only uniformly equated them all with the racially marginalized black female subject, but performed that marginalization” (174, italics mine). These remarks not only criticize black women as unfeminine but also, as Nelson shows that by their proximity to the representation of the black woman the other three subjects are also “blackened.” Sharing equal space and focus, amid the white European female subject, the other figures of the other female subjects repulsed critics of the work. The vehement response to the three-dimensional presence of the black African female in *Les quatre parties du monde* indicates that as blackness becomes corporeal, it becomes more threatening to white dominance in both the visual field and the imagination.

American author Toni Morrison’s treatise on literary theory, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination* (1992), explains Africanism as an assemblage of reductive beliefs about Africa and Africans that are tethered to all that is abject in the European/Euro-American imagination. Abjection of the Other in this sense is what Kristeva says demarcates space from the subject by recalling a repressed “primal” condition. Then “secondary” repression is based on conceptions and assumptions developed out of the prior marking of the primal space or the “enigmatic foundation that has already been marked off” (Kristeva 11). These conceptions manifest as “phobic, obsessional, psychotic guise, or more generally and in more imaginary fashion in the shape of abjection” (Kristeva 11). The Africanist presence is a pseudo-African from a pseudo-Africa, and can take literal or metaphorical forms of abjection within a text. While Morrison acknowledges an Africanist presence exists in other postcolonial cultures, her insights on American Africanism are useful to the broader topic of contemporary representations
of race in opera because many of the widely disseminated iconographies of racialized people she describes are part of a continuum of European cultural hegemony (7). Morrison describes the existence of various forms of Africanism, but as she describes it, European and American Africanism are almost identical. Central to Morrison’s position is that “Americanness” in literature is unidentifiable without the Africanist presence (Morrison 6). An “Africanist presence” emerges out of “Africanism” when “Africanness” is presented as a constrictive notion tied to a distant sense of place, effectively making the non-European strange. The strangeness of Africanness is conflated with visible, corporal blackness and making blackness the visual marker of the “exotic Other” (Morrison 49). JanMohamed also concurs that racial exoticism is a crucial device in the Manichean allegory (JanMohamed 66). The Imaginary text positions the colonized "native" as the inversion of the colonial European in that “to say ‘native’ is automatically to say ‘evil’ and to evoke immediately the economy of the Manichean allegory” (JanMohamed 65).

Africanism, Morrison says, serves that purpose, to evoke the “evil native.” Like Orientalism, Africanism highlights racialization in *Aida* to create a liminal narrative space, especially for the singer in the eponymous role. Conversely, understanding Africanism in *Aida* reveals provisory artistic interpretations of the libretto. It presents opportunities to challenge the reductive hegemonic function of the Manichean allegory by re-historicizing Africanness as multiplicities of pre- and postcolonial ethnicities that reclaim cultural identities connected to African continent. Morrison resonates with JanMohamed particularly in that the vilification or mediation of the non-white non-European/American other is integral to the formation of white identities in Western literature and Western culture. She describes the Africanist presence, as "a dark and abiding presence, there for the literary imagination as both a visible and an invisible mediating force" (Morrison 46). To the colonialist imagination, rivalries of Manichean oppositions are
accepted as metaphysical in effect and thus transcend materiality of fact. The “Imaginary”
allegory is a “mapping of the intense European rivalry” between the European and the “native”
that “tends to coalesce the signifier with the signified” (JanMohamed 65). In European
colonialist literature, the Africanist presence synthesizes from a culmination of evocations from
those visual artworks that reach beyond the imagined narrative spaces into the consciousness of
the viewing audience, including the performer. Therefore, when considering the prevalence of
using of black subjects on paintings of the nineteenth century to situate whiteness and blackness
as Manichean oppositions, Morrison's literary theory of American Africanism or "the Africanist
Presence" provides an applicable framework for understanding the racist and sexist critical
responses to Les quatre parties du monde, while demonstrating the effects of the Manichean
allegory on the psyche. Africanism was the context within which the black female subject was
confined, articulating the white supremacist cultural context of nineteenth-century art criticism.
Although Carpeaux sought to subvert Africanism in his work, he could not erase the Africanist
presence from the minds of his critics, people who would have been exposed through education
to Manichean allegories in colonialist literature, and likely could have been operagoers. The
Africanist presence forms a connective tissue creating subtexts for representations of the black
female subject in literature and works like Les quatre parties du monde, and Aida.

As Morrison asserts, “Americanness” in literature is unidentifiable without the Africanist
presence. Likewise, identifying whiteness in the compositions of European paintings and within
the coded language of Western art criticism is contingent on a disparaging depiction of a black
African subject (6). Again, Morrison concurs with JanMohamed that the vilification or mediation
of the Other is integral to the formation of white identities in Western literature in the way it
creates a kind of visual map. She observes how the works included in the conventional canon of
American literature have been constructed in such a way that the visibility of people of African descent comes to signify ideological, physical, and metaphysical oppositions to white superiority. Morrison asserts that the reduction of this visibility comes down to the:

[D]emonizing and reifying the range of color on a palette…. to say and not to say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire or fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom. (7)

These widely disseminated iconographies of racialized natives/Africans in the Americas were part of a continuum of European cultural hegemony of political blackness that was stratified visually on the body (Morrison 7). As this absorbed into the cultural psyche, it initiated the practice reading of blackness on bodies to inform politics and nation-building in the Americas (Morrison 7). In such a social milieu, whiteness can only be valid in relationship to the abjection of the Other forming the basis for white person as the civilizer to the black person who inherently savage.

*The Africanist Presence, Embodied*

To the colonialist imagination, the mapping of rivalry between Manichean oppositions starts as metaphysical and becomes material fact. For example, the egalitarian visibility of race in Carpeaux’s work subverts the competition by presenting a harmonious co-existence through the spatial materiality of sculpture and conceptually through subject matter. This is further symbolized through the four allegories holding up the earth together. Critics of the *Les quatre parties du monde* were disturbed by this divergence of inferiority from black femaleness. The connotation here is that if inferiority could not be contained on the body through race and gender, then inferiority can be indiscriminate, mutable, and transferable based on its detachment
from corporality. As JanMohamed states, embodying the Other as invasive delineates an immediate hierarchal body politic that requires the harnessing of the Other. The multi-dimensional mapping of race derived from the imagination provides a plethora of prototypes for the embodied racial stereotype to emerge in *Aida*. If the notion of sculpture as performance can be translated to the stage through dramatic performance, then what perceptions of the visual form are transferred to perceptions of embodied performance? Morrison’s analysis shows that even in the absence of black principal characters in literature, the economy of Manichean allegory employs references to abjection and connects these to a black body in any incarnation. In *Aida* this happens in two ways. First, I link Said’s assertion that Orientalism was imposed on the representation of Egypt as political blackness manifested as the Africanist presence. While Egypt’s conquest parallels Europe’s, Verdi’s and his collaborators are deliberate in using Orientalism to portray Egypt as exoticized Other, and thus politically black. The second manifestation of the Africanist presence in *Aida* that blackness is specifically centered on the female body through Aida.

As the critical response to *Les quatre parties du monde* suggests, sculptural works can incite the impression of invasive black corporeality because of anti-black predispositions. The perception of invasive black corporeality translated into racial performativity in performing arts spaces where the notion could be replicated visually along the iconographic guidelines established in the visual arts. The practice of using the black subject to denote whiteness through contraposition was so culturally infiltrated, that it made its way into other facets of European culture such as advertising (McClintock 130). Even having abolished slavery in 1794, and as the cultural centre of Europe, Paris, France was at once a haven for freedom of black expression and a perpetuator of dehumanizing stereotyping of African peoples, especially fetishizing African
women (Sharpley-Whiting 15). As a result, the role of Aida becomes an intersecting point of potential multiplicities of body politics that underpin the narrative and the support or negate the opera space. The construction of the Manichean allegory depends on where and how blackness is visually spatialized on the stage (JanMohamed 65). In the Imaginary order, blackness is spatialized by marking the body through costume and gestural forms of racial performativity. On the other hand, in circumstances where blackness is spatialized figuratively, in the sense where the overall thematic of the staging focuses on the political racialization of marginalized peoples, the Manichean elements relate within the Symbolic order. The figurative shifts the perspective for reading the work more objectively, that is, the viewer can engage in a more thorough synthesis of the contextual elements of the music, narrative, as well as the staging, to create meaning (Knowles 19). Keeping in mind that European culture undermined other cultures based on the use-value of their ideologies to colonial interests, and the exchange-value of the capital they could produce the social-value ideologies of the native had to be quenched by colonialist thinking, so their bodies and land could be commoditized for its exchange-value (JanMohamed 60; McClintock 187). In her book *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock observed how persons or things that held both indigenous social-value and European exchange value were readily fetishized and commoditized by colonial economies. McClintock asserts that fetishism allowed for two outcomes that were integral to colonial dominance, “[f]irst, they could draw the unfamiliar and accountable cultures of the world into a systematic universe of negative value; second, they could represent this universe as deviant and thereby undervalue and negate it” (McClintock 187-188). We can then theorize how one might critique the cultural meanings of a work of art by assessing the ways in which it is useful or harmful to a particular group, on individual and social levels. We can also examine what social, material and cultural exchanges
are occurring through engagement with the work. On the surface, an economically driven approach to subjective and ephemeral art form such as opera might seem problematic, but I argue that it is mostly so if one considers the notion of economy as primarily tied to monetary gain, which it is not. Remember that it is the economy of the Manichean allegory that makes things (ideas, places, objects, etc.) accessible, replicable and sustainable. In capitalist economic systems, exchange-value and use-value are often at odds because the means of production is the ultimate commodity (JanMohamed 60).

How does this relate to the Manichean allegory at work in *Aida*? In as much as a social system is deemed more useful through physical labour, as in systems of institutional slavery, people are congruently commoditized through body politics. Furthermore, I propose that the Manichean allegory commoditizes blackness in literature and this commoditization also occurs through the labour of black bodies in dramatic performance. The Africanist presence is the commodity of blackness in art; it is a form of cultural capital. The use-value and the exchange-value of a commodity depends on the contexts of its production and consumption (Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* 124). To what end is seeing embodied blackness as abject useful? How does abject blackness generate social power and for whom? The Manichean allegory demonstrates that the commodity of blackness has use-value in that it performs a social function of exclusion. Additionally, the exchange-value of commoditized blackness is the ease of its dissemination regenerates political power of whiteness.

If stereotyping blackness in *Aida* supports the Manichean allegory, it increases the perception of the black woman on the opera stage as excessive and invasive much like in the works mentioned above of visual art (Fleetwood 10; Weheliye 33). When *Aida* manifests an unchallenged white supremacist narrative, it reifies this white supremacist ideal in and on the
bodies in performance and works in maintaining white dominance in the social consciousness. Furthermore, to hearken back to Edward Said’s criticism of *Aida*, the problems that he viewed with the work were not merely a matter of representation, but instead a lack of representation in the means of producing the work. For Said, *Aida* was an example of Europe’s continued commoditization of the non-European that only benefitted Europeans.

Hence, the fetishization and subsequent homogenization of non-European cultures and bodies fall into what I refer to as a “spectrum of blackness” in the cultural imagination and on the visual field of the stage. The spectrum of blackness is ordering in function and is both an object and a space that magnifies Manichean oppositions to whiteness. It also underscores the Manichean allegory at work in *Aida*. This stratification provides, to use Morrison's word, the "palette" through which the Africanist presence could be fabricated within three-dimensional spaces. Morrison argues that the meaning of racial difference of enslaved Africans in America was more powerful than the distinction of blackness itself (49). This meaning—when projected onto the abundance of black bodies, both enslaved and emancipated—acted counter to white social and political progress (Morrison 50).

*Make All Others Black*

In order to envision Africans within the conventional aesthetic standards of nineteenth-century audiences, I contend that colourism is used in *Aida’s* staging to stratify Africans into a spectrum of blackness to hide the diversity of African peoples (Fleetwood; Nelson 163). Specifically, the dark complexion of Ethiopians being typical of other sub-Saharan African groups made tailoring the phenotype of Egyptians toward whiteness necessary to uphold the Manichean allegory and embody the Africanist presence. The story’s parallels to the advancements of Europe into the Nile Valley and Ethiopia during the nineteenth-century made
*Aida* an enactment of European hegemony, but simultaneously enacted the production of race in Western culture (Gauthier and McFarlane-Harris 58). Furthermore, the political legitimization of Egypt depended on successfully personifying the symbolic power of whiteness through the Egyptians. To explore the commissioning of Verdi to create an “Egyptian” opera to legitimize Egypt as an economic power (Bourdieu 23), I will return to Bourdieu’s description of symbolic power, as a constitutive power “to conserve or to transform current classifications in matters of gender, nation, region, age, and social status [……] through the words used to designate or to describe individuals, groups or institutions” (23). These classifications form in the colonialist imagination, under the belief that legitimatization comes through civilizing the racialized other (JanMohamed 62). Thus, depicting Ethiopians as black and civilizing the Egyptians by portraying them as white, manifests the Africanist presence on the stage and is one such transformation that *Aida* the opera employs to ensure its legitimization in the canon of Western opera. Whitewashing Egypt may have been strategic in situating Egypt as a rising political
power, but this tactic dehistoricizes Egypt as a flourishing African nation thereby aligning it more closely with the ideal Europeanized ally. It also emphasizes the Manichean oppositions within the visual space of the stage and audience by iconizing Egyptian and Ethiopian bodies within the light and dark binary (Gilman 204).

Art historian Sander Gilman describes how this manifests throughout eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European visual arts. He states, "Rather than presenting the world, icons represent it… when individuals are shown within a work of art (no matter how broadly defined), the ideologically charged iconographic nature of the representation dominates" (204). Verdi, his consultant, Auguste Mariette, and his librettist, Antonio Ghislanzoni used Orientalist imagery appropriated from ancient Egyptian iconography for the stage to reflect a pseudo-Egyptian cultural milieu (Gauthier and McFarlane-Harris 57) since this reductive constitution of Africa was more palatable to European sensibilities. The process of transformation was complete when Egypt, an assemblage of Orientalist imagery, became an icon⁹ representing colonial dominance by its placement on white European bodies through costume and maquillage. In contrast, Aida and her fellow Ethiopians are given no cultural symbols, except the distinguishing visual factors of costume, skin colour, and the position of the conquered (Gauthier and McFarlane-Harris 64). This is most apparent at the end of the “Triumphal March” scene (Fig. 5) in which the Egyptian army has returned from successfully subduing the Ethiopian army. Aida’s father, King Amonasro and the conquered Ethiopians are presented as an assemblage of Africanist icons wild, exotic, monolithic and completely dominated.

**Isolating Blackness**

The opulent mass of white Egyptian bodies versus Aida's black, subjugated body is a common theme throughout the traditional staged performance (Fig. 5). Depending on how the
Manichean aspects of the visual staging unfold, Aida's isolation can be used to focus on her as a national martyr or to entrap her body within a racialized body politic, where a foreboding "white" Egyptian presence evokes a defeatist interpretation of her narrative. The frequent presence of Aida on stage as the sole dark-skinned person reinforces that she is truly trapped inside a world that would see her body dead before it would see it liberated\textsuperscript{10} (Morrison 8). Morrison describes this as the “impenetrable whiteness” that “appears with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control….” (33). Unable to break free from Egypt’s oppression and in surrendering her life to Radamès, Aida fulfills all of the representations of the allegory of the Imaginary order. Like her homeland, her body is conquered, colonized, and finally destroyed drawing an analogous relationship between the female body and a conquered land of “the native.” Depicting the imminence of death for the racialized woman through conquering and displacement is a pervasive tactic in Western hegemony that naturalizes the conflation of gender and racial hierarchies in Western hegemony that exists from the colonial periods to the present day (McClintock 23). It is in contrast to the white woman, manifested in Amneris, whose only power in a patriarchal monarchy exists in relationship to Aida, where her white privilege creates space for her. JanMohamed also explains Aida’s fate as annihilation of the native, also a typical ending for the non-European Other in the literature Manichean Allegory of the Imaginary order. He writes, “the debased native's lack of potential is a foregone conclusion, or if he is endowed with potentiality… then it is violently and irrevocably foreclosed before the novel ends” (62).

It is also important to note that until the twentieth-century, black performers were prohibited from performing in professional operatic houses. Therefore the marking of racial difference in performances of *Aida* influenced casting decisions contributing to the continued
erasure of actual black persons from opera practice in Europe and the Americas well into the twentieth-century (Gilman 204). This illustrates how the visuality of race in European cultural artifacts has been crucial to perpetuating systems of domination in contemporary social spaces. Wherever opera was performed in the colonized world, entrenched images of the racial other learned from Imaginary texts were seen in recognizable and retrievable iterations (JanMohamed 61), but every iteration compromised the subjectivities of black persons in opera who continue to be excluded, even to this day. Documentations on costume and staging notes show that while the text of the libretto of Aida maintains racial ambiguity, race concretized more purposefully through racial performativity, though blackface (Locke 109). Historically, when a white woman singer was cast as Aida, the common application of blackface presented a concise vision of two African peoples differentiated by race, while sanctioning the operatic stage for white bodies. If a white singer could be racialized through makeup, it eliminated the obligation to cast a black singer, thus privileging white performers, and maintaining the racial exclusiveness of operatic spaces.

Interrogating stereotypes, performativity and the other peripheral aspects of the operatic space for characteristics of allegory Imaginary of the order is key to disrupting hegemony at work in Aida. The Manichean allegory of the Symbolic order would employ a more historicized staging; costume, maquillage, and gesture would reflect cultural difference between the Egyptians and Ethiopians. Conversely, the Manichean allegory of the Imaginary order requires that as long Aida’s skin colour is black, the Egyptians should be depicted as white. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the dominant social perception of black people conflated any person of African descent with "slave" (Honour 50). Africanist staging ties the blackness of Aida's skin to her enslavement, and then to her female body as Other; the three together form an
icon of white European patriarchal dominance. It is a powerful counterpoint to a simulacrum of the "white Egyptian" that is not African. Consequently, in Aida, Aida's enslavement would have implied her blackness, and her blackness would have demanded her enslavement. The marking of blackness of Aida’s body consistently juxtaposed with the visible whiteness of Amneris’ body in staging Aida come to mean something in the visuality of the story that extends beyond the libretto or musical texts (Morrison 49). It recalls and reconstitutes the systems of dominance that have already been seen and lived within the social milieu.

**Schemas of Blackness**

I have previously discussed Susan M. Jaeger’s use of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “bodily schema” as the synthesis of bodily perception and cognition as it relates to the context of the present, and the poetics of the space within which the body is situated. Cultural theorist, Nadine Ehlers describes the body as a “schema” upon which “race is inscribed and through which race is transparently conveyed” (49). Both definitions intersect in that the body is perceived, understood, and contextualized within a body political paradigm, and then situated within space. Moreover, Ehlers articulates the following assertion, central to the arguments made in this thesis: “The subject becomes synonymous with the body, which functions as the disciplinary mechanism through which the social and legal position of the subject is defined and regulated, and it is this body that marks the parameters of subjectivity” (49). Additionally, by distinguishing between performativity and performance, the type of adaptation undertaken for the role of “Aida” can sustain or subvert problematic interpretations of the work (Ehlers 56; Johnson et al. 2007; Bourdieu “Social Space and Symbolic Power,” 23). Portraying the most visible of the Egyptians characters on stage as white, and the Ethiopians as black, the marking of race on and through Aida’s female body racializes her, and by extension, any non-European. Specifically
speaking, it is racializing Aida through the performative stereotyping of black bodies that creates an Africanist presence in the opera. As an African nation, it is completely illogical to portray Egypt, at any point in its history, as a white nation. This approach denies the presence of agency and dominance of black people in any African nation (since the Ethiopians are the conquered), which is a direct misrepresentation of African peoples.

As I have discussed previously, the canon of American literature use tactics derived from European hegemony, whereby the visibility of people of African descent comes to signify ideological, physical, and metaphysical oppositions to white superiority. The same is true for conventional operatic staging. Morrison’s phrase as mentioned earlier, the “demonizing and reifying the range of color on a palette” encapsulates how the hypervisibility of blackness foregrounds racist foundations of colonialist ideology through staging. Therefore, in the case of Aida, portraying Africanness is limited by the Africanist presence where blackness is managed and mitigated through whitewashing Africans and the painting of blackness onto female bodies.

African American mezzo-sopranos like Grace Bumbry (1937-) and Shirley Verrett (1931-2010) portraying Amneris create an even more challenging body politic because while they subvert their own exclusion, the process of legitimatization in opera eventually invalidates their presence. Here I will provide more cases as evidence of this invalidation. In the documentary, Aida’s Brothers and Sisters, these African American opera singers discuss the challenges and the triumphs of singing opera while black. When speaking on the subject of make-up, Bumbry describes a specific make-up regimen she undertakes for every role. Having a complexion one might liken to milk chocolate, Bumbry describes the various tints of make-up she used to lighten her skin for many of her roles. In an interesting coincidence, the colour she used for Amneris was Max Factor’s “Light Egyptian,” one of a collection of shades created specifically to make
white actresses look black or mixed-race (Glinton 2010). While this may seem inconsequential, the irony and the parallels are not to be overlooked; the product that Bumbry used to lighten her complexion was invented to erase her existence as a black woman on the operatic stage, and in the fictional Egyptian milieu of *Aida* (*Aida’s Brothers and Sisters* 1999). It makes blackness less legible in performance, while simultaneously referencing the fabricated absence of black bodies in Egypt. Why should her natural complexion seem out of place for Egyptian princess? Figure 6 shows acclaimed African American mezzo-soprano Shirley Verrett as Amneris with white Romanian soprano Virginia Zeani as Aida in full blackface; Zeani’s blackness is a prop. While Zeani’s blackened body juxtaposed by Verrett’s natural dark brown skin creates a simulation of race, the viewer’s knowledge of Zeani’s true whiteness effectually calls attention to both Aida’s and Verrett’s racialization.

Furthermore, if blackness is a prop on Zeani’s body, then is it possible that the audience could read Verrett’s actual body as a prop because of its inherent blackness?

Ehlers describes that effect of “[t]he passer illuminates that race is, essentially, a scopic regime because it relies on the ability to visually identify difference as the means by and through which to delineate subjects” (61).

Thus, the female body is objectified by
blackface and central to the Africanist presence in *Aida*. The female body is a canvas for examination and positions the surveillance of blackness in the narrative. When the black female subject represented in art becomes embodied on stage, it reconfigures meanings of and for the black woman in society. My next analysis will consider the ways *Aida’s* vocal musical score and narrative exoticize the female lead characters. How does the rivalry between Aida and Amneris reify the Manichean opposition within the vocal score? I will postulate that Verdi’s choice to use an Ethiopian woman as the main protagonist of this story enforces the interests of the work as a form of cultural capital. This will provide the musical analysis that will round out my final synthesis, a discussion about the effects of various iterations of black femaleness on the psyche and how this shapes the black woman’s experience of opera practice.
Chapter Three:

Musical Chiaroscuro and the Imagined Space of Narrative

I have discussed the implications of pitting a black Ethiopian woman against a white Egyptian woman with all other contrasting elements actualized through their racialized bodies in *Aida*. As the frame of the stage brings the racialized female characters of *Aida* into focus, it incarnates the Manichean oppositions and projects them into the social space of opera. Positioning the light versus dark opposition on the bodies of the two African female characters visually heightens chiaroscuro in the dramatic performance, enhancing the ideological and political underpinnings of the drama. These female characters carry the ideological baggage of white supremacist hegemony that pervaded nineteenth-century European arts and opera (Nelson 8). Their bodies become abstractions of chiaroscuro, symbols of opposition. At this, I will describe how the aesthetic principles of chiaroscuro cultivated in the visual arts are also manifested through musical representations in opera performance. Returning to performativity as the stylized repetition of acts which are constitutive productions of culturally normative behaviours (Butler 519), chiaroscuro in *Aida* demonstrates a vocal musical thematic that, like gesture, are intended to perform nuances of the identity of the character. The musical composition inverts the dark versus light symbolism through the singing that disrupts the Manichean oppositional meanings of chiaroscuro in the staging and positioning of bodies.

*Aida* employs chiaroscuro in the vocal musical aesthetic attributes and, in keeping with convention, informs and coheres the overall aesthetic of the performance (The Genius of Verdi). Notes on staging from the creators describe the parameters of convention for *Aida* that shows a clear visual aesthetic practice embodied through the operatic work that differentiates civilized Egypt from savage Ethiopia (Locke 117). My goal in this chapter is to articulate how
Chiaroscuro, in the vocal score in tandem with the libretto, establishes a narrative space that interrogates and critiques the Manichean oppositions. I suggest that this interrogation presents a clear preliminary pathway to disrupting the work of the allegory of the Imaginary order by using the vocal score to invert balance of power between masculine white master and feminine black slave depicted on the stage.

**Chiaroscuro Feminizing the Voice**

Voice type is a significant part of understanding representation in operatic performance (Cotton 153) since one’s voice type has a direct impact on what kinds of roles they are physiologically capable of singing (Cotton 154). While all opera is considered in the realm of drama, there are some voice types whose particular aural characteristics lend to a more dramatic sound (Mitchells 47). Opera performance traditionally attaches specific voice types to certain kinds of characters, especially stock characters. The aesthetic value of the nineteenth-century created a vocal typology that, for opera composers, provided a replicable methodology for creating vocal scores that produced affective responses to the characters (The Genius of Verdi). Much like the iconography in western art, Musicologist K Mitchells writes about how this vocal mythos functions within operatic performance:

Our propensity to hear character differences between high and low notes, and correspondingly between high and low voices, reaches beyond a merely auditory realm in so far as we find in them expressive qualities which we can also experience through other senses, and which connote characteristics of the external world and the inner world of the human psyche. (47)

Additionally, Mitchells goes on to describe the ways voice type evokes feelings based on the high overtones and low undertones the listener hears. The soprano voice type is the benchmark
for depicting the most acceptable conventions of femininity. With the ability for this voice type to sing very high pitches with stamina, comfort, and agility, the soprano voice is often described with words associated with light such as “clear,” “bright” and “sparkling” (Mitchells 53). Mezzo-soprano voice types sing more comfortably in deeper tones than her soprano counterpart. The mezzo-soprano voice type is typically described with allusions to darkness, but also sensual and textural adjectives like “sultry” and “heavy.” Female characters with the mezzo-soprano voice type are often depicted as seductive or sinister, but also at times as older. Characters with mezzo-soprano are often linked with deviant sexuality, especially hypersexuality, mysticism, and masculinity11 (Johnson, et al. 87; Mitchells 54). “Heaviness” of the voice connotes the performative and descriptive contrasts between heavy and light that also speaks to how the voice evokes feelings, but the body experiences corresponding sensations of weight (as in light-heartedness being both bright and not heavy) (Mitchells 48). This musical framework for the voice reinforces a dramatic perspective where the embodiments of the good versus evil trope are paralleled, manipulated and conflated with lightness and darkness. Paralleling nineteenth-century pseudoscience that used physiognomy to presume one’s character or intelligence, vocal musical tropes relied on the premise that a character was to be understood through acoustic frequency of their voice (The Genius of Verdi 2010). While this could appear to be an inconsequential factor, its convention in traditional opera is significant enough to indicate otherwise (Van 98). This practice embeds the notion of chiaroscuro within the vocal text itself, which then becomes embodied through the performance.

In *Aida*, the characters can be depicted somatically in three ways: first, through performance of voice type, secondly through costume, and the third through racial performativity (Gauthier and McFarlane-Harris 56). Aida’s aria in Act I scene iv, “Ritorna vincitor,” and
Amneris’ chamber scene in Act II scene I, are two scenes in which the music presents dynamic contrasts light and dark through a reversal of vocal conventions. Yet, an analysis of both scenes shows that even when the inversion of the female voices could subvert racializing the light and dark paradigm, it is undercut by the use of the previously discussed Orientalism and exoticism applied the visual elements of costuming and staging.

“Ritorna vincitor,” Aida’s first aria, is a monologue of her internal conflict. As she passionately sings for a victory for her beloved Radamès, she expresses equal frustration that such a victory would mean defeat for her father, Amonasro, and their people (Act 1 scene iv). The music of the aria follows the full range of emotions in three parts. In this first half of the aria, a zealous Aida sings, “Ritorna vincitor! E dal mio labbro usci l’empia parola!” (Return the conqueror! And from my lips came that impious word!). Using the full breadth of the soprano vocal range, she describes the ominous details of her situation in a full-bodied lower registration that borders on speaking. There is a declamatory, militaristic style that conveys the weight of her turmoil with a musical syntax that parallels a warfare march. A war is happening within Aida’s psyche as she is torn between two conflicting desires. Here, an impassioned Aida is anxious to be rescued and avenge her people, but that comes at the expense of her love. In the second phase of the aria, she comes to terms with her emotional state, and the music takes a more solemn tone. Her frustration is conveyed through a spiraling melody of descending notes that evoke her growing despair. Finally, the aria closes with a plea for the gods to take pity on her suffering (Price 1966). The melody in this section is full of sadness, yet the ascending notes allude to some vestige of hope for redemption. In “Ritorna vincitor,” the soprano is not idealized in musical levity. By singing the soprano voice in the lower vocal registrations, Aida conveys emotional turmoil without infantilizing the character; there is no intimation of high-pitched vocalizing
typically associated with coquettishness; however, I would describe the rich undertones of Aida’s dramatic vocal composition as imbued with depth and a steadfast power that is a departure from patriarchal tropes that are often portray female characters as complacent victims or erratic with madness. The emotionally contrasting dynamics in “Ritorna Vincitor” relies on a decidedly “darker” sound to enhance the complexity of the character (Price 1966).

The emotionally contrasting dynamic in “Ritorna Vincitor” relies on a decidedly “darker” sound to enhance the complexity of the character (Price 1966).

The inverse is true for Aida’s antagonist, Amneris. As Aida ends the first acts in melancholy unrest, the second act opens with the chorus singing a love song about Radamès lead by Amneris, “Chi mai fra gl'inni ei plausi” (“Who is between hymns and praises;” my trans; Act 2 scene i). Amneris, in her chambers, is being adorned and entertained by a chorus of slave girls who sing of Radamès’ victory. She sings in between the chorus sections in a romantic beckoning to Radamès, “Ah! Vieni, amor mio, m'inebria, fammi beato il cor” (“Oh! Come, my love, I am intoxicated, let my heart be happy;” my translation; Act 2 scene i) and later, “Vieni, amor mio, ravvivami. D'un caro accento ancor” (“Come to me my love, and revive me, even with a tender word;” my translation; Act 2 scene i). The duet is sung in a higher vocal range atypical for a mezzo-soprano that a soprano would be comfortable singing. At this moment, as opposed to singing in the lower registers to allude to sexual passion typical of mezzo-sopranos, Amneris is lighthearted and romantic singing soaring high notes, a portrayal usually reserved for sopranos. It is another side of a character that was, until this point, portrayed as sinister. Verdi’s composing the passage in a higher vocal range evokes the sentimentality of Amneris’ love for Rademès and conveys heady infatuation. A women’s chorus of maids accompanies her, creating a vocally luscious romance in the song and allowing a mezzo-soprano a rare ethereal vocal quality that is uncommon within this opera or in most other soprano/mezzo-soprano dyads (Van 98).
Even basking in the light of love, the Africanist presence emerges in middle of the act with the “Dance of the Moorish slaves.” It resembles a dance called moresca, which was in fashion among the fifteenth century Italian and German elite classes and ultimately experienced a revival in the nineteenth century. Morescas parodied Moorish slaves by costuming white performers in blackface (Taylor 21). The levity of Amneris’s love song is disrupted by the insertion of this Africanist presence (that is also Orientalist), but whether the presence is associative to Amneris as the villainous seductress, or as the counterpoint to her somatic whiteness is open to interpretation. In the first instance, the Moors as savage other could be a representation of Amneris’ internal malice or that of Imperialist Egypt as conquerors. In the latter case, that moresca found a way into the score and libretto of Aida shows a cogent use of the chiaroscuro aesthetic to depict racialized bodies. The black “savage” is juxtaposed with white (read European) “civility” that manifests a white supremacist power dynamic in the narrative on stage. The slaves are understood as black because they are identified as Moors, Northern Africans who are often depicted in portraiture for their dark skin (Fig. 8). In this scene, they are further racialized through performative gestures. Halfway through the Act 2 scene I, a group of slaves, played by ballet dancers, engage in dance that was described in the original production notes as “lively,” yet “grotesque” and unrefined (Gauthier and McFarlane-Harris 65), evoking morescas that were used in tandem with the buffoons between acts of plays in early modern Italian in theatre13 (Taylor 21). If makeup is not
used to depict race, then traditionally the costumes of the Moors and Ethiopians are made to look and act primitive and exotic (Fig. 8) (Gauthier and McFarlane Harris 67; Locke 117).

As the scene progresses and Aida finally enters, Amneris tricks Aida into confessing her love for Radamès. The preceding scene sets the tone for this tension of the Manichean opposition of racial whiteness and blackness. In effect, Aida’s skin colour simultaneously foregrounds her race and connects her body to the enslaved Moors, symbolizing her lack of agency in her situation under white Egyptian rule. The contrast between light and dark is robustly depicted through the black slaves in service to, and under the gaze of a white ruler. In this staging of the Imaginary order, the scene also creates an atypical moment for a mezzo-soprano, where the high and light vocal tonality of Amneris aligns with the tonality of her physical representation. Between Aida and Amneris, the chiaroscuro is reconfigured through the visibly racialized bodies of the singers in each role so that the bodies of the female characters drive the racialized subtext of the plot. The effect of depicting Aida and Ethiopians in blackface on the operatic stage acutely parallels the use of chiaroscuro in *Olympia*. The assemblages of this scene form an iconography of the black female that Gilman identified in western art:

Even with a modest nod to supposedly mimetic portrayals, it is apparent that, when individuals are shown within a work of art (no matter how broadly defined), the ideologically charged iconographic nature of the representation dominates. And it
dominates in a very specific manner, for the representation of individuals implies the creation of some greater class or classes to which the individual is seen to belong. (204)

Thus, again it can be seen how the visual stage of the opera became a social stage to show the pseudo white Egyptian dominance in the “Orient” (Gauthier and McFarlane-Harris 53). As I have previously discussed, the context of the economic relationship between Europe and Egypt informed the visual content on the operatic stage. The result had to be a whitewashing of Egyptian identity, with the rest of black Africa left to fade into obscurity. The conquered peoples who are overtaken by whiteness reiterates the ways black Ethiopian, and Moor bodies are maundered around the stage as slaves and also, erased from the visual field of the operatic narrative by whitewashing the Egyptians.

In summary, as embodied chiaroscuro occurs in Aida when two black and white subjects share the visual field, and in the vocal music elements in the opera. As the marking of race happens on the female bodies in performance, Verdi’s vocal compositions for the female characters can challenge meanings, or make multiple meanings in a work. K. Mitchells writes, “An ideal vocal impersonation of an operatic character requires not only a voice of the right pitch and quality but also a congenial individual timbre which brings out the distinctiveness of the particular figure” (55). Verdi’s vocal score does much to support conventional vocal typecasting, using chiaroscuro in musical representation by using it as a tool to convey the emotional development of the characters. However, the way racial binary is realized on the stage informs how the characters in the dramatic production can subvert the conventions of embodied and musical good and evil that undermine the integrity of the narrative elements of Aida. The vocal typecasting follows tradition, meaning the opposition between the soprano as the protagonist and the mezzo-soprano as the antagonist is maintained. However, the relationship between
chiaroscuro in the vocal text and the staged work presents in an unconventional way by skewing prevailing cultural perspectives on dominance, race, and nationalism through the interactions between the female bodies on stage. The mezzo-soprano Amneris in her treachery is implicated by her Egyptianness as Orientalist other, while the depiction of Egyptians with white skin clearly connects their identities to whiteness. Since it is the visibility of race that highlights the power dynamic taking place in the plot, the inversion of meaning in the black and white Manichean oppositions in *Aida* resists a reading of the work solely as an allegory of the Imaginary order.

As argued above, iterations of the Africanist presence embodied in operatic performance impose perceptions of white supremacy on the social world. The implications of pitting a black Ethiopian woman against a white Egyptian woman actualized all the other contrasting elements through their racialized bodies, thus writing the light versus dark opposition on the bodies of the two African female characters (Dallery 293-294). Using race in this way to iconize women’s bodies demonstrates the surveillance that the patriarchal gaze imposes on women’s bodies, while it brings with it the ideological baggage of the white supremacist hegemony that pervaded nineteenth-century European arts and opera (Nelson 8). Amneris’ enslavement of her Ethiopian counterpart subjects Aida to panoptical surveillance in the plot. Simultaneously, the practice of blackface and fetishization of the black female body enforces that same panoptical surveillance on black women in opera and other social spaces (Ehlers 56; Sharpley-Whiting 121). Blackface demonstrates how race is the reduction of cultural and ethnic difference to visual, physical attributes. Moreover, the practice of blackface suggests that race is movable and thus potentially pervasive, reinforcing underlying Western preoccupations with purity (McClintock 211; McKittrick 9). This preoccupation reiterates in language through the notion of blackness “rubbing off,” versus being “washed” by civilizing whiteness (McClintock 215). Thus, the
central visuality of blackness created through blackface ruptures all other mechanisms of the opera as a cohesive work: Aida’s narrative is lost, and her skin colour becomes the visual code through which the story is filtered (Foster 235). It connects her enslavement to her race on the stage while dehistoricizing the Africanness of both women to validate the supremacy of the colonial conqueror over the humanity of an exotic Other. The subjugation that positions Aida under the panoptic white gaze parallels a panoptic white gaze that continues beyond the world of the Imaginary and follows black bodies in Western societies of the past and present.

**Foreboding Bodies in Forbidden Love**

I have discussed extensively how the theatre space is a context for practicing the white gaze, but it also privileges the male gaze. As myopic incarnations of black femaleness reiterate throughout the opera, and they potentially proliferate in social interactions. Binding together these various ideological projections of blackness on the female body—blackness that is hypervisual, objectifying and negative—is sexual violence. Sexual violence is implicated in Aida’s enslavement, where Western forms of chattel slavery tie the black women’s reproductive ability to her value as a producer of more slaves (McKittrick 80). Similarly, feminist cultural theorist bell hooks discusses how popular culture’s reduction of black women’s bodies to the sum of its parts is a form of violence that emphasizes these bodies as expendable (hooks, *Black Looks* 64). We recall that from the nineteenth century Europe when the term “slave” was equated and conflated with a person of African descent—a black person. It is significant that in the opera’s plot, Aida has been captured and enslaved, not imprisoned. Even as depictions of enslaved Africans in Western visual art were intended as abolitionist propaganda, this type of imagery spatialized black Africans perpetually conquered. Hence, referring to Aida as a slave as opposed to a prisoner of war has implications that illustrate how connotations of language
spatialize blackness. The way this spatialization plays out in the plot parallels the ways in which black women’s geographies have been dictated by racialization and sexualization (McKittrick 40, 57, 75). Furthermore, hooks comments extensively on the history visual representations of the black female body as an icon of hypersexuality in visual culture. She observes that “[s]ince black female sexuality has been represented in racist/sexist iconography as more free and liberated, many black women singers, irrespective of the quality of their voices, have cultivated an image which suggests they are sexually available and licentious” (hook 63).

Oversexualization, violence, and expendability unfold in the narrative of Aida, but I will delve deeper into how the context of the Imaginary or Symbolic Manichean allegory affects the way this is read. For example, Radames’ opening aria, “Celeste Aïda” in which he declares his desire for Aïda, establishes the male gaze in action by singing the following:

Celeste Aïda, forma divina, Heavenly Aïda, divine shape,
Mistico serto di luce e fior, mystic garland of light and flowers,
Del mio pensiero tu sei regina, you are queen of my thoughts,
Tu di mia vita sei lo splendor, you are the splendour of my life
Il tuo bel cielo vorrei ridarti, I would like to give you your sky back,
Le dolci brezze del patrio suol: the sweet breeze of the fatherland:
Un regal serto sul crin posarti, to put a regal garland on your heart
Ergerti un trono vicino al sol, to build up a throne for you next to the sun

He speaks of her shapeliness, of adorning her, of giving her gifts; she is the splendor of his life, she is his idol. What is compelling about “Celeste Aïda” is that this kind of idealization of the female body is typically reserved for white women. Radames’ passion for Aïda is tainted by his complicity in her oppression. Aïda acknowledges this contradiction in the aforementioned
“Ritorna Vincitor,” yet later on in the Triumphal March scene, as Aida and the conquered Ethiopians plead for their lives, Radamès sings, “Il dolor che in quel volto favella al mio sguardo la rende più bella; ogni stilla del pianto adorato nel mio petto ravviva l'amor” (The sorrow, which speaks in that face makes her more lovely in my sight; every beloved tear she sheds reawakens love in my breast.) (Act II sc 4). Even as Aida laments her country and pleads for her life, instead of offering compassion Radamès remains fixated on his own sexual desire. Radamès continues to believe that a relationship with Aida is possible, as long as she remains in Egypt, but refuses to acknowledge that also means her enslavement. It is not until Aida is met with the possibility of being executed that Radamès begins to acknowledge the reality of the situation: that their proximity is contingent on her oppression. His infatuation within the context of Aida’s enslavement demonstrates the ways in which his perspective is characterized by “patriarchal ways of seeing and white colonial desires for lands, free labour, and racial-sexual domination” that “rest on a tight hierarchy of power and knowledge that is spatially organized” (McKittrick 40). Radamès organization of knowledge is inherently white, masculine and visual, resulting in the objectification of Aida, her people, and negation of the spaces they occupy (McKittrick 40). All notions of Ethiopia essentially become congealed within the visuality of Aida’s body. McKittrick’s example of visual contingent of subjugation in enacted as Radamès’ sense of place is dependant on seeing Aida’s present bondage. So although he eventually betrays his position to save Aida, his hand is forced by the prospect of her execution, or erasure, and not by an immanent chance to emancipate her. The extent of his narcissistic delusion is seen in the libretto of Act 3 scene 2, in which he sings:

Nel fiero anelito di nuova guerra
To the fierce call of new war
Il suolo etiope si ridestò
the land of Ethiopia has awakened once
i tuoi già invadono la nostra terra, your people already invade our land.
io degli egizii duce sarò. I shall command the Egyptian armies.
Fra il suon, fra i plausi della vittoria, Amidst the noise and plaudits of victory.
al re mi prostro, gli svelo il cor I shall prostrate myself before the King, and reveal my heart to him.
sarai tu il serto della mia gloria, You shall be my crowning glory,
vivrem beati d'eterno amor. we shall live blessed by eternal love.

In response to this, Aida protests that Amneris’s fury would result in her and her father’s execution, and it is only when her father Amonasro offers him a place on a throne does Radamès finally relent in the name of “love.” While Radamès eventually decides to flee with Aida, it comes too late for them both, and he is imprisoned for treason. Lamenting the betrayal of his own nation, yet, unwilling to renounce Aida to live with Amneris without honour, Radamès chooses to die in his conviction. This is presented as a romantic gesture, but what is perhaps most preposterous about Radamès’ ideal is that he expects to have victory over Ethiopia and still take Aida as his, “crowning glory” essentially making her a spoil of war. Radamès never explains how he intends to help Aida to freedom so again; we see how Radamès’ identity is tied to imperial glory and possession of Aida as a spoil of war. The reason for Radamès’ reluctance is due to McKittrick poignantly describes as the sense of place for the white patriarchal man being dependent on seeing the black woman inscribed as “worthy of captivity, punishment, and objectification; her bodily codes produce her slave master’s surroundings” (40). Here we return to the economy of the Manichean allegory; marginalizing Aida's black femaleness manifests Egypt's white imperialist patriarchy. Amneris’ expressions of remorse are for Radamès' fate, but
not Aida who, for all her suffering, remained innocent, reflects the positionality of the white woman in white imperialist patriarchy who can preserve her privilege. Even though patriarchy limits her power, she still has someone to subjugate, the black woman (hooks *Ain’t I a Woman*, 122). Radamès’ ultimate renouncement of his privilege in order to love Aida is indicative of Verdi’s sympathetic approach to the Ethiopian portrayal, but it still clearly upholds patriarchal messaging. In Radamès, Verdi undoes the trope of the heroic white saviour since Radamès’ alliance with the Other strips him of power, civilizing influence, and ultimately his life. This violent ending is common to the colonialist Manichean Allegory of the Imaginary order.

JanMohamed describes this trope in the following quote, “In the colonialist fiction, on the other hand, either the debased native's lack of potential is a foregone conclusion or, if he is endowed with potentiality [...] then it is violently and irrevocably foreclosed before the novel ends” (69). Resistance to colonialist infiltration is met with death by execution of the racialized other and her ally.

*Extensions of Identity, Deterritorializing the Self*

Northrop Frye brings art into the formation of identity through the idea that “Art begins as soon as I don't like this' turns into 'this is not the way I could imagine it’” (13). Consequently, reimagining the Self in relation to or within the work reimagines the work of art. I suggest that this is why in any given opera the voice types of the singers should not be the sole focus. In consideration of Knowles’ theories around cultural materialist semiotics I previously referenced, I argue that the voice and the music are only two identifiers of character that must cohere with the other physical aspects of the performance. One might hear the voice and express a particular musical aesthetic preference, but the visual elements must also complement that aesthetic to enhance the narrative. As these work together in the imagination of the viewer, the voice is
contextualized adding greater nuance to the characterization. Nevertheless, what opera directors need to understand is that using blackness to provide context for characterization is racist. This method measures individual interpretations of the roles against articulations of codified blackness, Africanist stereotypes. Consequently, this absorbs subjective dramatic interpretations within the Africanist presence and demoralizes black performers. In this sense, art can be seen as an external territorializing of the imagination, expanding the territory of the Self. Therefore, in a colonialist mindset, expanding the territory of the Self through art only occurs through usurping the subjectivity of the Other to ensure superiority. For as Fanon wrote, “[i]t is the racist who creates his inferior” (69). However, decolonizing the arts could come through connecting with the Other, to create landing sites of potentialities (Manning 2006). Philosophers Erin Manning and Brian Massumi suggest that a landing site is a field of potential where whatever happens is articulated through an agreement between the body and the space it occupies. They write that, “The site is in the process of apportioning itself out, as the body is apportioning itself to it. The site lands itself for the body, as much as the body lands the site” (Manning & Massumi 449). They also say that in a landing site, “for anything in particular to happen, a particular expanse must be taken” (450). Hence, it can be seen how decolonizing the arts aligns with the notion of the landing site through the mutual and reciprocal expansions of subjectivity and space.

If the Self is not permitted to expand within a space, particularly as one limited by hegemony, it has the potential to produce traumatic results on the psyche. Moreover, if art can create spaces of exclusion, it can also create spaces of belonging by affirming the Self-Other dialectic. Deleuze and Guattari write, “each articulation has a code and a territoriality; therefore each possesses both form and substance” during the process of becoming, things are stratified, or brought together, and territorialized, spaced together according to the articulations and attributes
of the strata (41). Although the performing artist makes art out of the imagining of identities
different than the Self, a personal identity disconnected from the Self presents a precarious
ontological position for the individual. On the former point, the precariousness created out of the
incongruence of identity and the Self, Fanon describes this as the social reality of black
individual in a white supremacist society and explains the effects of racial performativity.
Furthermore, I have previously mentioned that unless the Other is degraded, the notion of a
white identity is diminished in the white imagination. As colonialist expansion deterritorializes
space of the Other, a white identity emerges consequentially at the expense of selfhood; for
again, how can one articulate the Self without the Other? Weheliye and McKittrick both
reference Sylvia Wynter’s “theories of Man” to describes how hierarchies of power created by
modalities of humanness disrupt the dialectic between the Self and the Other and facilitates what
Wynter calls, “the over-representation of Man” (Weheliye 35; McKittrick 123). Weheliye writes:

[R]acialization figures as a master code within the genre of the human represented by
western Man, because its law-like operations are yoked to species-sustaining
physiological mechanisms in the form of a global color line—-instituted by cultural laws
so as to register in human neural networks—that clearly distinguishes the good/life/fully-
human from the bad/death/not-quite-human. (38)

For those who hold the balance of power, white men, all others exist only as “cases by which
Man can demarcate himself as the universal human” (Weheliye 35). I argue that the notion of
“whiteness” is intended to hide all that is deemed negative about the human experience (bad,
mortality, abjection) by associating these with an imaginary notion of blackness. Furthermore,
white supremacy suppresses the identities of the Other in ways that make it difficult to foster a
constructive dialectic between the Self in the Other, thus breeding abjection in the white identity
In the fear of the Other, white supremacy produces a self-fulfilling prophecy of abjection towards the Self. Under these circumstances Kristeva describes the Self as “weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, find[ing] the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject” (5). Therefore, the seeing of embodied blackness is conflated with the inevitable limitations of humanness that conflict with white supremacist worldview. Thus, in narrative forms like literature and opera, Manichean oppositions evoke blackness to incite tension that is tempered by the Africanist presence. It is the psychic projection of compulsive narcissism of white cultural identity that marks corporeal blackness with its own negation.

**Reading, Spacing, and Performative Blackness = White Selfhood**

As the process of racializing non-white bodies in the social schema happens through white supremacist thinking, the mindset of the white Self is reified and then situated through the presence of the abject non-white Other. For this purpose, racial performativity gives political blackness a materiality of presence that can be reified, reiterated and imposed on the body or in social space (Fleetwood 6). Thus all persons within the racialized schema learn to “read” a body as raced instead of individual, particularly through corporeal blackness and in proximity to whiteness. Hence, I propose that it becomes difficult for the white person to self-identify because the lens of the white psyche relies on seeing oppression of the racialized Other. The dialectic between Self and Other in literature plays out in similarly performative ways that are pervasive as economical tactics in the production of race in society (JanMohamed 81). It also produces a void in the performance of narrative in that racial performativity hinders the development of non-oppressive characterizations of white persons, while it sanctions black persons to marginal representations, or erases them altogether. Furthermore, to humanize the black female character
in the narrative is to acknowledge the subjectivity of like individuals in society (McKittrick 19). Nevertheless, the degradation of the African/black person makes them an object, a canvas onto which negative aspects of the Self can be projected (JanMohamed 67). Hence, to return to Charmaine Nelson’s analysis, I posit that the perception of pervasive corporeal blackness that made non-African/black bodies illegible in *Les quatres parties*, was not Africanness, but Africanism created by the homogeneity of white supremacist colonial ideology (JanMohamed 67; McKittrick 20). In the name of conquest, the diversity of European indigeneity becomes assimilated into a singular white identity. Disconnected from the Self in the presence of difference, “the Self becomes a prisoner of the projected image” (JanMohamed 86).

Consequently, difference that is seen is ascribed with the characteristics of the Self that remain suppressed. It is a form of narcissism that conflates the shortcomings of the Self, with inherent and inevitable loss of the Self (JanMohamed 67). I have established that, like many works of the traditional canon of Western literature, the production of opera has been rooted in self-preservation of white supremacist hegemony. Additionally, I propose that any narrative that depicts unchallenged Western notions of racial hierarchy is a white supremacist representation, and whiteness in such a work is always oppressive. The seeing in art, the reading in literature, and the embodiment in performance are oppressive iterations and racial performativity on stage is intrinsically connected to the commoditized reenactment of the rules of social expression (Ehlers 56). My position is that the line between fiction and actuality is easily blurred in performance for the white gaze because white bodies have their privilege through spatial fluidity that homogeneity affords them. That is, the Western narrative tradition presents the assumption that white people can and should exist in any space regardless of an intimate knowledge of or history in said space. It accepts the supremacy of whiteness as fact. That is not to say that the
white performer is incapable of knowing the difference between “real” and “make-believe,” but I will bring this point back to *Aida*. When no one questions the validity of depicting of white Egyptians occupying an African space, whether fiction or fact, this is not only demonstrative of white privilege, it upholds white hegemony. I further argue that the constancy of this method of interrogation is crucial to what makes artistic representation equitable, comprehensible, and generative towards new ideas. Racially and gendered nondiscriminatory artistic interpretation depends on the rigorous critique of representations of white gendered identities in relationship to non-white gendered identities, how these manifest visually and how visuality shifts balances of power in space. This assignment of disciplined behaviours onto bodies is how the visual field in performance creates marginal social spaces with white identities at the centre (Ehlers 52, 56).

How does the black female performer acquire the power to make groups, in this case, as a cultural producer of opera in any capacity? Bourdieu’s answer is the group decides based on agents who can speak, but the black performer is actively silenced by the group (“Social Space, Symbolic Power,” 24). I have established the ways in which the white gaze projects onto racialized peoples, preventing the group from recognizing black opera performers as relevant. I previously stated that symbolic power to create social spaces is dependent on two factors: symbolic capital and symbolic efficacy. Symbolic capital is the credibility that and empowers a performer toward recognition as an authority in the social spaces that opera can exist. It legitimatizes through a process of institutionalization. Symbolic efficacy requires these to have a material relationship to the group, referentially or concurrently, so that it the group believes in the relevance of the performer. Accordingly, developing symbolic efficacy poses significant challenges for black performers in that the somatically black body conflicts with the symbolic power of the opera space. An artist can obtain the education, training and performance of opera;
they can learn the etiquette, vernacular and any other behaviours associated with opera subculture and these all contribute to the singer’s symbolic capital. When put against a white performer, blackness is the detrimental factor to the symbolic efficacy of the performer. Consequently, the material reality of racism, which prevents the power to make groups or construct social spaces such as opera institutions, is complemented by the symbolic reality of the Africanist presence; both of work together to stabilize white identity (Ehlers 65).

**Assembling Black Venus on the Opera Stage**

Thus far, I have Verdi’s *Aida* to present how aesthetic conventions in opera exist on a continuum of racist and sexist stereotypes in Western visual art. I have also explored the ways in which the aesthetic in visual art occurs throughout *Aida* through racial performativity and musical composition, but also suggested that the musical composition can also be the first means of subverting stereotypes in the visual field of the stage. I have used two literary theories, Africanism and the context of the Manichean allegory, to present how opera narratives can be a formulated, systematized and efficient medium through which the most pervasive white supremacist patriarchal ideologies are promoted. By synthesizing the Manichean allegory and Africanism with social and political theories of space I will examine how the construction of race in art and Western social consciousness also constructs social space. From this examination, I have deduced that the history of Western arts demanded racialized staging conventions in theatrical performances. Adherence to this is where the political power of opera becomes apparent through *Aida* (Taylor 15).

To how the Manichean allegory influences spatial contexts through narrative, I will now discuss in ethnographic terms how racialization territorializes by conflating the attribute of corporeal blackness with spatialized blackness; whereby, blackness is both the margin and a
territory. Fanon said, “For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” and that “the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself” (Fanon; *White Skin, Black Masks*, 83 emphasis mine). He also wrote that the consciousness of the black body as a negating entity causes this relationship between the black and white person, is characterized by distortions of blackness that structure the lived experience of black persons into a definitive dialectic between the black body and the world (83). In this dialectic, the relationship between the black person and the white person is simultaneously the space of blackness that the white person dare not cross, lest they lose their whiteness and by extension social worth (86). As the white self is developed, a social schematic that justifies the various forms of violence that is depicted in *Aida* emerges. Thus I propose that articulation of the Africanist presence in a performance of *Aida* imposes liminality on the black artist both as artist and spectator.

I wrote of the derogatory racially coded language used to describe the black female in Jean Baptiste-Carpeaux’s sculpture work, *Les quatre parties du monde* revealed the entrenched impression of abject black femaleness to the elite of French High Art. French artistic representations of the black female subject provided profoundly visceral on cultural discourse on visual black female corporality in social spaces. The language used to describe black women fed into key aspects of the cultural fascination with the other, in particular, black Africans. Out of this cultural discourse arises the image of the “Black Venus.” When Africanism is projected onto the black female body, it creates another dynamic of otherness that further marginalizes the black woman (Gilman 212). About this cultural studies theorist T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting wrote, “Desire for knowledge, and thus mastery of blacks and women, led to the creation of racist-sexist ideologies, images (sexual savages and prostitutes), and institutions (slavery and motherhood) to
produce and sustain the illusion of realism, of absolute truth, thereby effecting mastery of otherness” (Sharpley-Whiting 6). She further states that black women embody the dynamics of racial and sexual alterity that incite primal feeling in “European (French) men.” As a result, the Black Venus represents the sexualized savage, in the nineteenth-century collective imagination (Gilman 212; Sharpley-Whiting 6). The image of this figure is threaded throughout European cultural imagination evoking the transatlantic slave trade, the industrialization of Europe, and with the rise of opera as a popular and prominent art form of during the nineteenth-century, juxtaposed representations abject racial otherness with the civilized colonial subject. However, beneath the veneer of cultural capital, Black Venus represents the various facets of systemic violence brought upon black women. Her blackness is reframed and re-spatialized within each framework she is presented. As Fanon states, the idea of restrictive blackness must be overcome in social spaces. In colonialist spaces, the commodity of blackness is a mark that can be repeated, moved, but must not be readily erased because of how it constructs the spaces that black women occupy, and disciplines the woman’s body within these spaces (Ehlers 56). The movement of blackness parallels the forced mobility/migration of postcolonial and decolonized black peoples. Reclaiming corporal blackness for the black woman deterritorializes the white gaze away from Fig. 9 Sartjee the Hotentot Venus. Unknown Artist. Source: http://www.britishmuseum.org/
the black female subject. Blackness then becomes a visual attribute, not a territorializing force. Ehlers speaks of “fiction of race” as the ability for the racialized person to pass through social groups that negate that racialization is based to the failure of the body “to articulate the racial truth” ascribed to it (56). The result could be that the individual gains power to refuse to self-discipline because at a corporeal level, they disrupt the restrictions racism imposes upon them (56). The “racial truths” established in society, reified in Aida through marking the body contribute to perceptions of seeing black women in operatic space, that flowed into the twentieth century opera culture in Europe and beyond. In “Black Venus, White Bayreuth: Race, Sexuality, and the Depoliticization of Wagner in Postwar West Germany,” musicologist and cultural studies scholar Kira Thurman presents a compelling exposition about the national controversy around the first black woman to sing at Bayreuth Opera Festival in 1961, Grace Bumbry. Thurman’s analysis of the social rhetoric and discourse around Bumbry’s debut exemplifies the reification and reiteration of the Africanist presence imposed on the body of the black woman in opera performance. It also demonstrated the power of the Manichean allegory in shaping the thoughts of the viewing audience. To create a Modernist production of the Wagnerian opera, Tannhäuser (1845), Wagner’s son, Wieland's goal was to deliberately use Grace Bumbry’s black female body as a counterpoint to white female purity to apply Brechtian alienation techniques (Verfremdung) (Thurman 614). Verfremdung was created by, “transforming the Nordic goddess into a completely unfamiliar image, a black woman” (Thurman 614). Instead of a Western goddess, Wieland wanted an “Asiatic Astarte.” Even his language recalls Orientalism, showing the conflation of that concept with blackness. Thurman shows how this casting in this cultural moment of German operatic history, still refers back to the image of the Black Venus in nineteenth-century French spectacle embodied in the Khoikhoi woman Saartjie Baartman, who
was exploited under the monikers, Hottentot Venus or Black Venus (Fig. 10). While the Venus figure is the regarded as the Roman Goddess of love and beauty (Fig. 11), she was also known as the protector of prostitutes and often depicted nude in art. Regarding the Black Venus Sharpley-Whiting states:

It is the latter image of prostitution, sexuality, and danger that reproduced itself in narrative and was projected onto black female bodies. The projection of the Venus image, of prostitute proclivities, onto black female bodies, allows the French writer to maintain a position of moral, sexual, and racial superiority. (6)

There is also what was previously mentioned as Ehlers’ “passing figure,” the person whose genotype is defined as black, but crosses the racial line into whiteness through winning acceptance as white (56). Ms. Bumbry was by no means able to pass for white, but Wieland presented a consolation to potential dissidents in the German public who were opposed to a black operatic singer at Bayreuth. Wieland promised that the “exotic black goddess” would actually be draped and made up in gold, so that her blackness would less recognizable (Fig. 12) (Thurman 615). Thurman’s observation of the contradiction in this move toward blackness while simultaneously abhorring it parallels the desire to see a black Aida without the presence of an actual black person. If we remember that according to JanMohamed, in such a paradigm, whiteness is always the civilizing force, then the lead role of Aida requires white body in blackface. Thus, racial performativity is what implements Verfremdung as the white audience takes comfort that underneath the dark makeup is a pure, white Venus, goddess of beauty. In this context, the lead role of Aida requires white body in blackface.
Ms. Bumbry’s presence at Bayreuth undoubtedly inspired black, especially African American, opera singers around the world to believe that their restrictions from international operatic stages were coming to an end. However, Wieland Wagner was trying to communicate a denazified Germany to the outside world by passing off a visual spectacle of the black female other as inclusion. Yet, in Thurman’s analysis, it is seen how Ms. Bumbry’s blackness was used to resituate the social space of Bayreuth, Germany, and opera in the international community. Also while covering Ms. Bumbry’s body in gold would be considered costume, her collaborators who were in positions of power, conveyed to the public that it would hide her blackness. So, while territorializing her body, they also erased it. Regardless, her body as black, not her voice, became the locus of her overall performance (Thurman 616). This is evident during both the
methods of production and with the rhetoric describing Ms. Bumbry’s visual presence on the operatic stage at Bayreuth was made strange. Thurman connects the reaction to the visuality of the black woman on the operatic stage and the language used in the shaped by the Manichean oppositions of racialization calling her “newly discovered colored star” and “dark singer” who presented an “accurate portrayal of an idol of hell” (616). Thurman writes, little was said about her voice except that it was underdeveloped (616). These incidents show how the opera world is troubled by black womanhood, and how it systematically works to confine black agents into a paradigm of the abject.
Chapter Four:
The Performance Space of the Opera Theatre

The exclusion of black classical singers from opera houses in nineteenth-century Europe and the Americas continued well into the twentieth-century. Marian Anderson (1897-1993) was one of the most influential African American opera singers of the twentieth century in that her success inspired a great many black female singers who proceeded her (Aida’s Brothers and Sisters). Within African American communities, she possessed symbolic power that was evident in her musical talent and vocal skill, and her internationally recognized achievement made her a role model who motivated members of her community to pursue careers in classical music and opera. Although Anderson was forced to focus primarily on a recital career, in 1955, she was eventually invited to sing her only operatic role at the United States’ most prestigious opera house, The Metropolitan Opera. Even with Anderson’s accomplishments, black singers continued to be excluded from opera houses around the world (Aida’s Brothers and Sisters) and continued to lose symbolic power once they entered the opera space, often being relegated to the margins or used as tokens representative of the entire race. A common narrative among black people in many professions has developed into a maxim that says black labour requires double the work of their white counterparts, to receive half the social gain. For example, African American tenor George Shirley (1934-) was the first black tenor in leading role at the Metropolitan Opera in 1961 (Aida’s Brother’s and Sisters). With a career that spanned from 1959 and continues into the twenty-first century, Shirley stated in an interview that his white manager told him early in his career that should he ever be hired over a white colleague, he should expect to be paid less (Aida’s Brother’s and Sisters). Leontyne Price (1927-), one of the twentieth century’s most celebrated sopranos described her own experience as being “the token
black” but also a “pioneer and barrier breaker” (John Callaway Interviews: Leontyne Price 1984). This duality in experience for individual performers reveals the complex ways systemic discrimination displaces black performing artists in opera, while their successes become valourized among spectators of black communities. The few that have been able to gain a livelihood from an international career have had to overcome remarkable obstacles not necessarily within their own psyches but within the professional opera spaces.

**Black operatic utopians**

Between a history of racial discrimination and the continuation of racial performativity, contemporary opera spaces around the world continue to be contested ground for the black performer. Even among established working opera singers, an opera world that embraces racial difference remains to be seen. In 2015, the Washington Post opera critic, Anne Midgette facilitated a discussion with four active opera singers, two male, and two female, about the challenges of being black in opera. One singer stated that to be successful in opera “you have to go through certain doors, you have to go through certain people. I don’t think enough black people hold the keys to those doors.” Another elaborated with the following: “when our white colleagues decide they don’t want to sing anymore, they are welcomed [into opera administration] with open arms. This doesn’t happen for our black colleagues” (Midgette Washington Post). These singers describe Bourdieu’s theories on the creation of social spaces and symbolic powers within fields, the power to open doors to let people into the group to be part of the group. Black singers or arts professionals that wish to become administrators are barred from positions where their influence can affect the professional or artistic positionalities of their colleagues. The experiences of the singers discussed in this section demonstrate how racial hegemony influences the creation of social spaces and symbolic powers within fields, the
power to open doors to let people into the group to be part of the group (Bourdieu “Social Space, Symbolic Power” 21-22). Their experiences also show how little has been done to combat systemic racism in opera, despite the knowledge of it at work. Moreover, it is evidence that systemic racism is more concerned with preserving forms of characterization (stereotypes), over the content of characterization; this affects how casting decisions are made in Aida. What the conventional staging practices in Aida reflect, and what the plot highlights, are the racially biased attitudes that black singers must navigate. The term “navigate” is significant because the negative perception of blackness in society territorializes black bodies so that black people must continuously negotiate whether to move through social fields according to personal agency, or personal protection while determining when agency is at odds with self-preservation (Ehlers 55).

The construction of social fields with and through hegemony in art resonates both figuratively and literally in social spaces (Frye 9). The connections between notions of blackness and the construction of white cultural identity and colonialism become more evident when considering the ways in which the Western arts produce Western culture, and Western culture produces the Western arts. Much like Bourdieu’s social fields, blackness is understood in terms of territory, in that it delineates boundaries by prescribing associative behaviours that govern spaces to racialized bodies (Bourdieu Distinction 101; Fleetwood 6; Ehlers 70). This means those who occupy blackness, or at the very least, appear black, must also behave as ‘black’ ” (Ehlers 56). The reverse is true for “white spaces” that is the space within the margins (Ehlers 65) which brings me to the notion of a “passing” as a certain race. I turn to cultural theorist Nadine Ehlers who argues that “the passing figure highlights that racial discipline is sustained through the performative” (56). It happens, “by shaping behavior, and in incorporating and conforming to racial norms the individual who observes this discipline is shaped as a racial subject” (55). Ehlers
goes on to say that the process of racialization is a “discipline that can only be re-enforced through the perpetual reiteration and reinscription of performative decrees of race” (Ehlers 70). This makes the theatre space of opera performance a convoluted one for black performing artists because it requires a multiplicity of conflicting behaviours that are always under panoptic surveillance (Ehlers 54). The black singer who wishes to be acknowledged for artistic talent is continually mitigating the social perceptions of blackness imposed on them. The black woman singer has the added challenge of managing gender normative expressions of blackness that deem her body territory to be colonialized or object to be discarded. Yet, when these perceptions are being reified and reiterated in the performance canon, negotiating one’s artistic practice within liminal spaces of expression requires more covert self-preservation tactics (McKittrick 41). The somatically black female body must pass by engaging in behaviours that govern white spaces but are reserved for and expected from somatically white female bodies. Thus, even with a black woman acting according to the etiquette of the field of opera, the fact of blackness remains in the visual (Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* 82). The agency of the black woman in the field of opera is territorialized by her own body. This can determine a number of ways in which she is subsequently managed in such a space, but also how she manages herself.

There is also a question of “legibility” that Ehlers discusses in the performative aspect of racialization. Specifically, how are the black performers read in white spaces, including aesthetic spaces if they are acting outside the stereotypes imposed upon them? They may be seen as imposters, expressed through language that questions the relevance of their artistic talent in relationship to skill, class, or educational pedigree. Some common comments critique the quality of voice as lacking sufficient “refinement” of skill, yet these critics downplay how class impacts consistent access to quality performing arts engagement, education, and professional
opportunities. If a black singer and a white singer are both able to maintain a quality musical education, have access to same job opportunities, learn the social behaviours of the field, but black singers specifically continue to experience discrimination, then it behooves opera institutions to examine perceptions around race, as foregrounded in this thesis.

The same is true for other non-white singers. They too must learn to act in accordance with the rules of social field while in an Othered body. But so long as colorism stratifies perceptions of race and plays a significant part in how singers are cast, then the white gaze will categorize racialized bodies accordingly within the spectrum of blackness, privileging whiteness. In doing so, black performers may possess enough of the symbolic capital that typically leads to symbolic efficacy for their white colleagues. But the ongoing issue of exclusion from spaces of social power within the field for black artists shows Fanon’s frustration rings true: “The white world, the only honorable one, barred me from all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man—or at least like a nigger” (86). It begs the question, as a form of high art in a white patriarchal hegemony, how can anyone occupying a black female body ever racially pass in opera? I have previously presented how in Aida staging conventions distinguishing one African ruling class from the underclass relied on colorism, even though regionally, such differences would be negligible. With white hegemony at its historical core, the opera stage frames whiteness by territorializing black bodies, keeping black opera singers locked within the margins in the social space of opera regardless of gender. However, thinking back to the trope of Black Venus and the colonialist spectator, how does a black woman singing become more than an objectified spectacle? If the ways of navigating the opera space for the black female singer are marked by her own gendered blackness, as long as she stays within acceptable limits of black femaleness, she can have a career. To be clear, I do not wish to
insinuate that black women who wish to be opera singers are limited by identity as a black woman. On the contrary, I would argue that artistic practice provides the black woman with opportunities for fullness of self-expression that a racist society demands she suppress. What I propose is that in many ways, being in opera can be a liberating and a revolutionary art form for a black woman singer if the institutions evolve beyond their current white supremacist sexist state. Toward this purpose, the role of Aida provides a unique opportunity to disrupt the white hegemony of opera.

“Why don’t they just hire a black singer?”

In spite of systemic racism in opera, it is easy to assume Aida’s plot setting would be a clear opportunity for black singers to be cast. The logic is simple: if a role in an opera portrays a black character, why not just cast a black singer? Directors of contemporary Regietheater adaptations of Aida have attempted to circumvent the racial overtones of the story by moving the setting out of Africa to another Westernized setting understood to be white (La Scena Musicale 2010). Often, the result of Regietheater adaptations is the complete erasure of African nations except in the libretto text (Canadian Opera Company 2010). However, the most basic response to how Aida should be cast is basing casting on the premise that vocal singing abilities of the singers determine who should get the role. While from purely musical standpoint this should certainly be the case, opera is as much about the dramatic narrative as it is the score. I will reiterate that in opera the dramatic staging is the platform through which the music can tell its story. The music can be evocative, but if the staging is incongruent to what is expressed in the score, libretto, and the contemporary cultural context it undermines the overall reading of the work. If consideration for the drama were removed, it would be a glorified concert recital. Therefore, broader considerations of ideology and symbolism should inform the staged
presentation to ensure that the music enhances the overall dramatic performance, in our contemporary cultural moment.

An Internet search on “racism in opera” will yield the ongoing debate among many singers, conductors, opera coaches and other practitioners and lovers of opera of all races about the notion that there is a dearth of non-white singers with the technical ability to sing operatic roles. Some of these sources are referenced in this thesis. Excuses for the lack of racial diversity rarely take into account racial discrimination as well as the numerous systemic and economic barriers unique to racialized people that are perpetuated by the institutional practices in opera. While for the individual artist arts practice may be a fulfilling means of self-expression, the process of gaining symbolic capital through pursuing an education and a career in opera and classical music is often a dismaying experience, the result of which can be a pyrrhic victory. This fact often glares most when with the question of casting in *Aida*. Many established non-white singers are less worried about the application of blackface, and more concerned with the appearance of “authenticity” in representation, but moreso non-white singers of any gender do not wish to be limited to *racialized* roles, so they would rather not see their white counterparts limited. Ironically, this egalitarian perspective is not reciprocated and non-white opera singers continue to be excluded from lead roles because operatic roles that are not marked as “black,” are taken for granted as “white.” In recent years, my emerging artist colleagues and I have voiced concerns about the challenges involved in developing an enriching arts practice in a racially discriminatory environment. We were often told that we needed to have “thick skin to survive in opera” or that we needed to just get the work, so that power will come later. In my combined eight years of study, practice, and scholarly research on racial representation in Western opera, I have found no consistent evidence that exceptional skill, mental fortitude, or emotional resilience
on the part of any black singer of any pedigree or at level of success in any historical period, has dismantled systemic racism in the art form. On the contrary, the use of such rationalizing and demoralizing language as a way of advising protégées indicates acquiescence to the social conditioning in opera that, for most non-white singers, demonstrably does not lead to inclusion. Otherwise, I argue, there would be more inclusion of non-white performing arts professionals in every context of the arts, which as I have shown in previous chapters, is not the case. Instead, I have observed and experienced some more established black singers become liaisons of surveillance to ensure young black performers are acting in accordance with behaviours that are perceived to advance the symbolic efficacy of all black singers. As singers internalize the hegemonic social structures of opera, Bourdieu says it creates a “perception of disposition” where even the most disadvantaged agents “perceive the world [of opera] as natural and to accept it much more readily than one might imagine especially when you look at the situation of the dominated through the social eyes of a dominant” (18). Again the adaptation of a white gaze is implicated in the process of spatialization and naturalization of a particular socially imposed ways of being. As Ehlers states, “the individual--under the ever-present subjection of panoptic surveillance--is compelled to abide by the disciplinary injunctions of the racial 'site' within which they are discursively positioned and through which they are constituted” (55). As black singers seek entry into the white supremacist spaces in opera allowed to them due to their race, they only disrupt the semiotic understandings of blackness in as much as those in power will permit. Within such a disciplining environment, Ehlers asserts that the black singer adapts towards self-discipline and self-surveillance that is dictated by seeing blackness through the white gaze (Ehlers 55).

When interpreting any performing artwork, patrons are not the only spectators;
performers, directors, producers, composers and any other contributors to the operatic work are also spectators (Hutcheon 134). It is crucial that those who adapt or engage operatic works are aware of the relationship between socialization and spatialization within white supremacist hegemonies. The stereotypes in narratives formed within the Manichean allegory are the colonial inheritance of racial prejudice in the opera field that socializes people within that social space. Subverting racial discrimination entails also challenging racist stereotypes in opera narratives. Without interrogating representation in all of its forms, opera creators use the symbolic power of opera to coerce and manipulate performers and audiences into complicity to oppression.

**Black Feminist Geography of Aida**

I have applied feminist, postcolonial and poststructural social theories to assess how race, class, and gender inform the political and social power of Africanism and Manichean allegory in Western art forms. Grounding this methodology in a study of the opera *Aida* has revealed intersections in the construction of race in art, Western social consciousness and the construction of social space. From this examination, I have deduced that the history of Western arts demanded racialized staging conventions in theatrical performance; adherence to this is where the political power of opera in Western culture becomes apparent through *Aida* (Taylor 15). Now that I have determined how the Manichean allegory uses race in narrative as a method of socialization, I will now discuss in ethnographic terms how racialization territorializes black women’s bodies by conflating the attribute of corporeal black femaleness with excessive spatialized blackness whereby blackness encompasses all margins and is itself territory.

The repetition of various racial assemblages of the black female subject is an active inheritance from the colonialism that legitimizes the dehumanization of black women in society. Likewise, as a white identity is developed in *Aida*, a social schematic of the plot justifies the
various forms of violence that are depicted on the stage. Although the spectator feels pathos for Aida and her fellow Ethiopians, the dominance of the white Egyptians reduces any potential subjectivity in representation to abjection in a place Kristeva defines as a place “where meaning collapses” (2). Considering that this vision of Africanism is imposed on the black artist both as artist and spectator, it is only through Aida that the identity of the Other is restored.

This residual body politic from slavery replicates in society because the systemic exploitation of blackness has yet to be dismantled. Women’s studies scholar, Katherine McKittrick has relevant insight to offer to understand how forced servitude during transatlantic slavery “incited meaningful geographic processes that were interconnected with the category of ‘black women’ She posits that these processes asserted visual and social representations of a kind of “gendered servitude that was embedded into the landscape” (McKittrick xvii). According to McKittrick, “femininity” for the racialized black women exists within a particular framework of servitude characterized not only by inhumaness, but the objectified body as both a site through which racial “sex, violence, and reproduction can be imagined and enacted, but also a captive body” (McKittrick xvii) or, a commodity. Framing Aida within enslavement as opposed to imprisonment has specific implications that connect to the period of nineteenth-century colonial body politics for the black woman. Here, enslavement is a deliberate and publicly violent performative act demonstrating the supremacy of the Egyptians. Emphasizing the slave status of Aida and her parallel association with the other racialized characters is another way of territorializing the black female body so that “it is publicly and financially claimed, owned and controlled by an outsider. Territorialization marks and names the scale of the body, turning ideas that justify bondage into corporeal evidence of racial difference” (McKittrick 44-45). McKittrick’s assertion encapsulates the meaning of racial performativity in opera. It draws a
direct ideological line from the auction block of the transatlantic slave trade, to the operatic stage. What marks, names and scales a racialized body more than blackening up a white body? In effect, fictive performances that use racial performativity without a process of alienation having taken place is symbolic violence against black bodies (Ehlers 56). Therefore, blackface and other forms of racial performativity do not connote racial difference; they make non-white bodies strange. Racial performativity spatializes, and disembodies identities and then limits identities to that space. Contrary to “artistic intention,” or an attempt at naturalism or realism, blackface codifies Western notions of blackness, places and spaces it, and then scales it beyond the body. As this coded blackness is given space beyond and apart from the body, the person/agent living an identity attributed to being black disappears (Ehlers 59). What is left is a portrayal of a person who is limited within blackness. It is a process of denaturalization of corporeal blackness in performance spaces that becomes acceptable through normalizing dehumanizing behaviours against non-white performers of any race, specifically through psychological abuse (Ehlers 54). Some tactics include, sweeping and often degrading generalizations about physical characteristics, claims about intellectual/musical abilities of non-white people, and reliance on stereotypes in representation both on and off the stage. For example, comments such as “you don’t look/sound/act black,” “you don’t ‘look’ the part” while in the same or similar instance asserting that “it’s the voice that matters most” are isolating and restrictive practices that occur in performance spaces. On the other hand, demanding that the audience “suspend belief” in a fictional narrative, but then reserving and regulating roles based on race only for non-white performers shows a clear double standard (Ehlers 62). In stories where historicity or history is not embedded within the plot, the race of the performers is inconsequential. In opposite cases, however, the race of the performers must be considered from a political standpoint because the
audience will interpret the performance work from their own political perspectives and positioning within contemporary culture.

The Scale of Black Femailness

The reasons I deem most pertinent to the exclusion of black singers from opera and how black women in opera are perceived in opera spaces are related to the positionality of the black female subject in *Aida*. The juxtaposition of *Aida*’s central female characters, Aida with Amneris, illustrates the collision between gender politics and race in society in the way they highlight the continuum of hypervisibility of the black female subject in the European arts which I have discussed over the course of this thesis. Moreover, when *Aida* reiterates Africanist assemblages from story, myth, and culture by ascribing these onto the bodies of the black female characters, it alludes to the notion that black women’s bodies are simultaneously excessively black and excessively female (Fleetwood 9). I will explain how these excesses of black femailness pose a unique threat to the white colonialist mindset regardless of gender.

In spaces of white hegemony, the visibility of the black woman is a paradox between her femailness, which is deemed an un-representable enigma to be defined according to male interests, and in her blackness, which is visual and oppositional to be constrained by the purity of whiteness (McClintock 193; Ehlers 52). McClintock poignantly describes the colonialist intersection between female and non-European Other, “Women become the Dark Continent, the riddle of the Sphinx-exoticized and implicitly racist images drawn from an Africanist iconography” (193). Furthermore, Ehlers asserts that “racial performativity always works within and through the modalities of gender and sexuality, and vice versa, and these categories are constituted through one another” (64). Out of these modalities comes the compulsory tethering of race to gendered bodies, “black woman” and “white woman” as opposed to just “woman”
(Ehlers 64). The black female body as a site of reproduction in her excessive black femaleness, she is capable of producing more excessive blackness (McKittrick 79). The more embodied blackness becomes, the more blackness is perceived as pervasive to the colonialist imagination. Hence, especially when she is contrasted with the idealized, sexually pure, and protected white woman, the black woman is a fetishized, hypersexualized and accessible territory (Gilman 212). In her racialization, the black woman is perceived as the embodied assemblage of excessive femaleness and blackness, a living, embodied challenge to white supremacy and patriarchy (Ehlers 64; hooks 64).

In this paradigm, the frame of the painting, the volume of sculpture and, the elevation of the theatre stage are all sites that scale this image of excessive black femaleness and offer it to spectators as a commodity (McKittrick 78). Speaking of scaling the black female body, McKittrick recognizes the auction block of transatlantic slavery as what she calls a “slave geography” which is an extension of “racial geography” (78; xxvii). The auction block is the catalyst for this method of scaling black bodies for various types of labour, including economic, reproductive and sexual “to build and maintain material and discursive geographies” of white supremacy (McKittrick 77). I propose that unless black bodies are stereotyped and commoditized, exclusion of black people from performing arts spaces, including the opera house, risk likening the stage to the auction block, where the agency of black performers are erased and replaced with Africanist assemblages of blackness to be bought by the spectator. To further my assertion, I will reference the following by McKittrick:

Scale illuminates the ways in which the black subject is produced by and implicated in the making and meaning of the auction block and other slave geographies. At the same time, specific social processes demonstrate that the scale of the body, a unique subject on
the auction block, can also be abstracted, transformed into a racist multiscalar ideology, which undermines heterogeneous black subjectivities. (78)

Moreover, Ehlers argued that racial performatives produce race through the "decree" of blackness, which races and disciplines bodies and this ties to the ways of seeing difference (Ehlers 52). Additionally, I began with a study on the black female subject in Western art history because recognizing the history in this way substantiates an understanding of how “blackness has been twinned by the practice of placing blackness and rendering body-space integral to the production of space” (McKittrick xxvii). Therefore, I qualify any artistic space as black geography if it conforms to practices and behaviours that deem the seeing of blackness on the body as a negating marker of difference. A black geography emerges in the arts through the Africanist presence as the marker of difference to justify the relegation and systemic exclusion of black artists, and then uses that same regulating system to “build and maintain material and discursive geographies” (McKittrick 20).

The power of the scale is related to the degree that it is reiterated intertextually and throughout artistic representations, resulting in the perception of symbolic power (Bourdieu Distinction 256; Gilman 203). So here we see there are a few concepts at work: one, how the dissemination of specific iterations of the black female in visual culture produce the dimensions of multiplicities of the Africanist presence (Weheliye 48). Two, the marking of conceptual blackness onto the female body to make blackness strange through stereotype coincides with the performance of strange black femaleness in art. Three, the acceptance of this method of stereotyping in the institution of opera, and in broader visual cultures, legitimatizes the stereotyping of black woman and reifies racial performativity that “decrees” blackness. At this, Ehlers culminates her discussion by positing that the classification of race is a performative
utterance, the declaration of “blackness performs the action of racing the subject and exercises binding power” (72). Such binding power is contingent on the visibility of race on and through the body.

Fig. 12 Leontyne Price, in her final Metropolitan Opera performance as “Aida,” Jan 3, 1985. Source: Metropolitan Opera website.

About the role Aida, soprano Leontyne Price mused, “Aida was a natural for me because my skin was my costume” (Guarracino 1). Therefore, whether imagined through portraying the black female subject or, lived as opera singers, Aida can represent an intersection or a departure from the marginalized experiences of the black woman. When we consider the historically significant social power of opera as a form of high art in Western art, and if we remember that an opera is a form of visual culture, then conventions of visual representations of black women in opera are influential to how black women are perceived in other social spaces of power.

The Role of Aida: A Site of Memory

This erasure of black bodies attacks the schema of the black spectator. Fanon describes
the creation of schemas by “a definitive structuring of the Self and of the world” built through white dominance (83). The first schema, the corporeal, is defined by the negation of corporeal blackness and the historically racial schema, which is built from interpretive narrative constructs of the Eurocentric and white supremacist imagination. These schemas converge to position the black person into alterity (Fanon 83-84). This unfolds in Aida as the plot progresses: Aida’s odds of returning to live an autonomous life dwindle, leaving her to continue as a slave, or die trying to escape enslavement. The death of central female characters is almost a basic prerequisite for opera, but in Aida, Aida’s death parallels what the black woman is faced with when she attempts to maintain an identity in the midst of displacement and oppression. McKittrick calls upon the theories of Fanon as she writes of the geographies of enslaved black women; she describes the black woman as a site within sites that emerge in relationship to her racialization. As these sites contribute to her entrapment, new sites of autonomy are also possible. She explores these possibilities called the “site of memory,” which are emancipatory spaces created by the psyche in the midst of oppression, but that reify within the territory of blackness (McKittrick 32-33). Aida expresses these sites of memory in the aria, “O patria mia” which she sings at the Nile which leads back to her homeland, and again in the tomb where she chose her fate with her last vestige of love, Radamès. As opposed to inevitably being killed trying to escape her oppression, Aida’s sense of autonomy and her steadfastness are expressed through "O patria mia." As the lyrics evoke the longing for home, Aida makes the Nile her site of memory, and the stage, becomes a site of memory for the black woman. Although Aida chooses death on her own terms, the libretto and the vocal score subvert Aida’s loss of subjectivity by privileging her voice to drive the plot, be the voice for her people and for herself. In this sense, the role of Aida conveys the most symbolic power to the spectator (Dallery 295). She defies Africanist ideology, symbolism and
iconographies. The unusual sensitivity toward the black female subject in the narrative structure of *Aida* and Verdi’s musical treatment of the role of Aida ensures that the forces that oppress her never overshadow Aída’s rich internal life.
**Conclusion**

Decolonizing the field of opera requires creating contemporary performing art practice that is affirming to the subjectivity of the non-white artists. It involves the reconfiguration of the psyches of every kind of spectator that contributes to opera’s production and performance. I suggest the following starting points:

1) use the spatial context of the stage to mark and the shift the anchors of the dominant gaze to restore the dialectic between the Self and the Other from narcissism to equitability.

2) challenge or remove marginal spatialization of the Other on and off the dramatic stage and;

3) affirm the testimonies of those who have been Othered and racialized through thoughtful research, intercultural collaboration, and the creation of dramaturgical methodologies that foster a socially integrative arts practice.

The level of agency the singer is given in the interpretation determines which of these actions contribute to the reading performance. An essential goal of demarginalizing the black woman performer is to reassert her agency to *act* on critical considerations when performing a work of art with a strong colonialist sentiment, such as *Aida* (Tesfagiorgis 185). She must assess what potential personal work can be done through the performance of *Aida* in spaces that are historically reserved for white bodies, interrogate the cultural work and the knowledge she contributes to through portraying a black female subject (Tesfagiorgis 195-196). Meanwhile, she must negotiate her subjectivity when the visibility of being a black female opera singer diverges with professional, cultural and artistic conventions of the art form (Fanon 75; Guarracino 14).

If Verdi’s original political intention for social criticism was lost in the original
production, I argue that alienation was less effective. The audience became subsumed within the Imaginary allegory. Part of the solution involves revisiting Verdi’s anti-Imperialist agenda present in many of his operas (Locke 108). The systematic implementations of European panoptic social frameworks in Egyptian society (Mitchell 24) parallel the panoptic white gaze imposed on racialized portrayals of the Ethiopians and Moors. Therefore, it might be helpful to identify patterns for interpreting these critical ideas to transfer into the methodology of practice that interrupts the white gaze. These ideas could be presented through inter-textual media or incorporated into the production to build on the notion that Verdi may have had allegorical intentions of the story and to emphasize his negative sentiments toward European-style Imperialism over his ideas around Egyptian culture itself (Locke 108). The inevitable conquering of the exotic Other, in this case, Aida and her fellow Ethiopians fulfill the final criterion. However, I have previously demonstrated the ways in which Verdi used the musical score to invert stereotypical representations of the Manichean oppositions that could result in a turn toward the Symbolic order. Therefore, using these devices that exist within the text to re-emphasize the subjectivities of African nations is crucial to decolonizing Aida (Guarracino 15).

Nicole R. Fleetwood proposes that optics of race is most apparent during the ephemeral staged live performance. In her book, Troubling Vision Performance, Visuality and Blackness (2010) Fleetwood calls theatre “as much a visual medium as it is one of embodied performance and the live text, or dramatic script” (73). She discusses how black bodies in visual culture are uncomfortable and disruptive to white supremacist audiences when they are centered on the personal agency of black bodies (6). Thurman and Nelson’s observations concur, showing that over the span of almost a century and across disciplines of Western High Art, white audiences are made viscerally uncomfortable when seeing black bodies in spaces unless they are being
objectified. The use of racially or gendered performativity for any dramatic effect contributes to the marginalization of the non-white bodies and narratives. So, when opera musicologists like the ones reviewed in this thesis insist that Verdi is to be considered primarily on his music it shows clear negligence to the fact that in the performance spaces, black performers are not only denied that same privilege, their presence is degraded in the process. The interpretative agency of the operatic singing actor is disrupted when their bodies are othered.

**Interventions Against the Oppressive Gazes**

I will introduce two hypothetical methods of interpretation that exist for *Aida*: the Brecht’s alienation method and what I will call demarginalization; both honour Verdi’s politicized underpinnings. Brechtian theories draw attention to the margins in order “to produce a spectator/reader who is not interpolated into ideology but is passionately and pleasurably engaged in observation and analysis” (Diamond 83). Demarginalization erases the margins, establishing a way of seeing that is informed by the dialectic between the subjectivities presented in the performance narrative. This method resists notions of “centering” experience, gaze or ideology. Unlike with “colourblind” approaches, demarginalization prioritizes the interrelational and parallel ways of seeing difference among the individuals depicted in the narrative. It requires decontextualizing the environment of the work so that power dynamics flow laterally, in non-hierarchal ways.

As I have previously discussed, historicizing the African nations in *Aida* undo the colonialisit work of the Imaginary allegory by highlighting the respective national identities, preventing them from being absorbed into a reductive hegemonic iconography. A Brechtian approach to staging *Aida* prevents the spectator from being entranced by the romance of the spectacle and plot by connecting the threads of colonialist ideology entrenched in the work to
systems of domination present in opera’s current historical moment. This approach would create new opportunities to envision Aida beyond the constraints of the white supremacist colonialist aesthetic for which the opera is known.

I argue that contemporary productions of Aida fall short of the incisive political statements of Brechtian theatre because of superficial readings of the work I have discussed. For example, in recent production by the Opera Hong Kong in 2017 sought to make a broad statement about the artificiality of opera by incorporating still images from Cecil B. DeMille’s classic film, The Ten Commandments as a backdrop. One critic who reviewed the production called it “sophisticated,” but my analysis of Aida establishes that the conceptual cross-reference is redundant. Melding the two performance works together enhance the spectacle of Orientalized depictions of Egypt and continue to disregard the problematic body politics of representing Africans as racially white people. I am skeptical that this approach is constructive to connecting Aida’s narrative to this contemporary historical moment. Furthermore, this tactic reinforces a white supremacist aesthetic and hinders specific critical reading of Aida by deflecting criticism to opera as a whole. Finally, the sweeping criticism of opera falls short because it assumes the spectator is ignorant to the artifice of opera performances. Brechtian alienation could be better achieved by using artifice to disrupt any sense of realism in Aida by calling attention to the connections between racial performativity in dramatic narratives and constructions of race in society. This would better demonstrate ways the practices of whitening of African ethnicities and blackface are an inheritance of European hegemony, not a simple costume (Locke 110).

Returning to JanMohamed’s central argument: European literature uses the subjugation of the exotic Other, to understand the Self. When Verdi was commissioned to compose an “Egyptian opera” (Locke 110) I argue that he could only do what JanMohamed established
Europeans do when encountering the Other: project a version of European identity. Regardless of where Orientalism is applied, it is a trope used to generalize depictions of the exotic Other. As the Orientalist musical idiom in the score codifies exoticism of the characters as non-European, the Manichean allegory is inherently specular toward a European worldview. The gaze must shift from blackness to expressions of humanity beyond the visual, while interrogating the ways the visual semiotic readings can hinder recognition of the Other as equal and form emancipatory subjectivities (Knowles 16). Opera makes this process especially accessible due to the evocativeness of the music, but its fantastical spectacle of drama also facilitates audience alienation techniques. With this type of approach, what I am proposing is to use the economy of the Manichean allegory to invert symbols of domination to disrupt the colonialist mindset. This is similar to what I discussed Verdi did in the vocal score, but this could be expanded to the staging as well because the elements are recognizable, but the multiplicities of their meaning reveal the cultural work they perform. Collectively, the misrepresentation of Egypt as a white, pseudo-European nation, the Orientalist idiom of the visual and musical aesthetic and the inscription of race on the female body all present an Imaginary allegory (Dallery 293).

Central to the methodology of performing arts narratives is the issue of historicization. Performance studies theorist Elin Diamond states that the ways the Brechtian methodology historicization considers “the body as a site of struggle and change” which compliments the feminist reading of the body as “culturally mapped and gendered” (89). Diamond suggests what she calls “Brechtian Gestus,” a gesture, a word, an action, a tableau by which, separately or in series, the social attitudes encoded in the playtext become visible to the spectator” as a productive means of displacing the dominant gaze to see the female other (89). This creates moments that both explain the play and extend its meaning beyond the dramatic moment. She
goes on to say, “a gestic feminist criticism would ‘alienate’ or foreground those moments in a play text in which social attitudes about gender could be made visible” and “refuse to appropriate and naturalize male or female dramatists, but rather focus on historical material constraints in the production of images” (83). She challenges the theatre producer to create a dialogue with the text as opposed to mastering it. Applying this methodology to *Aida* could subvert the spectacle of which Said was so critical, because they so greatly overshadow the rich political statements embedded into the plot. Diamond asserts that female body on stage enters into immediate and unmediated presence, but also as signifying element, a performative referent of her gender and a patriarchal sign system (89). Therefore, alternatively, a feminist gestic model could be used to address the positionalities of women’s bodies in *Aida* to highlight the ways they mark spaces described the plot on stage, and corresponding implications within the vocal score. I will discuss some examples in the following paragraphs.

One specific example could depict the Symbolic order of the Manichean Allegory by bringing attention to the ways in which the construction of race happens on Aida’s body. This could also subvert the Africanist presence by historicizing the representations of African people (Guarracino 2). Additionally, a more visceral portrayal of the construction of race in *Aida* could take place in Amneris’ aforementioned, chamber scene. The maids might dress Amneris (played by a black woman singer) in white make-up, and while the audience sees Amneris force Aida (also played by a woman black singer) to cover or alter her dark skin with makeup. The staging would have to emphasize the act of marking the women’s bodies in contrasting ways to convey the intrusiveness of colonializing powers and the specificity of territorializing women’s bodies through racialization. It can also be an exploration of the tensions of intersectional feminism, particularly with how black skin has been made aesthetically strange in the white imagination.
and the divisions this causes among black women who feel pressure to conform to white supremacist beauty standards. Any interpretations that portray the Egyptians as "white" dehistoricizes Egypt as an actual place with its own distinct history and culture. Without the presence of the racialized other, or the Africanist presence, whiteness is displaced and demonstrates the dismantling of white supremacy. More productive performance methodologies would emphasize the nuances of the political relationships presented in Aida, over notions of “authenticity.” In summary, marking race on the female body because of its gendered otherness imposes that same racialization on the black woman and sustains systemic sexism, misogyny and other systems of coercive power. These methods are acts of symbolic violence to black singers and dehumanize artistic practices.

**Affirming a Discourse Beyond the Oppressive Gaze**

In progressing toward an affirming artistic process, I propose an Afrocentric Feminist interpretation repositions the conflict in Aida as nationalist and shifts away from reductive racial codes, stereotypes and iconography (Weheliye 33). The aim is to reterritorialize the assemblages of black women through an emancipatory arts practice that produces an affirming performance text (Weheliye 34). This method allows the spectacle of opera a more robust fulfillment of the plot that appeals to broader discourse around nation-building and ethno-cultural identities. By removing the paradigms of racialization, characterizations of whiteness do not fit within a story based in an antiquated African country. It succinctly cancels the notion of a supposedly “authentic” and decidedly “traditional” staging of Aida where Egyptians are depicted as primarily white and paternalistic, yet Oriental. Finally, why should blackface ever be used if actual black performers exist? However noble Verdi’s anti-Imperialist messaging, the communication is muddied because Aida meets all of the criteria for a Manichean allegory,
therefore subverting an allegory of the Imaginary order requires accountability for and the restoration of the dialectic between the Self and other.

For the black woman who attends the opera, she is a spectator who is part of the audience. The black woman who sings in an opera she is spectator who is creating the work of art. The black opera singer is simultaneously a spectator who is acting and an actor who is spectator. Add to this making music and it can be seen how in performing an operatic work, the singer must develop an understanding of ways of seeing the embodiment of the dramatic character as it relates to these multiple ways of being within spaces, both social and imagined. I propose that liberation comes through expression of subjectivity aware, yet untethered to the disciplining of the panoptic surveillance (Ehlers 54; Fanon 75). When the space of opera creation and performance reflects hostility to black women’s bodies, then the black woman opera singer in performance becomes a revolutionary act born out the oppositional gaze. From this position, she interrogates the white patriarchal gaze that seeks to limit her expression. Through the expression of performance, she can “look back,” as she chooses her expression, she misbehaves (hooks Black Looks 126).

Alexander G. Weheliye used the following quote from The Combahee River Collective, “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (35). Herein lies the importance of examining the cultural work of operas like Aida. Black women and other non-white artists, need to be as free in performing arts spaces as they are in other social fields. In narrative, regardless if they are playing a hero, villain or victim, they deserve the right to assert their artistic agency without threat of being silenced and erased because of systems of oppression. Verdi’s Aida presents fertile ground to demarginalize black women in opera
performance. In considering the elements of artistic representations of the black female subject examined in this thesis, I have established how the subjectivity of the black woman skilled in opera performance in *Aida*, is subverted by stereotype. Her body is a space onto which projections of identity are made from white spectators and creators alike, an object to be commoditized and erased, or an icon from which cultural meanings are derived. At the same time, if representations of the Other in narrative privileges the point of view of the dominant social class then, emancipating the role of Aida from the structures of hegemony can make the representation a symbol of emancipation for black women and all others who have been marginalized in opera spaces.

Because of the modes of expression that the arts allow and the ways that expression creates social spaces, I argue that to make art is as much a political act as it is personal. In my view, to recover the cultural relevance of *Aida* and other operas during the twenty-first century, opera’s evolution must directly and deliberately lead to freeing the art form from white supremacist patriarchal ideologies. Once white supremacy and sexism is siphoned out of the social field of operatic artistic production, opera can be revitalized as a relevant form of artistic expression for contemporary practice. How this plays out depends on the audience and pre-established goals of the performance.

Analysis of the black female subject in *Aida* is part of an aesthetic continuum of Western art introduces the ways in which convergences of racialized aesthetic paradigms with performance practice have broader phenomenological implications affecting the black woman as artist, spectator, and within artistic institutions. In the end, these images and actions are demoralizing and dehumanizing for both the performer and viewer. Acknowledging the fields of social power, understanding methods of oppression and removing the margins between social
groups, decolonizes opera performance and contributes to balancing unequal power across the arts.
Works Cited


Zoffany, Johann. “*Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay (1761-1804) and Her Cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray (1760-1825).*” Scone Palace, Scotland, 1778.
These can be any kind of practice: artistic, political, pedagogical, social etc.

2 Bourdieu was skeptical of psychoanalysis, particularly Freudian theories that he deemed “essentialist” and “dehistoricized.” He acknowledged Lacan’s significance to the field of psychoanalysis, but criticized him for pretentious use of language. Source?

3 I am considering social structures as what Bourdieu calls “fields” with the psyche, related to the habitus. However, the habitus and the psyche differ in the ways they are changeable. Habitus is grounded historically in material realities, while the psyche is conceptual in its development.

4 Some notable operatic works include, Georges Bizet’s opera, Carmen, Puccini’s Madama Butterfly, and Turandot. The Arabian story of Shéhérazade has been adapted to music for orchestra by composers, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Maurice Ravel. Also, Claude Debussy is also known to incorporate Orientalist motifs into his compositions.

5 Facial phenotypes, although important, are less considered in this paper because it is my view that reading these certain physical characters as racial requires a greater level of nuance that becomes less relevant or practical in the spectacle of operatic performance.

6 These trajectories parallel Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of "lines of flight." See “Introduction to Rhizome” in A Thousand Plateaus.

7 In his book, Distinction, Bourdieu presents this influence as part of a class struggle where art is the tool of domination. Art can be used to narrow class distinctions by limiting the access of education capital needed for appreciation (2). However, increased cultural capital amongst individuals shifts cultural fields, mitigating this narrowing of class distinction. These changes result in the class struggle because the boundaries of taste must be redefined (3). Bourdieu elaborates in his essay, "Social Space and Symbolic Power," this redefinition often means also redistribution of power.

8 Art historians Albert Boime and Hugh Honour both discuss how the Abolitionist movements throughout the nineteenth-century demanded an increase in art depicting the victimhood of enslaved black people at the hands of white oppressors as an appeal to conscience of “civilized whites” to denounce the horrific practice of slavery. At this, paintings clearly worked as forms of political propaganda in European culture. However, this repetition of victimization played into another Manichean opposition of the white saviour and civilizing the savage, shifting the narrative from conquerors to bringers of civilization. Honour states, “The abolition of slavery was not, however, to undermine the faith of whites in their own superiority—rather the reverse as it was seen as one of their achievements.” Need reference pg #

9 In Colonising Egypt, Mitchell discusses how the appropriation of Egyptian iconographies into the France’s Exposition was a main catalyst in developing the Orientalist aesthetic that Said comments on. Orientalist images of Egypt were so redundant in nineteenth-century European popular culture that traditional staging of Aida synthesized a pastiche of interpretations of iconography into a monolithic icon in the operatic stage source. This erases any subjectivity in representing African peoples in the context of the opera. Thus, Egypt and Ethiopia
are icons to be manipulated. See Gilman page 212.

10 This was a deliberate dramatic tactic as female characters were often juxtaposed with a predominantly male ensemble, providing the prima donna a more effectual entrance, but particularly in cases where a woman is the central character, it can reify the male-dominated power struggle within which they are entrapped.

11 Some operatic roles of the classical era and prior were originally written for male singers who were countertenors and castrati. As castrati fell out of favour and countertenor were a rare vocal type, these male character roles eventually went to female mezzo-sopranos or contraltos dressed as men.

12 Vocal registration is a concept describing tonal qualities according which parts of the vocal mechanism (larynx, vocal cords etc.) are being engaged. The resulting sound is comprised of various aural tonalities. To achieve chiaroscuro, in classical singing, it is important that the head dominant overtones and chest dominant undertones are managed in balance so that there is no differentiation in registration. See David Jones “Seeking Registration Balance,” March 1, 2017.

13 Taylor elaborates that while morescas may have had real North African origins, these were diluted and reconfigured through parody to reify the strangeness of the non-European other. I also want to draw attention that the striking similarity to blackface minstrelsy suggesting that the stereotype has a clear lineage to the European satiric tradition of morescas.