

Part 1: A Postcolonial Theologian Goes to Opera. Why, on Earth, Opera?!

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What does opera have to do with postcolonial theology and theory? Is such a question nothing more than an off-the-wall decadent rehash of a *quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis* type? Is it merely a sarcastic Tertullianesque smirk, fast-forwarded to the mature postcoloniality of the 21st century, to wonder if opera can serve as an avenue of transformative deconstruction of the Western colonial imaginary? Whatever one might think of opera, regardless if one adores it or has never set foot in an opera house, one thing is rather apparent. Namely, the golden age of opera as the most popular and prolific multimedia art and entertainment form of Western modernity in Europe coincides with the “prime” of Western colonialism ranging from the 16th century into the first part of the 20th century.

Indeed, Western modernity—including all its most sublime *da capo* arias for the castrati, its most suave *bel canto* coloraturas all the way to its most passionate *verismo* crescendos—is a colonial modernity. Apart from the time honored fixture throughout opera’s illustrious career—an entanglement of love with its many temptations, which Edward Said once pungently described as being about “a tenor and a soprano who want to make love but are prevented by a baritone and a mezzo¹”—it is glaringly obvious that opera is a multifaceted and sensuous landscape of audio-visual orientalism. In other words, from a postcolonial perspective, besides all other things that opera was and is for its adoring fans and despisers, it can be claimed that opera is a performative cartography of the aesthetics of orientalism. Music in general, as Martin Stokes points out, is “clearly very much part of modern life and our understanding of it, articulating our knowledge of other peoples, places, times, and things, and ourselves in relation

to them.”² Alongside orientalism, other unsavory dimensions abound in the enamored world of opera: sexism (remember Catherine Clément’s *Opera, or the Undoing of Women?*), racism, classism, and endless valorization of unflinching bravery in conquests and wars And add to that an equally endless and unfailingly beautiful fascination with the seductive power of evil! Last but not least, the laundry list of opera’s favorite obsessions must include the noteworthy and persistent attraction to otherness, preferably of the magic, exotic, or subaltern kind—be it the “orientals” and “savages” of various origins and virtues, or gypsies, or somnambulists, or whatever and whoever doesn’t comfortably fit into the mainstream/malestream modern Western colonialist culture and its theological underpinnings.

Now, that being said, are we still talking about opera as a simultaneously deconstructive and transformative avenue in our postcolonial milieu? Isn’t opera the most snobbish, the most upmarket form of metropolitan cultural narcissism, as far removed from the subaltern rhythms and voices that trouble the conscience of postcolonial critics as possible? What does this allegedly arcane world of gourmet music have to do with the postcolonial worlds of mundane injustices and the grinding routines of devastating violence and struggles for survival? No doubt, these are relevant questions. A provisional answer would be to say that yes, indeed, to suggest that opera harbors subversively transformative potential is a risky endeavor. The list of cultural entrapments that opera cannot escape easily and naively is rather lengthy. Most certainly, without a heavy dose of piercing and introspective performative irony (still most often missing from the limelight of contemporary operatic stages), opera continues to dangle above the abyss of what Edouard Glissant described as a musical creativity that today can be most seriously perceived as “reduced to a numbing, neurotic practice that contains nothing but the capacity for disintegration.”³

And yet . . . in the same way as aesthetic practices can be honed and co-opted into the regimes of oppression, they can be similarly empowered to subvert and transform. Opera can simultaneously convey not only the approval and reinscription of the cultural and socio-political status quo through its aural and visual regimes of beauty and repulsion—culturally circumscribed as they always and everywhere are—but also re-orchestrate, re-vocalize, re-phrase, and re-modulate those very regimes toward the advent of liberation. If beauty alone cannot exactly save the world—as Dostoevsky’s Prince Myshkin was snickered at because of having suggested such a crazy thing—it can nevertheless sound a sensuous, deeply immanent and embodied aperture of transcendence. Nothing, from the perspective of redemption, is beyond salvation. Nothing is beyond what Karl Rahner called the eschatologically triumphant mercy of God—that is, beyond the possibility of transfiguration out of brokenness into wholesomeness. Here I must say, though, that deconstruction and subversion constitute just the first step in the trajectory of the tortuous advent of the eschatologically triumphant mercy. To get stuck in the deconstructive gesture is to be equally neurotic and numbing. But transfiguration can be beautiful, often painfully beautiful—as well as practically and socio-culturally useful. Opera is pregnant with possibilities for both: on the one hand, for the soundbites of amazing grace reaching out to the humanity at full stretch before God (as Don Saliers would put it) just a tad beyond human manipulation; and on the other—for a transformative socio-cultural utility.

So when I, as a postcolonial theologian, find myself sitting in an opera house somewhere in the world again and again, my ears and eyes have long been schooled by Gayatri Spivak. Remember her musing on what a deconstructive politics of reading can look like? It would be to “see if the magisterial texts can now be our servants, as the new magisterium constructs itself in the name of the Other.”⁴ To stretch Spivak’s language a bit (if opera can forgive me reductively

pushing it into the categories of textuality), the magisterial Western operatic scores and performances can now be our servants as the new multimedia magisterium constructs itself in the name of the Other(s) in our postcolonial world of convoluted globalization. But the deconstructive moment is not, well, cannot be, the whole story for a theologian . . . at least today.

But my ears and eyes have also been schooled to hear and to see opera from the perspective of redemption under the assiduous tutelage of Theodor Adorno. To paraphrase Adorno's famous "*Zum Ende*" to *Minima Moralia*⁵, the only way to justify opera in the face of the postcolonial despair would be the attempt to hear and see all things operatic as they would appear from the perspective of redemption. So when a postcolonial theologian sets their foot in an opera house or tunes into radio, webcasts, podcasts, or live streaming of opera across the world, then it is with profound awareness that in the present dispensation the redemptive light of beauty must reveal the rifts and cracks of this needy and disfigured world to be a genuine instrument of the eschatologically triumphant mercy of God.

And so, let's talk about opera—its villains and victims, conquerors and the conquered, the powerful and the abused, its heroes, traitors, elites and the untouchables, and everything in between—from wherever we find ourselves in our journeys throughout the global postcolony.

¹Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1994): 114. ²Martin Stokes, "Introduction: Ethnicity, Identity and Music," *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place* (Martin Stokes, ed., Oxford and Providence: Berg, 1994): 3. ³Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (J. Michael Dash, transl.; Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999): 112. ⁴Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward A History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999):7. ⁵Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on Damaged Life* (E.F. N. Jephcott, trans.; London and New York: Verso, 2005): 247.

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