The Modernities of H. Lawrence Freeman

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Picture the 1920s as a drag race whose entries are ages vying for the Champion _gros-ben-aye_ of the times, that aura that remains after the flesh of the age has dropped away.

Ishmael Reed, _Mumbo Jumbo_ 1

On September 10, 1928, composer H. Lawrence Freeman’s “Negro Jazz Grand Opera,” _Voodoo_, was premiered at the Palm Garden on 52nd Street in Manhattan’s Broadway district. Performed by Freeman’s Negro Grand Opera Company—with the composer conducting and his wife Carlotta Freeman in the role of Lolo the Voodoo Queen—the opera was scheduled for a seven-night run that was cut to three following poor ticket sales. Reviews were notably mixed, the coverage differing considerably between white and black publications. In the white press, Freeman was taken to task for his allegedly anxiety-ridden and even perverse attachment to nineteenth-century European styles. The reviewer Harold Strickland complained, “[_Voodoo_] is supposed to be a jazz-opera, so a jazz orchestra was selected. But ‘Voodoo’ is not jazz. It is an attempt to produce under the guise of negro forms the old Italian form of opera. There are arias that ape Verdi and Donizetti. There is a plot that reeks [sic] of the tragic school.” 2

Another critic mocked the opera’s faux-antique libretto: “I recall such lines: ‘Ah, could I to thy form the life but restore,’ and ‘List! The nightingale is trilling.’ The point is that Freeman is so anxious to produce in the great line of European development that he falls into the stupidest conventions of the European stage, even to the extent of setting a nightingale trilling in Louisiana, where nightingales are as scarce as the duck-billed platypus.” 3

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1. Reed, _Mumbo Jumbo_, 20.
Freeman’s nearly twenty operas, dating from 1891 through the late 1940s, did indeed draw upon conventions of nineteenth-century European opera, and the high-flown language of his librettos elicited criticism even from Valdo Freeman, the composer’s son, lifelong champion, and sometime performer. But *Voodoo* was not solely perceived in the white press as a retrograde work “couched in the grandiloquent phrases of old-time opera,” as another columnist put it. Reviewing the same performance, one critic enthusiastically wrote of “a thing so hideously bizzare [sic] that it was beautiful . . . a thing of irregular forms and rhythms, of discords that trembled and crashed[,] a thing effrayant, effroyable; modern of moderns.” Another reviewer observed that although Freeman’s arias “harked back to an Italo-French operatic atmosphere of last century . . . the composer often waxed modernistic.”

Strickland, too, wrote that alongside its flourishes from nineteenth-century Italian opera, *Voodoo* contained orchestration that resembled “the worst elements” of such paradigmatically modern composers as “Strauss—Schoenberg—Stravinsky—Honegger and Gershwin.” The purported failing of *Voodoo*, then, was not that it was simply anachronistic but that it was an incoherent amalgamation of styles old and new (“a conglomeration but not an entity,” “a mad melange,” “a curiously naïve mélange,” “a conglomerate rather than a homogeneous, well fused score”) that only insufficiently made use of its one real novelty: black American music. Indeed, numerous critics

4. Valdo Freeman, “Interview with Valdo Freeman on Harry Lawrence Freeman, 1971 December 28, conducted by Vivian Perlis” (transcript), Oral History of American Music, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, Yale University, 17: “He [H. Lawrence Freeman] wrote his librettos and everything. That’s what used to annoy me, when I used to type up the different synopses and everything, I’d take them around [to potential producers]—I didn’t think they told such good stories, personally, you see . . . . And putting those words in there was, to my mind, terrible, you see. Now in the opera I told him about this effulgence, bright, and affluent whatever it was . . . . The very thing one of the critics hopped on.”


advised Freeman that his work would be successful and truly “modern” only when he learned to develop it out of “negro” rather than European forms.10

Discussions of Freeman and modernity were more celebratory in the black press in New York and nationwide during the height of what was then commonly referred to as the “Negro renaissance.” A headline in the Baltimore Afro-American read, “Voodoo, Race Opera Opens Up New Field—Lawrence Freeman’s Play Takes Pioneer Step in New Race Culture,” while an advance publicity blurb in the New York Amsterdam News bore the martial title “The Negro Invades the Grand Opera Field.”11 A few years later, in a 1934 profile of Freeman, Amsterdam News theater critic Obie McCollum commented on the dialectic of conservatism and innovation in the composer’s life and work. Upon stumbling into Freeman’s studio, McCollum conceded, one might be forgiven for exclaiming, “‘Here is the workshop of an old school music teacher who lives in the past.’” “Certainly,” he continues, “the Elizabethan period paintings, the wall masks recalling the glory which was the Moor’s, the alabaster bust of Shakespeare, bard of Avon; the mullions and furniture in Doric, Louis IV and Ionic, and the panelled walls and ceiling in ebony, red, gold and pale green would suggest a leaning toward yesterday.” But to dwell on appearances, McCollum suggests, would be to entirely miss the deep strain of innovation in the work of this “pioneer composer.”12

This piece of the reception history of a little-known opera by a largely forgotten composer bespeaks the slipperiness of the concept of the “modern” in the 1920s, and broadly indicates some of the eclectic, if not competing, values and aesthetics that underpinned it—ideas about sonic “discord,” racial progress, and authenticity, to name but a few. Certainly, the meanings of “modern” and its cognates—“modernity,” “modernism,” “modernization”—have been manifold, and the relationships among these terms unstable.13

10. Frankenstein writes, “One more book Mr. Freeman should study. It should be a history of modern music. There he would learn that the Russians and the Spanish and the Hungarians and the English and others have lifted themselves into high position in musical art by deep study and unremitting exploitation of their racial resources, and by no other means”: Frankenstein, “New York Hears First Negro Opera Company.” J.B.C. writes, “[T]he opera as a whole is not melodious, nor is it even faithfully Negro”: J.B.C., “Realm of Music.”


13. It is even—or especially—hard to find agreement on when “modernity” is supposed to have begun, to say nothing of whether it has ended. Does it begin in the seventeenth century as Anthony Giddens would have it, in the late eighteenth century as Marshall Berman implies, or
This article cannot resolve the apparently intractable problems surrounding a set of largely incommensurate concepts. Nevertheless, the ambiguities of the “modern” that I am concerned with are fundamental and follow from the term’s double meaning, since it designates both qualitative properties and a temporal condition. Thus, not only have many, often conflicting ways of imagining the modern coexisted in a given period and place (as the reception of Voodoo makes clear), but the concept also inevitably gets out of joint with itself over time.

If this rather axiomatic declaration about the relativity and transience of the modern verges on truistic banality, my aim in this article is to lend it historical specificity, paying particular attention to race. Toward that end, I show how Freeman’s lifelong project, the creation of what he would call “Negro Grand Opera,” mediated between disparate and sometimes apparently irreconcilable figurations of the modern that spanned the late nineteenth century through the interwar years: Wagnerism, uplift ideology, primitivism, and popular music (including, but not limited to, jazz). Throughout, I focus on Freeman’s inheritance of a worldview that could be called progressivist, evolutionist, or, to borrow a term from Wilson Moses, civilizationist, and on the complex relationship between this mode of imagining modernity and the various facets of modern culture that he brought together in Negro grand opera. I will discuss these terms at greater length below. For now, I simply sketch the broad contours of the problem at hand.

While the idea of continual human progress has a long lineage in the West, from Christian doctrines of moral perfectionism to the Enlightenment faith in the unfolding of rationality over time, it became an increasingly dominant belief across the nineteenth century, eventually constituting something like an “official” ideology of modernity. It is a terminological irony that the ideal of modernity as the result of historical progress would appear to be the antithesis of so much that ultimately fueled “modernism,” from a fascination with the “primitive” and a corresponding critique of civilization, to new forms of popular culture (including jazz) once maligned by so many elite-minded adherents of the developmental thesis. Historian Jackson Lears goes so far as to write that what “[literary] critics call modernism” he calls “antimodernism,” since the artistic ferment thus designated was largely a reaction against progressive narratives of modernity and their genteel optimism.16

earlier—perhaps, as Fredric Jameson once “outrageously” (his word) suggested, with the Council of Trent? Giddens, Consequences of Modernity; Berman, All That Is Solid; Jameson, The Ancients and the Postmoderns, 3. For a classic study of the philological and conceptual history of modernity, see Calinescu, Five Faces of Modernity, esp. 13–92.


15. See Lears, No Place of Grace, esp. 3–26.

16. Ibid., xix.
But this is to overstate the case and unnecessarily simplify the relationship between modernism in the arts and the teleological view of history. After all, the canons of European modernism are rife with figures and movements who retained the dogma of civilizational progress in their attitudes toward aesthetic forms (think of Schoenberg or Boulez). To turn toward African American artistic production, when Samuel Floyd describes Scott Joplin’s opera *Treemonisha* (ca. 1907–11) as an embodiment of the “spirit of modernism” because it “rejects ‘ignorance and superstition’ and looks forward to the ‘raising of the race’ through education,” his is no purely idiosyncratic reading of modernism. Floyd’s use of the term points to an African American discourse of cultural uplift whose debt to Victorian ideas about civilizational development—implicit in both the message and the “high” form of *Treemonisha*—is entwined with such quintessentially “modernist” values as the valorization of the “new.” Indeed, the trope of the “New Negro,” from its *fin-de-siècle* beginnings through its heyday in the 1920s, was a testament to the dialectic between narratives of progress on one hand and rupture or radical renewal on the other. From this perspective, both Joplin’s and Freeman’s foundational contributions to what Eileen Southern once called the African American “obsession” with operatic composition might be regarded as “modernist.”

None of which is to argue that “modernism” and “modernity” were categories that seamlessly integrated the disparate ideologies and aesthetics that have been imputed to them. On the contrary, Freeman’s music and career are interesting precisely because the eclectic versions of the modern that he assembled were often in tension. He was heir to the late nineteenth-century American reception of Wagner (advertising himself as “the colored Wagner”) as well as to the roughly contemporaneous reevaluation of spirituals, both of which had been deployed in *fin-de-siècle* projects of cultural uplift. But if Freeman adopted uplift paradigms of racial advancement through high art, he also toured on the early twentieth-century black musical comedy circuit and memorialized its minstrel origins in an “operatic sketch.” Moreover, he derided ultramodernist compositional tendencies from a “Romantic” standpoint while experimenting with harsh neoprimitivist harmonies, and played with the notably modern signifier “jazz” while slyly critiquing its Jazz Age significations. From these varied, sometimes overtly contradictory musical engagements, Freeman forged Negro grand opera. In exploring these tensions and contradictions, I show how the American

18. For a study of the concept from 1895 to 1925, see Gates, “Trope of a New Negro.”
19. Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 582. This was an often painful obsession given the steep fiscal requirements for producing opera in general, and the difficulties facing black composers who sought access to operatic institutions in particular.
understanding of race ramified the idea of the modern and inflected the process by which it plays catch-up with temporal modernity.

My discussion finally takes up a set of questions concerning the historiography of modernism and modernity. Should we speak of a black modernist tradition distinct from some putative white modernism? Would we do better to show how, for example, African American aesthetics and cultural production were in constant dialogue with European and Euro-American modernisms—even forming, to a considerable degree, the “origins” of modernism per se, as recent scholars such as Geoffrey Jacques and James Smethurst have argued?20 (Of course, these need not be mutually exclusive positions, as Paul Gilroy has long suggested.)21 Underlying such inquiries is a yet more basic question: Is (or was) modernity singular or plural?

Although I offer no unequivocal answers to these portentous questions, I eventually cast doubt on the notion of sharply differentiated modernisms even as I frame modernity itself as a plurality. This admittedly counterintuitive conclusion is partially a consequence of studying a relatively little-known figure rather than one of Freeman’s more renowned and influential contemporaries, a number of whom also hybridized African American folk music and European “formal” genres, worked in popular music and in opera, or experimented with symphonic jazz.22 Freeman was indeed in dialogue with Harlem Renaissance (and pre-Renaissance) musical and cultural currents, but, as I hope to show, he created a distinctive and original musico-dramatic world. More to the point, his very status as an apparently “minor” figure draws attention to the pivotal role of canon formation in the very concept of the modern. I will ultimately argue that it has never been solely a question of deciding who and what counts as “modern” at some given moment, but also one of adjudicating the modernity of the past. Thus, against the entrenched Euro-chauvenist belief that people of the African diaspora were not capable of full participation in modernity, whatever precisely that was presumed to be, it is perhaps tempting to “recover” a figure such as Freeman as a modern or a modernist, the kind of move that has become familiar in criticism of recent decades.23 My title may imply that something like this is

20. Jacques, Change in the Weather; Smethurst, African American Roots of Modernism. George Hutchinson also critiques the construction of an “autonomous’ African American literary tradition”: Hutchinson, Harlem Renaissance in Black and White, 4 and passim.

21. Gilroy proposed a transnational constellation of aesthetics, ideas, and practices that “stand simultaneously both inside and outside the western culture which has been their peculiar step-parent”: Gilroy, Black Atlantic, 48–49.

22. A list might include Will Marion Cook, R. Nathaniel Dett, J. Rosamond Johnson, William Grant Still, and Duke Ellington. I say more about all these figures below.

23. For the classic study in this respect, see Baker, Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. For a monograph on Harlem Renaissance music that takes Baker’s book as its model, see Spencer, New Negroes and Their Music.
my aim, and that is not entirely incorrect. Negro grand opera incorporated multiple strands of cultural modernity and I demonstrate that it can be readily interpreted as a modernist endeavor. However, I am ultimately less concerned with enshrining Freeman in an expanded canon of modernism than with exploring his work and career in order to illuminate tensions lodged within the historical concept of the modern, not the least of which is the propensity for the term’s meaning and coverage to be continually transformed.

Introducing Freeman and Negro Grand Opera

Since Freeman has received little scholarly attention, an introductory sketch of his career is in order. I begin with the basic facts before discussing his artistic development and reputation in more depth. Born in Cleveland in 1869, Harry Lawrence Freeman wrote that he was largely raised by his maternal grandmother, who had been “born a slave on a Maryland plantation, but . . . had ‘walked’ away at the age of 14.”24 He studied piano as a child, led an ensemble of boy singers, and began performing as a church organist around the age of twelve.25 Having moved in the 1880s to Denver, he attended a performance of Tannhäuser by the Emma Juchs Grand Opera Company, an experience that, by his own telling, changed the course of his life.26 Determined to compose opera following his encounter with Tannhäuser, Freeman formed an all-black amateur opera company in Denver to put on his early original works, the librettos of which he also wrote. The Freeman Opera Company, as the group was known, premiered the composer’s first two operas: Epithalia in 1891 and The Martyr in 1893.27 The Martyr was presented again that same year in Chicago during the World’s Columbian Exposition, although the performance was not part of the fair itself.28

24. H. Lawrence Freeman, “The Negro in Music and Drama” (unpublished typescript, no date), 249–50, Box 50, Folder 3, Freeman Papers. Typos and orthographic irregularities in Freeman’s writings have been silently corrected.
25. For a concise biographical sketch, see Handy, “H. Lawrence Freeman.”
26. Freeman told this story in a biographical sketch he sent to Edward Ellsworth Hipsher: H. Lawrence Freeman, letter to Edward Ellsworth Hipsher (no date), Box 49, Folder 3, Freeman Papers. It also appears in McCollum, “Trail Blazer.”
27. In the biography sent to Hipsher, Freeman writes that The Martyr (originally titled Platonus) was performed at Denver’s Deutsches Theater, perhaps referring to one of the two German theaters of the Denver Turnverein. He names the singers in his Freeman Opera Company as Abram Williamson, Adah Roberts, William Carey, Edward Bennett, Ida Williamson, Winnetta Williams, Ida Clark, Ethel Bundy, and Sarana Clark.
28. According to one source, the Chicago performance of The Martyr was held at “Bethel Church,” perhaps referring to Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. See “Grand Opera ‘Destiny’ by Colored Composer Harry L. Freeman” (unidentified newspaper review, dated 1898 by Freeman), Box 59, Freeman Papers. On African Americans and the World’s
Freeman returned to Cleveland in the mid-1890s before moving to Ohio to teach at Wilberforce University, probably during the years 1902–3. Following a brief stint as musical director at the Pekin Theater in Chicago, he settled in Harlem around 1910 and established a music school. By 1913 he had founded a New York–based group called the Colored Choral Society. To produce his operas, Freeman began to work out plans for a black opera company at least as early as 1916. Originally to be called the Colored Grand Opera Company of New York, the organization was eventually incorporated as the Negro Grand Opera Company in 1920. Attempting to sell stock in the company ($100 a share), Freeman printed a pamphlet that appealed to racial pride: “The Negro composer has not had this same opportunity for public presentation, the Caucasian not deeming it within his province to accept the Negro’s creative ability in the realms of higher art seriously. . . . Hence the successful presentation of these works by a superb organization . . . who will forthwith establish irrefutable proof of the creative achievement of the great Races of the World.” But money was a perennial problem and the company managed only a few productions over the next decade, the most notable of which was the 1928 run of *Voodoo*. Under the leadership of the company, Freeman continued to compose new operas through the late 1940s. He died at his home in Harlem in 1954. (A photograph of Freeman taken by Edward Elcha ca. 1921 may be seen in Figure 1.)

Freeman considered *The Martyr* his first “grand opera.” The work’s exotic subject matter (Egypt in the early days of Judaism), antiquated language, and romantic score would in many respects set the mold for his output over the next fifty years. Indeed, by the close of the nineteenth century, Freeman had begun to formulate a program for his life’s work, as recorded in an article in the *Cleveland Press* in 1898: “Freeman’s plans are to go to Europe in about two years and after a thorough course at the big Columbian Exposition, see Paddon and Turner, “African Americans and the World’s Columbian Exposition.”

29. See the program for a performance by the Negro Choral Society on December 18, 1913, Box 55, Freeman Papers, and “Choral Society Scores—One Hundred Voices of Male and Female Artists Applauded as They Appeared for Y.M.C.A. Building Fund” (unidentified newspaper review, no date), Box 60, Freeman Papers.

30. These early plans are alluded to in “Colored Opera is Planned for N.Y.” (newspaper article labeled by Freeman “Amsterdam News, 1916–17”), Box 59, Freeman Papers.

31. Valdo Freeman, “The Artistic Status” (no date), Box 49, Folder 11, Freeman Papers. This is a brief essay contained within the pamphlet in question; though attributed to Valdo Freeman (in his capacity as manager of the Negro Grand Opera Company), it may actually have been written by H. Lawrence.

32. I discuss other notable performances and successes below.

33. He struck *Epithalia* from his oeuvre and the score does not survive. *The Martyr* was in fact originally subtitled a “sacred opera.”
conservatories to go to Africa. He wants to meet the Zulus, the Kaffirs, the Abyssinians and other nationalities and study their legends, mythology, and native music. He believes he can construct truly grand and noble operas on these foundations.”

Freeman never made it to Africa, nor did he study in Europe. He did, however, receive private lessons from the Leipzig-trained conductor and composer Johann Heinrich Beck in Cleveland in the 1890s.

34. “[Word missing] African Operas,” Cleveland Press, March 25, 1898 (Box 59, Freeman Papers). This article was published on the occasion of a performance by the Cleveland Symphony, led by Johann Heinrich Beck, of excerpts from Freeman’s opera Zuluki (retitled Nada).

35. Freeman did not study at a conservatory or college, as did a number of other African American composers born in the late nineteenth century. For example, J. Rosamond Johnson (1873–1954) studied at New England Conservatory, R. Nathaniel Dett (1882–1943) studied at Oberlin and later at Harvard and Eastman, and William Grant Still (1895–1978) studied at Oberlin.
mid-1890s, and he incorporated African students from Wilberforce into a 1903 performance of his opera *An African Kraal.*

Freeman would spend the rest of his life developing what by the early 1920s at the latest he was designating “Negro Grand Opera,” but not without first revising his attitude toward black American folk music, which he had once rejected. In his unpublished study “The Negro in Music and Drama,” he recounts a tense exchange with famed poet Paul Laurence Dunbar on the subject of African American folk culture. Dunbar, Freeman writes, had attended the Chicago performance of *The Martyr* in 1893. Two years later, while staying at the Freemans’ home in Cleveland, the poet admitted his bafflement that the composer had ignored “‘Negro themes—the folk, work or camp-meeting songs of the South,’” and in fact all black American music. (“‘There is nothing at all Negroid in any of your compositions.’”) Freeman recorded his reply: “‘You mean for me to copy and utilize, for operatic purposes, those funny-sounding noises—groanings, moanings and wailings. . . . You expect me to say “Dis” and “Dat” in music, do you? . . . Well,’ I concluded; ‘You suit yourself! I’ll suit myself! Do all the “South Before The War” stuff you wish. None of it for me!’” After relating this story, however, Freeman comments that he had “long since learned to love and revere these selfsame aboriginal Negro themes and melodies more than any music within the ken of mortal man.”

He had begun to incorporate spirituals into his musical language and Southern black dialect—or his conception thereof—into his librettos by 1912, when he composed the first draft of *Voodoo.* (A slave in the “American Music-Drama” *Athalia* of 1916 sings, “Sojers is crossin’ de fiel’ out dere, ’Pears lak to me deys a headin’ heah!”) With the addition of black American subject matter and music, by the second decade of the twentieth century Freeman had laid the conceptual basis for Negro grand opera. “By this,” he writes in an essay-cum-manifesto of the early 1920s titled “The Negro in Grand Opera,” “I mean works conceived by Negro composers, based upon typical Negro life and interpreted by Negro artists.”

36. Beck was born in Cleveland and studied in Leipzig. He was an early champion of Freeman. In addition to conducting some of Freeman’s early works, he wrote him letters of introduction and recommendation.

37. See H. Lawrence Freeman, “The Negro in Grand Opera” (unidentified magazine article, ca. 1922–23), Box 55, Freeman Papers.

38. Freeman, “Negro in Music and Drama,” 342–43. The story is curious given that Dunbar himself had a vexed relationship to his dialect poems. According to James Weldon Johnson, Dunbar lamented, “I’ve got to write dialect poetry; it’s the only way I can get them to listen to me”: Johnson, *Book of American Negro Poetry,* xxxiv. See also Gaines, *Uplifting the Race,* 179–208.


40. Freeman, “Negro in Grand Opera.”
Freeman’s turn toward black American music and topics was meant not to supplant but to complement and extend the mytho-historic opera project he had begun in the 1890s. Negro grand opera was to be truly global. In addition to setting African American topics, Freeman added, “[w]e also claim the right to depict certain episodes of other dark skinned races, such as the [American] Indian, Mexican, Mongolian and other oriental peoples, especially those who have made their abode in Africa from time immemorial, such as the Egyptian and the Arab.”

Freeman’s operatic works, all of which he appeared to retrospectively group under the category of Negro grand opera, would include Valdo (1895), a “Romantic Opera” about a nineteenth-century Mexican caballero (Freeman proceeded to name his son after the character); The Octoroon (1902–4), a “music-drama” set in the antebellum South, based on Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s serialized novel of 1861–62; An African Kraal (1902, revised 1937), about hunters in “Kaffir-land”; The Tryst (1910) and The Prophecy (1911), both about American Indians; Voodoo (ca. 1912–14, premiered 1928), a “Negro Grand Opera” set in Louisiana shortly after the Civil War; Athalia (1916), set in the South during the Civil War; Vendetta (1923), set in Mexico; Uzziah (1931), about Israelites in biblical times, based on a libretto by Florence Lewis Speare; the Zululand “African Music Drama” tetralogy comprising Chaka, The Ghost-Wolves, The Stone Witch, and Umslopogaas and Nada (1917–43); and Jezebel (1944), a “Music Drama” set in Israel during “the remote past.”

It is difficult to assess Freeman’s position and reputation among the artists and intellectuals who formed the frontlines of the Harlem Renaissance. W. E. B. Du Bois never mentioned him in writing, and Alain Locke did not include him in The Negro and His Music (1936). In the seminal collection The New Negro (1925), edited by Locke, Freeman’s was not among the forty-five names included in the appendix titled “Selected List of Modern Music, Influenced by American Negro Themes or Idioms.” But he was by no means completely overlooked, as indicated by the numerous reviews of

41. Ibid.
42. The earliest manuscript for Voodoo is dated 1912. (Freeman’s general practice was to write the date of beginning a composition on the first page of a manuscript and the date of completing it on the last. But in the case of this early Voodoo manuscript the only date provided is 1912 on the first page.) In his writings Freeman usually listed the date of Voodoo as either 1913 or 1914.
43. Freeman also composed a few other operas that were not obviously about the “dark skinned races” of the world. American Romance (1924–29), which I deal with in depth below, is about white New York society during the Jazz Age. Leah Kleschna (1930), adapted from the eponymous play by C. M. S. McLellan, concerns a jewelry thief. The Wolf (undated) is a “fairy operetta” for children.
44. The list included white and black composers, famous and not so famous: Frederick Delius, William Grant Still, Igor Stravinsky, Carl Diton, Edgard Varèse, Henry Hadley, Edmund Thornton Jenkins, Louis Moreau Gottschalk, George Gershwin, and Hall Johnson, among others.
Voodoo. He was the subject of an admiring essay of 1933 by the literary historian Benjamin Brawley, published in the Hampton Institute’s journal, the Southern Workman. Six sentences were devoted to him in Maud Cuney-Hare’s historical survey Negro Musicians and Their Music (1936), and three in James Weldon Johnson’s Black Manhattan (1930). The respected Chicago Defender critic Dave Peyton wrote enthusiastically of the composer. Freeman would also have been a familiar name through occasional columns on music that he himself wrote for the widely circulated Baltimore Afro-American during the 1930s. This is not to say that he was universally praised by the black commentators who discussed his work. In his 1930 study of William Grant Still, poet and composer Harold Bruce Forsythe bitingly criticized the “impossible” black press for overusing “the words ‘beautiful,’ ‘talent,’ ‘genius,’ and ‘wonderful,’” adding, “Freeman and others have written very dreadful things, even more dreadful than certain of Mr. [Harry T.] Burleigh’s songs.”

Forsythe’s judgment notwithstanding, the year prior to that critique Freeman and Burleigh were jointly given Gold prizes in the music category of the recently instituted but prestigious Harmon Award for Distinguished Achievement among Negroes (Freeman won for Voodoo). A list of other composers who were awarded Harmons might help us to begin to form a partial picture of Freeman’s musical milieu during his New York years. In 1927, R. Nathaniel Dett and Clarence Cameron White won Gold, and William Grant Still and Edward H. Margetson won Bronze. The year in which Freeman and Burleigh won Gold (1929), Carl Diton was awarded Bronze, and the following year Hall Johnson received Gold. None of the great jazz and blues musicians of the day received Harmons, perhaps unsurprisingly given the dedication to forging an elite African American art music that prevailed among one wing of Harlem society. Freeman, however, certainly collaborated with musicians who worked in an array of popular and vernacular styles. Early in his career he worked with the great musical comedian and ragtime songwriter Ernest Hogan, and he claimed to have taught the stride pianist-composer Charles Luckeyth Roberts (Lucky Roberts).

45. Benjamin Brawley, “A Composer of Fourteen Operas,” Southern Workman, July 1933; abridged version printed in the Dunbar News, August 9, 1933 (Box 55, Freeman Papers).
46. Cuney-Hare, Negro Musicians and Their Music, 342; Johnson, Black Manhattan, 125.
48. Forsythe, “William Grant Still,” 278–79. In an Amsterdam News column of 1944, the critic Nora Holt celebrated Freeman’s achievements but also hedged her bets: “Whether these operas and other works, covering more than fifty years of labor and creative genius, are great is difficult to say”: Nora Holt, “Father of Opera,” New York Amsterdam News, November 11, 1944, 13.
49. See Freeman, “Negro in Music and Drama,” 189–90.
was a friend and published a few of Freeman’s own forays into popular song. In 1934, Freeman collaborated with Handy and an impressive roster of composers on *O, Sing a New Song*, a “musical extravaganza” designed to “display Negro Music in an Historical way” that was presented at Chicago’s Soldier Field. These included three of the most significant composers of black musical theater, Will Marion Cook, Will Vodery, and J. Rosamond Johnson; military bandleader and teacher of many jazz musicians Major N. Clark Smith; as well as Harry T. Burleigh and William Grant Still, two of the preeminent African American composers of concert music, representing older and younger generations respectively.50

Freeman also knew Scott Joplin and the two reportedly had a meeting in 1912 to discuss opera. Advised by fellow musicians to revise *Treemonisha*, Joplin apparently sought guidance from Freeman, a year his junior but with a decade more experience in the form.51 Joplin’s bitter struggles to get *Treemonisha* produced are now well known, and even sometimes mythologized as the cause of his tragically early death in 1917. Freeman’s own substantial difficulties in presenting his operas do not appear to have shortened his life and he was still around to contribute to what Gayle Murchison identifies as a “tradition of African American opera emerg[ing] in the 1920s” that reflected Harlem Renaissance aesthetics and ideals, such as the hybridization of “formal” and African American “vernacular” styles, the tactical use of art to undermine anti-black prejudice, and the representation of Afro-diasporic religious traditions and pan-Africanist cultural politics.52 This repertoire would include Clarence Cameron White and John Frederick Matheus’s *Onanga!*, a dramatization of the Haitian revolution and its aftermath, composed during the late 1920s; *Blue Steel* (1934), William Grant Still’s first completed full-length opera, with a libretto by aforementioned Freeman critic Harold Bruce Forsythe about a mythical confrontation between voodoo and modern materialism;53 and Shirley Graham’s *Tom-Tom* (1932), a pageant-like meditation on the continuity and distance between an ancestral Africa and contemporary black America.

Freeman was aware of at least some of these works. An advertisement for the widely publicized *Tom-Tom* may be found in his scrapbooks, as may a letter from an acquaintance of Valdo Freeman’s who was put out that


51. Joplin had also composed a now lost opera in 1903. On the meeting between Freeman and Joplin, see Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 218, and Berlin’s source, Reed, “Scott Joplin, Pioneer,” 132. Reed’s sole source, however, appears to be a letter written by Valdo Freeman in 1971.


53. *Blue Steel* was preceded by an aborted collaboration between Still and Countee Cullen from the late 1920s.
Graham’s work had been acclaimed by some as the “first negro opera.” (“Your father twenty five years ago produced his first here [in Cleveland] and many since.”)54 Whether or not Freeman knew of Still’s early operatic endeavors, he had enough confidence in the younger composer to seek to hire him as the orchestrator of Voodoo (to no avail).55 Given that Freeman had always orchestrated his operas himself (although a number remained in piano-vocal score), his solicitation was perhaps a response to Still’s fluency as an arranger of jazz and popular music of the day, an ideal qualification for orchestrating a work that would be advertised as a “Negro Jazz Grand Opera.”56

While Freeman should surely be included in the tradition of Harlem Renaissance opera, many of his works belonged to an earlier era and in certain respects reflected pre-Renaissance values. Voodoo may have presaged Ouanga!, Blue Steel, and Tom-Tom in depicting vodoun-related ritual practices, but in Freeman’s opera “voodoo” is a source of evil to be vanquished by Christianity rather than a venerable link to the African past.57 And although it is conceivable that Freeman’s African-themed operas may have influenced Graham’s Tom-Tom, as suggested by Sarah Schmalenberger, the differences are as significant as the similarities.58 Graham followed Freeman in employing, or representing, African instruments and in depicting “characteristic” scenes of traditional African life, such as hunts. But if the composers deal with similar topoi, Graham’s allegory about Garveyism and its discontents was a quintessential reflection of cultural-political debates of the Renaissance years, while Freeman’s African operas reflected an earlier phase of exoticism. This is true even of those works he composed later in life. The Zululand tetralogy (1917–43), for example, was an adaptation of the wildly popular Victorian-era novelist H. Rider Haggard’s primitivist fantasy Nada, the Lily (1892).59 Freeman certainly belongs within a fin-de-siècle lineage of black nationalist and early pan-Africanist thought, but the complexities attending his sources of inspiration must not be glossed over. His Afrocentric conception of Negro grand opera was significantly mediated through his abiding interest in a figure who was also crucial for Joplin and Graham (composer-librettists all), Richard Wagner.

54. Harry Ford, letter to Valdo Freeman, July 12, 1932, Box 49, Folder 3, Freeman Papers.
55. See William Grant Still, letter to H. Lawrence Freeman, November 15, 1921, Box 49, Folder 2, Freeman Papers.
56. Postcard-sized advertisement for Voodoo (1928), Box 59, Freeman Papers.
57. Joplin’s Treemonisha similarly presented folk “superstitions” as a major impediment to African American uplift.
59. On the influence of H. Rider Haggard and other “champions of empire” upon “the imagination of young African Americans and colonials,” see Gaines, Uplifting the Race, 112.
“The Colored Wagner,” Civilizationism, and Modernism

It would be only a mild overstatement to say that following his youthful encounter with *Tannhäuser* Freeman’s career unfolded under the sign of Wagner, from his taking up the appellation “the colored Wagner” in the 1890s to completing a massive tetralogy of “music dramas” in the early 1940s. The influence of Wagner could also be found in Freeman’s conspicuous use of a leitmotivic technique—he labeled the motives assiduously—as well as in concrete musical allusions. *The Martyr* contains a clear instance of the Tristan chord (although resolved in a decidedly un-Wagnerian manner), as well as numerous passages that recall *Der fliegende Holländer* (see Figures 2–4). In the hunt scene that opens *An African Kraal*, a Valkyrie-esque cry (“O-ya-o-ya-o”) is introduced by an orchestral tremolo borrowed from *Die Walküre* (see Figure 5). And the “Prelude” to *The Octoroon* would appear to be indebted to that of *Tristan und Isolde* in more than name: like Wagner’s Prelude, Freeman’s comprises a collection of fragmentary phrases separated by dramatic rests (see Figure 6).

These overt Wagnerisms notwithstanding (and plenty more abound), even Freeman’s earliest operas do not sound much like Wagner. The eclecticism that bewildered critics of *Voodoo* can be found throughout his oeuvre. Stylistic points of reference include Debussyan harmonies—Freeman’s proclivity for augmented triads and other chords derived from the whole-tone collection verged at times on obsession—ragtime syncopated figures, and primitivist ostinati à la early Stravinsky. In an especially un-Wagnerian vein, Freeman’s operas often featured arias that contrast starkly with the predominating musical material and declamatory vocal style. In *An African Kraal*, for example, a kind of lied with flowing pianistic arpeggios abruptly emerges from a haze of clustery chords, as if the stage had rotated and transported the characters to an early nineteenth-century salon. Similarly, in *Chaka*, the first installment in his Zululand tetralogy, whole-tone tonalities and declamatory exchanges are briefly forgotten in an “Orgy of Love” that synthesizes the descending tetrachord of Baroque lament with choral passages bearing the

60. “[Word missing] African Operas.” The article observes that “the colored Wagner” was “the appellation given to Harry L. Freeman by the musicians of Cleveland.”

61. I have chosen to illustrate my discussion of Freeman’s scores with photographic reproductions of his manuscripts rather than engraved transcriptions for two reasons. Firstly, Freeman’s manuscripts serve as historical documents, providing information that transcriptions would not. (For example, the way he labeled motives and inserted stage directions cannot be properly conveyed through transcription.) Secondly, the reproduction of the manuscripts acts as a reminder that none of Freeman’s operas was ever published. He may have produced such exquisitely neat scores because he knew his works would not be engraved.

62. Certainly, Wagner also wrote arias (for example, in *Tannhäuser*), but they do not tend to be sharply demarcated, stylistically divergent “showstoppers.”
Figure 2  Tristan chord in *The Martyr*, p. 15. Box 18, H. Lawrence Freeman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. Used by permission.
Figure 3  Passage recalling *Der fliegende Holländer* in *The Martyr*, p. 8. Box 18, H. Lawrence Freeman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. Used by permission.
Figure 4  Passage recalling Der fliegende Holländer in The Martyr, p. 17. Box 18, H. Lawrence Freeman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. Used by permission.
Figure 5  Valkyrie-esque cry in the hunt scene in *An African Kraal*, p. 8. Box 1, Folder 1, H. Lawrence Freeman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. Used by permission.
tonal imprint of spirituals (see Figure 7). Voodoo, which Freeman once named as his greatest achievement, was also among his least Wagnerian scores. Black American musical styles, including a four-part harmonization of the spiritual “Steal Away” as well as secular folk dances with banjos and “bones,” are juxtaposed with late nineteenth-century Italianate arias and exoticist “Spanish” tropes. A “tempo di Tango,” with castanets, recalls Carmen.

If Wagner remained a touchstone throughout Freeman’s career despite his eclectic taste, this was probably due to the symbolic legacy of Wagnerism as much as straightforward musical influence. But which Wagnerism? For the first generation of European modernists of the mid- to late nineteenth century, Wagner may have symbolized “what was transcendental about the new,” as Lawrence Kramer put it, but Wagner’s modernity was construed

63. Kramer, Opera and Modern Culture, 107. But as Kramer’s study well demonstrates, this is to significantly simplify the maddeningly complex place of Wagner in the formulation and legacy of European modernism. While Wagner may have inspired the burgeoning literary avant-garde in France, he was at once an opponent of “despiritualized” modernity—condemning capitalism, as well as electricity and early phonography—and in that respect anticipated a pronounced strain of antimodern modernisms that would later include the work of figures such as Eliot. See Lears, No Place of Grace, esp. 170–72.
Figure 7  Spiritual-like passage in the “Orgy of Love” in *Cluha*, p. 158 (p. 37 in earlier pagination). Box 6, H. Lawrence Freeman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. Used by permission.
quite differently in the United States, where, as Joseph Horowitz argued, Wagnerism took on a distinct shape under the influence of a “genteel” Gilded Age ideology. Through feats of sometimes extraordinary interpretive contortionism, American critics and musicians created a “meliorist Wagner,” whose life and work were purged of the sensuous, licentious, decadent, and indeed modernist associations that at once excited and scandalized Europe. In the United States, Wagner became a resolutely non-avant-garde symbol of moral rectitude and cultural betterment. This was the Wagnerism that Freeman presumably inherited, and it would have been easily enough adapted to the particularities of the African American concern with cultural uplift that was pervasive during his lifetime and prominently exemplified in his own writings.

That Wagner’s work was steeped in a vision of a national Volk would have made it all the more appealing for a composer who wished to elevate black American folk culture. Notably, W. E. B. Du Bois, Freeman’s almost exact contemporary, was also an avowed Wagnerite, perceiving in the music dramas an art simultaneously populist and sophisticated—a paradigm for a black folk Romanticism. Du Bois’s argument for Wagner’s relevance to black American life almost seems to describe Freeman’s Zululand tetralogy:

Faring further in his restless quest for the adequate expression of human experience and emotion, Wagner wrote, in the pain and doubt and hesitation of 40 years, the great Trilogy called “The Ring of the Nibelungs.” It is as though someone of us chose out of the wealth of African folklore a body of poetic material and, with music, scene and action, re-told for mankind the suffering and triumphs and defeats of a people.

Like Freeman, Du Bois maintained that African American folk culture was an invaluable source of artistic inspiration, already containing the seeds of an elite art form in its great repertoire of spirituals. By the first decades of the twentieth century, spirituals were increasingly enlisted in developmental narratives as an authentic folk expression that might at once form the foundation of a distinctly American “higher” art. In an essay of 1918, Freeman’s slightly younger contemporary R. Nathaniel Dett likened spirituals to both “rough timber” and mineral ore, adding that the African American inheritance of this material “will be of no value unless we utilize it, unless we treat it in such manner that it can be presented in choral form, in lyric and operatic works, in concertos and suites and salon music.” Alain Locke would

64. Horowitz, Wagner Nights, esp. ch. 15, here 286.
65. Ibid., passim.
66. See especially Gaines, Uplifting the Race.
68. Du Bois, Newspaper Columns, 1:130. Thanks to Alex Ross for reminding me that Du Bois’s description accords with Wagner’s understanding of the cycle as a trilogy preceded by a prelude (Das Rheingold).
later describe black folk music and spirituals in particular as the “purest and most valuable musical ore in America; the raw materials of a native American music.” Freeman himself regarded spirituals not so much as raw material waiting to be repurposed but as a dynamic “element” already moving toward a “higher art,” as if by some law of history. “The evolution of Negro musical art,” he wrote, “is based upon three potent elements—Spirituals, Blues, and Grand Opera.” Once this third term came to sublimate the first two, he suggested, not only would black music reach its point of culmination, it would also intersect with the great European tradition, giving rise to a “Negro Grand Opera” that would simultaneously constitute the first full-fledged “American opera.” Thus, for Freeman, as for many artists of the Harlem Renaissance years, the development of a new black art was also intended as a contribution to an American cultural nationalist project, but we should not underestimate the extent to which such nationalist appeals may have been, in part, tactical. In letters to producers and prospective patrons, Freeman frequently pointed to the failure of American opera as a travesty well known throughout the United States and the world—an embarrassing situation that, he added, might be rectified if his own works were better known. A late-career letter addressed to Eleanor Roosevelt begins,

Dear Madam: I am writing you in regards to our country, and also in regards to myself. . . . Our America has only one handicap that prevents it from being the equal of the great European Countries. In a recent broadcast, Mr. Skitch Henderson stated that America had not created a single grand opera of standardized potentialities, and as a consequence, we are far below other lands in musical art.

Over a period of sixty years, I have composed twenty original works—eleven grand operas, and nine “music-dramas” of the dimensions and caliber of those of the great European masters.

Freeman couched his teleological descriptions of Negro grand opera in a metaphor-heavy rhetoric of latency and potentiality. His essay “The Negro in the Higher Altitudes of Music in This Country and throughout the World” (1913) is characteristic. Beginning with a section titled “Status,” Freeman acknowledges that “the Negro . . . has not as yet revealed to the world at large his true musical value.” However, as argued in the following section (“Prospective”), there is every reason for optimism, as black Americans have proven themselves musically excellent in those areas in which they have been allowed to work:

Yet as babbling brooks, murmuring streams, roaring torrents and tumultuous cascades, each plastic and concrete in its own diminutive and individual form,

71. H. Lawrence Freeman, “The Musical Outlook” (draft, dated December 27, 1933), Box 50, Folder 2, Freeman Papers.
72. H. Lawrence Freeman, letter to Eleanor Roosevelt (no date), Box 49, Folder 7, Freeman Papers.
are bone and tissue (metaphorically) of each and every great and noble river, and the latter in turn offering fealty and allegiance unalterable to the vast and mighty seas and oceans, then also is the Negro’s capacity for the highest musical achievement fully assured, inasmuch as he has succeeded to the fullest extent in meeting the demands of the past decade for such smaller art forms in vogue through the only universal means of exposition at hand—the legitimate Negro theatrical and musical comedy organizations.

Thus the “Futurity”—the heading of another section—looks bright (“rich in voices of rare promise backed by will and superior intellect to further the same”). Freeman would leave little doubt that fulfillment of this “promise” was imminent, opening two other essays with the phrase “That the time is ripe.” As a rejoinder to the admonition, voiced by other “leading musicians of the race,” that it was still “too soon” for “the Negro” to compose, perform, or even appreciate opera, he looked to the “archives of past years,” which demonstrated that “literature, science and art were originated by the people of Africa.” The great learning of the civilizations of Egypt, Ethiopia, Arabia, and the Sudan, he continued, has “simply lain dormant in the soul of every black man and woman throughout the centuries,” awaiting rejuvenation. Thus, he seems to conclude, “the present day Negro” was assuredly up to the task of engaging with any of the “most modern and complex form[s],” be it opera or “luxuriant touring cars” and “aeroplanes, the acme of locomotion and exhilaration.” After all, he adds as evidence, he himself has already composed a grand opera.76

Presaging the Harlem Renaissance reevaluation of African heritage, Freeman’s conception of Negro grand opera was rooted in what Wilson Moses identified as the dialectic of nineteenth-century black “civilizationism.”

73. H. Lawrence Freeman, “The Negro in the Higher Altitudes of Music in This Country and throughout the World,” A. M. E. Church Review 30 (July 1913) (Box 59, Freeman Papers).
74. H. Lawrence Freeman, “Sign of the Times” (unidentified newspaper article, dated 1912 by Freeman, printed under the heading “Widely Known Musician Makes First Contribution”), Box 59, Freeman Papers: “That the time is ripe for serious consideration on the part of colored musicians, both executive and creative, has been evinced by the acceptance of a higher type of artistry and creations by colored people, upon the part of the American musical public during the last few years in general—the last few months in particular.” And, more straightforwardly, in Freeman, “Negro in Grand Opera”: “That the time is ripe for Negro Grand Opera is a foregone conclusion.”
75. I write “seems to conclude” because the passage is in fact slightly ambiguous: “The basis of this conclusion [that it is “too soon for a Negro to compose a grand opera”] is not that of the present day Negro. And this in the most modern and complex form, culminating in luxuriant touring cars as well as aeroplanes, the acme of locomotion and exhilaration”: Freeman, “Negro in Grand Opera.”
76. Ibid.: “Now while these same musical prophets admonish against the composing of grand opera by the Negro composer at this early date, they admit in the same breath that the works already composed by a Negro are grand operas, in every sense of the term. Why wait for our grandchildren to produce what we have already evolved?”
Moses describes, on one hand, a “historiography of decline” that proclaimed the former greatness of African civilizations, and on the other, a “historiography of progress” that asserted the promise of African and Afro-diasporic advancement in the future. The former shored up the latter in a “vindicatio[n]ist” argument that proved that, contra Hegel (among others), black people belonged to the march of global civilization and would once again contribute to the highest echelons of world culture.

The Eurocentrism and elitism that often underpinned this unilinear conception of human progress (for example, grand opera as a universal symbol of achievement) would eventually attract critique from some of the younger luminaries of the Renaissance years. Within the civilizationist framework, however, a space was maintained for black particularity. Black civilizationists invoked no Bible verse more frequently than Psalm 68:31: “Princes shall come out of Egypt: Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.” Freeman himself excerpted, and slightly modified, the passage as the epigraph to his study “The Negro in Music and Drama”: “Ethiopia Will Stretch Forth Her Hand Unto God In Song.”

Thus, hewing more closely to an ideal of civilizational development (simultaneously Western bourgeois, American cultural nationalist, and Afrocentric) than to a stereotypically “modernist” assault on tradition, Freeman’s evolutionist narrative of black music nevertheless displayed an aspiration to a certain kind of modernity—one secured by artistic achievement and reflecting a pronounced orientation toward “futurity.” Perhaps, then, we can better make out the allure of Wagner’s music dramas, whose special place in an American vision of aesthetic progress and cultural improvement may have entailed a suppression of their avant-garde connotations but not all vestiges of their status as Zukunftsmusik. And yet, it was precisely the European aesthetic hierarchies that Freeman’s generation had supposedly internalized, and their alleged enthralment to “false white idols,” that led later critics to cast them as regressive and distinctly unmodern by comparison with the famed “New Negroes” who emerged after World War I.

A critique of the so-called “Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem” generation was formulated as early as 1919 with William Stanley Braithwaite’s observation that the career of

77. On the “historiography of decline,” see Moses, Afrotopia, esp. 44–95. On the “historiography of progress” and “civilizationism,” see ibid., esp. 96–135.

78. In his 1824 Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte, Hegel famously wrote that “[Africa] is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit . . . What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World’s History”: Hegel, Philosophy of History, 99. Moses adopts the term “vindicatio[n]ism” from the sociologist and anthropologist St. Clair Drake and uses it throughout.

79. See McCaskill and Gebhard, Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem, 3. Of course, as Houston Baker reminds us, the “New Negroes” have likewise had their “modernity” and black authenticity impugned: Baker, Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance.
Paul Laurence Dunbar marked “the end of a régime, and not the beginning of a tradition”\(^8\) —a comment that curiously echoed the sentiment of Claude Debussy’s famous proclamation that Wagner’s music had been a “beautiful sunset that was mistaken for a dawn.”\(^1\)

Yet for all that monikers such as “the colored Wagner” might make us uncomfortable today, Freeman’s work can readily be interpreted as integrally modern. With his bold vision of a vast body of operas that would demonstrate the creative endowments of all the unjustly maligned “dark skinned races,” one could argue that Freeman “discovered” within Wagnerian music drama one of Du Bois’s most radical insights: namely, that the prevailing racial logic of modernity had to be conceived internationally; that it was not simply a matter of Anglo- and African Americans, but of whites and everyone else across the entire globe (“The Color Line Belts the World”).\(^2\) And if we wanted to posit the modernity of Freeman’s music on stylistic grounds, we might show that the passages from his operas that feature the most apparently derivative elements are often also the most startlingly original. When reviewers characterized his music as a “conglomeration” and a “mélange” they certainly meant it as a criticism. But such a description—by no means inapt—gets at what is truly striking, idiosyncratic, and indeed modernist about his work: the eclecticism as such, but also his techniques of structuring the stylistic array. (It is worth recalling that polystylistic collage—drawing on sources old and new, “high” and “low”—was as much a modernist as a postmodernist practice.)\(^3\)

In addition to juxtaposing divergent styles, Freeman often layered them. Such passages tend to be held together by interlocking ostinati built up over long spans of time, often taking the form of syncopated dances. In act 1, scene 1, of Chaka, the first installment in the Zululand tetralogy, a slow agglomeration of disparate material eventually builds to a massive “Folk Dance” that combines whole-tone harmonies, ragtime rhythmic figures, ostinati imitating the African calabash (according to a marking in the score), and moments reminiscent of Wagner. By the end of the dance the coordinating element of a single overarching time signature is abandoned. (See Figure 8.) If this description of the passage makes it sound rather like an outsize version of Debussy’s “Golliwog’s Cakewalk” (i.e., Debussy + Wagner + ragtime) or the barroom scene from Wozzeck, the music is also like nothing

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80. Braithwaite, “Some Contemporary Poets,” 402. Braithwaite, however, was commenting specifically on Dunbar’s dialect poetry, not on his imitation of European forms.
83. Standard literary examples would include The Wasteland and Ulysses. In musical composition we could point to works by Ives and Stravinsky, among others.
else that I have heard. Equally striking is a warriors’ “tribal dance” in “a slow measured step” toward the beginning of An African Kraal. It begins with the basses humming (“mmm”) a blue-note-inflected line in an odd-metered (5/4) syncopated rhythm, but tenors soon enter clashing four sharps against the basses’ four flats. The layers proliferate, with new blues elements added and others supplanted by the overriding augmented harmonies. (See Figure 9.)

It is tempting to read these polystylistic assemblages as an instance of what Houston Baker called the “mastery of form” in his 1987 study Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance.84 Baker’s phrase designated a black tropological technique in which the dominant culture’s impositions of ideology and style—including the “formally standard” conventions of “high” art—are inversely appropriated and treated as “artistic postures” or

84. Baker, Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, passim.
Certainly the conjunction of the terms “form” and “mastery” figured prominently in Freeman’s writings. “The dominant races of the world,” he wrote, “in general do not consider the Negro composer capable of mastering the intricate technicalities necessary for the construction of...”

85. Ibid., 85 (Baker’s emphases).
the operatic form. It seems doubtful that the multifarious subversions implicit in Baker’s trope are present in Freeman’s polystylistic play—the composer’s writings scarcely hint at an inversive stance vis-à-vis European forms—but the notion that the “necessary (‘forced,’ as it were) adoption of the standard results in an effective blackening” is at least suggestive. Freeman’s vast vamp

86. Freeman, “Negro in Grand Opera” (my emphasis).
87. Baker, Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, 85 (Baker’s emphasis).
passages, in particular, bear a debt to black vernacular styles that is expressed not only in their “surface” style elements but also in the constructive technique. And, indeed, Freeman often wrote about making European music blacker, deeper, and more fully American.

But to adopt Baker’s line of interpretation would also be to argue that those white critics who found Freeman’s work lacking in authentic blackness, and hence in modernity, were right in principle, if not in acuity of judgment. For Baker elaborates his tropology of black performance precisely to defend the modern (and modernist) bona fides of a body of literature that had at times been derided as derivative, “provincial,” and old-fashioned. In other words, his argument implies a rhetoric of cultural authenticity that is not wholly different from that of the newspaper critics. But I am not convinced that a positive assessment of Freeman’s modernity should depend upon understanding his Wagnerism, and his general debt to European music, as a form of critical-ironic pastiche under the sign of a black aesthetic. Nor, for that matter, should it require a suppression of his enthrallment with the works of a colonial apologist such as H. Rider Haggard. I will return to the problem of readjudicating what was and what was not truly modern, as if it were some category that we have some better retrospective grasp on. For now, I would like to dispense with the hagiographic impetus and instead explore Freeman’s own engagements with ideas about modernity, whose complex and sometimes paradoxical features have been too often ignored or forgotten.

**Meta-minstrel**

Freeman’s grappling with the temporal aspect of modernity is evident in the profusion of time markers that pepper his manuscripts. In the pages of the Zululand tetralogy, he recorded the date and time of his completion of scenes (“The End of Chaka, May 1; 5 am, 1941”); registered productivity (“Composed 114 pages in 30 days”); and marked the correspondence of completed sections with anniversaries of events in both American history and his own career (“Completed May, 30—1938 at 11 p.m. Decoration Day—45 years after the production of The Martyr at Wilberforce University”). Having written the last scene of the tetralogy first, he even provided an estimation of the date of the cycle’s completion (“According to calculation I do not expect to make connection with The Death of Umslopogaas until September—1944”). These markings seem to attest to a keen time-

88. The first of these quoted inscriptions is from Freeman, *Chaka*; the others are from Freeman, *Umslopogaas and Nada*. The tetralogy’s compositional chronology is complex and hard to reconstruct with any certainty. On the basis of Freeman’s at times conflicting notes, it seems that the first scene of the first installment, *Chaka*, was written in 1917. Another portion appears to have been written in 1932. Freeman then completed the fourth installment in 1936 and proceeded to
consciousness bound up with Freeman’s self-conception as a pathbreaking figure. Among his most overt forays into the stylistically modern are his experiments with a modernist-primitivist musical language. In the introduction to *An African Kraal*, for example, he used a figure that distinctly recalls the famous pulsations in Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* (see Figure 10).

I wish to focus, however, on Freeman’s engagement with popular music—a field integral to any discussion of modernity if still curiously hard to reconcile with the dominant genealogies of modernism. Recall that his tripartite model of black musical development included not only the by then venerable repertoire of spirituals (generally considered a sacred rather than “popular” music) but also blues. He joined the ranks, then, of a mostly younger generation of artists who championed the newer popular, secular styles that spanned the folk-commercial and rural-urban continuums. As mentioned above, Freeman had also long been involved with popular music of an earlier era, particularly a constellation of forms with deep ties to minstrelsy.

From the 1890s through the early 1910s Freeman worked on and off as a songwriter and composer for black musical comedies. After touring with minstrel performer and ragtime (and “coon song”) innovator Ernest Hogan in the 1890s, Freeman wrote songs, ensemble numbers, and opera scenes that were inserted into the 1905–7 productions of Hogan’s collaborative work *Rufus Rastus*. Commenting on the ensuing tension between “low” and “high” styles, Freeman wrote,

compose the rest of the cycle, setting down the final notes of his tetralogy’s approximately 2,000-page piano-vocal manuscript on July 30, 1943, approximately one year and two months ahead of schedule. But in the same score (*Umslopogaas and Nada*) Freeman would also write, “The Entire Cycle of Zululand Composed in Four Years Nine Months and Twenty One Days.”

89. It does not help that latter-day theories of modernism that do look to popular culture often subsume folkloric and commercial musical developments under the undifferentiated rubric “vernacular.” Although this tendency may represent an understandable reaction against earlier narratives that moralistically separated the two (folk art = good, commerce = bad), it obscures, among other things, the degree to which many of the relevant historical actors perceived a significant tension between them. Thus, Alain Locke wrote (in a lamentably anti-Semitic passage) that the “very musicians who know the folk-ways of Negro music are the very ones who are in commercial slavery to the Shylocks of Tin Pan Alley, in artistic bondage to the ready cash of our dance-halls and the vaudeville stage.” This follows from an earlier period (1875–95) in which, he claimed, “popular music becomes cut off from sound roots in folk music, and good [i.e., classical] music has to wall itself about to keep from being contaminated by popular music.” Locke, *Negro and His Music*, 4–5, 55. The term “vernacular” also fails to distinguish between secular popular styles and sacred music.

90. Complementing songs by Hogan, Tom Lemonier, and Joe Jordan, Freeman provided an “Operatic Opening Chorus” and, for the show’s closing number, a “Grand Opera Quintette” from *The Martyr*. He also contributed a popular song he had written called “Down Where the Yazoo River Flows” as the first act’s finale, and made a “contrapuntal arrangement” of Lemonier’s “Just One Word of Consolation.” See the program for a performance of *Rufus Rastus* at the Great Northern Theatre in Chicago, September 23, 1906, Box 59, Freeman Papers. Freeman writes that Ernest Hogan asked him to become musical director for *Rufus*
After having completed my operatic ensembles, Ernest called to Will Marion Cook, who was not only residing in the next house, but upon the same floor . . . and asked him what he thought of the recently completed numbers. The answer was “Great—Too great! Way above the heads of the audiences you will play to.” Whereupon Ernest replied: “I told the professor to aim as high as he desired along classical lines; and that I would offset it with my comedy.”

The confluence of popular and elite styles is also registered in the plot of Rufus Rastus. In this “Musical Extravaganza” Rufus’s misadventures bring him into contact with “Jubilee Singers,” “Minstrels,” “Terpsichorean Artists,” and “Serenaders,” as well as a number of characters who are involved in opera. There is a “Signor Brury, with operatic aspirations”—seemingly a satire of Theodore Drury, founder of the Drury Colored Opera Company in the 1890s—and a “Mandy Jones, leading soprano of the Ragtime Opera Co.”

In 1909 Freeman would replace James Reese Europe as the musical director of Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson’s Indian-themed show The Red Moon. Two years later he collaborated with musical comedian “Jolly” John Larkins on the “musical scream” Royal Sam.

Given Freeman’s reverence for grand opera, we might imagine that his involvement in musical comedy was merely a way of paying the bills so that he could continue his real work. But in contrast to a number of his contemporaries, including Du Bois, he was in fact deeply impressed by the black minstrel tradition and its musical comedy successors. His essay “Great Troubadours of the Past” begins,

To those ancient troubadours, the Minstrels of post-bellum days, whose restless and enterprising spirits caused them to forge a veritable array of original combinations of dramatic and musical exhibits—and to whose initiative the Negro Theatre of today owes its very existence, we tender a great tribute of honor and devotion. Theirs was not a sporadic effulgence of overflowing inspiration seeking to exploit itself in diverse characterizations; but new art factors

Rastus after hearing The Martyr in Chicago in May 1905: Freeman, “Negro in Music and Drama,” 159. Operatic medleys had in fact been part of the black variety show format as far back as the 1890s, although they would generally have been drawn from the European repertoire rather than composed anew; see Riis, Just before Jazz, 13–14. For a fascinating study of the intersection of opera and American popular culture, see Hamberlin, Tin Pan Opera.

91. Freeman, “Negro in Music and Drama,” 159.

92. Ibid., 160–61. A number of the characters (including Signor Brury/Drury) that Freeman names in the typescript of his book are missing from Bernard L. Peterson’s entry on the piece: Peterson, Century of Musicals, 295–96.


94. Du Bois wrote, “Side by side, too, with the growth [of black American music] has gone the dehaiserations and imitations—the Negro ‘minstrel’ songs, many of the ‘gospel’ hymns, and some of the contemporary ‘coon’ songs,—a mass of music in which the novice may easily lose himself and never find the real Negro melodies”: Du Bois, Souls of Black Folk, 184. On Paul Laurence Dunbar’s ambivalence about musical comedy, see Gaines, Uplifting the Race, 179–208.
fused into a concrete theatrical form. These groups depicted the life and pursuits of the colored people of America, from the period of their transplantation on this continent to the time of their emancipation, as thoroughly and as vividly as did their forefathers, through the Spirituals, the Folk and Work Songs.

Freeman proceeds to sketch a history of black musical comedy, from post–Civil War minstrel shows, when “aboriginal bards, . . . under the sobriquet of ‘End Men,’ sallied forth at the dawn of freedom, dispensing hope and cheer to the befuddled inhabitants of a stricken Nation”; to a “transitional” period of variety shows of the 1880s and 1890s, which “like unto phosphorescent barnacles, tenaciously annexed themselves to each and every specie of theatrical endeavor”; to a “Renaissance” period around the turn of the century, with the emergence of vaudeville and a new generation of “progressive geniuses” (Ernest Hogan, Bob Cole, Bert Williams, George Walker, and S. H. Dudley) who helped to create “Super-Shows” by “super-theatrical organizations . . . whose caliber of greatness has never been equaled since their dissolution.”

If Freeman had misgivings about the stereotypes that pervade this repertoire, they are perhaps manifest in his frequent defense of the “sophisticated” (i.e., European or Euro-American) private tastes of these singer-comedians whose public personae were so marked by mirth-inducing ridiculousness. Bert Williams, we learn, spent his “leisure hours . . . devoted to the perusal and study of literature of the highest order, as well as musical classics,” while Ernest Hogan had an avid interest in “Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe and Guy De Maupassant.” But whatever implicit discomfort with minstrel and vaudeville traditions we might read into Freeman’s commentary, the composer never suggests that these were anything less than artful, deeply inventive forms molded by performers of genius. Thus he praised Bob Cole’s formal innovations (“Cole was of an ingenious turn of mind, creative in the art of lyrical conceptions, and structural in the evolution of new forms”) before also noting his high-culture bona fides: “Like unto his great contemporaries, Bert Williams and Ernest Hogan, Bob Cole was also an indefatigable devotee to famous literature.”

A great deal of ink has been justifiably devoted to the numerous ways in which black American artists and orators adapted the conventions of minstrelsy for subversive ends, investing the minstrel persona with a trickster’s cunning. Freeman’s reevaluation of minstrelsy followed a related yet distinct logic. Rather than strategically conforming to minstrel stereotypes in order to undo them, he sought to elevate the minstrel tradition itself by reading

95. Freeman, “Negro in Music and Drama,” 135.
96. Ibid., 136, 143, 146, 148. For a similar periodization of black minstrelsy and comedy, see Locke, *Negro and His Music*, chs. 6–8.
97. Freeman, “Negro in Music and Drama,” 148, 149.
98. Ibid., 149.
it through the respectable rhetoric of progress. In this he was not alone. Although Locke may have proudly commented on the “younger generation” of New Negro artists who “have shaken themselves free from the minstrel tradition,” he would also write of the progression from the “really great Negro minstrel troupes” of the “First Age of Minstrelsy” (1850–75) to the musically more sophisticated era of “Ragtime and Negro Musical Comedy” (1895–1925).99 Even Dett, who faulted minstrel shows and vaudeville for degrading the status of spirituals, admitted that these traditions were catalysts of black musical progress. “That ‘it is an ill wind which blows nobody good,’” he wrote, “is proven by the fact that while the minstrel shows did much in lowering the tone and establishing a false impression of Negro music, yet [minstrel and vaudeville shows] also were a considerable factor in causing its development.”100 For Locke and Dett, whatever was valuable in the minstrel show and its theatrical descendants had been superseded. While Freeman’s respect for the minstrel tradition was probably greater, he too located its evolutionary terminus in the past. The “Super-Show” of the first decade of the twentieth century, he suggested, could not be improved upon—at least not within the generic constraints of popular forms. But having inserted operatic excerpts into his collaborations with Hogan and others, Freeman would subsequently invert the procedure, so to speak, commemorating the minstrel tradition in an “operatic sketch” titled Minstrels of the Past (undated).

Freeman’s meta-minstrel show opens in a “rustic amphitheater” in the forest. On five rows of tree stumps sit a group of “end men”—equipped with banjos, tambourines, bones, and trap drums—a handful of “chorus men,” and many of the most famous black minstrel, vaudeville, and musical comedy performers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Bert Williams, Ernest Hogan, Bob Cole, George Walker, Sam Lucas, J. Leubrie Hill, and, in the center of it all, a “pink and gold, sea shell enshrined Aida Overton Walker.” To this assortment of characters, Freeman adds a minstrel show staple, the “Interlocutor,” who variously implores the audience to be seated, engages with the principals (James McIntyre: “Why does a chicken cross the road?”—Interlocutor: “You’ve got me this time. Just why does a chicken cross the road?”—McIntyre: “So he can scratch on the other side”),101 and introduces the singer-comedians and their songs, all in operatic recitative (see Figure 11). With the exception of these introductions, jokes, and dialogues, the entire act—marked, in the traditional style, “Minstrel First Part”—consists of solo and ensemble numbers taken from the

99. For Locke, however, this progression had not been direct: between these periods a “gaudy and cheap” “Second Age of Minstrelsy” had intervened, popular music having been “cut off from sound roots in folk music”: Locke, New Negro, 48; Locke, Negro and His Music, 52–55.
100. Dett, R. Nathaniel Dett Reader, 29.
101. James McIntyre was a white minstrel performer of the period.
minstrel, vaudeville, and musical comedy repertoire from the 1870s through about 1910.102

“Opera” functions as a frame that bestows a kind of legitimacy on the entertainments and, in a sense, memorializes them. In place of the linear development of minstrelsy and musical comedy that he described in his study, Freeman operatically stages an out-of-time apotheosis in which the great figures are all present at once, thereby canonizing a tradition while

102. Freeman’s show includes “Sam Lucas” performing the 1876 hit “My Grandfather’s Clock” by the white composer (and abolitionist) Henry Clay Work (incorrectly attributed to Lucas by the Interlocutor); “J. Lubrie Hill” singing “Dahomian Queen” (a song that was incorporated into the seminal 1903 black musical comedy In Dahomey by Will Marion Cook, Jesse Shipp, and Paul Laurence Dunbar); “Bert Williams” delivering a half-spoken “Something You Don’t Expect” (from the Follies of 1910); two songs from Rufus Rastus, including an ornate four-part arrangement of the down-tempo sentimental tune “My Mobile Mandy”; a barbershop-quartet-styled version of the famous “My Sweet Adeline”; and “Aida Overton Walker” singing “Why Adam Sinned” by Alex Rogers (1904).
signaling its disappearance ("Minstrels of the Past"). But perhaps his formally hybrid "operatic sketch" was also meant to point the way forward. The minstrel tradition may have reached the zenith of its development sometime in the past, but it might be enfolded within, and contribute to, an operatic lineage whose path it had long crisscrossed.

Yet while discussions about forging a distinctively American style through the hybridization of black "vernacular" and Western "formal" traditions were pervasive during the Renaissance years, minstrel entertainment rarely served as the vernacular representative. Spirituels remained the obvious choice for a usable folkloric past, and blues and jazz would have been the more likely secular, popular candidates for an aesthetics of hybridity premised on the doctrine of musical progress. Indeed, by the time Freeman wrote *Minstrels of the Past*, the performance traditions featured therein had been increasingly eclipsed by the new music and dance styles that were the face of the Jazz Age. And while figures of early jazz would become an enduring part of the national mythology, the earlier generation of musical comedians would largely fade from the collective imagination. When today we think about black minstrelsy and the "coon song" repertoire, as well as much vaudeville and early musical comedy, we cannot but recoil from their racist stereotypes, against which jazz (as we know it) seems an ennobling and indisputably progressive and modern form. Freeman, however, did not appear quite so sanguine about jazz or Jazz Age modernity.

**Forced to Jazz?**

In one of the few scholarly comments on Freeman’s life and work, Elise K. Kirk suggested that the composer’s importation of a “‘low-class’” form such as jazz into his operas (she names *Voodoo*) was too far ahead of its time for mainstream American audiences and that his career suffered accordingly. But certainly by 1928, when Freeman publicized the premiere of *Voodoo* as a “Negro Jazz Grand Opera” rather than a “Negro Grand Opera” (its original...
subtitle), “jazz” was more of a selling point than a liability.\textsuperscript{107} Indeed, when the jazz craze first swept the American scene in the late 1910s and early 1920s, a number of critics and musicians declared the music to be an answer to the perennial problem of devising a distinctly American form of opera. In 1925, Irving Berlin wryly proclaimed, “If an American composer writes an opera in the standard foreign forms it will not be an American opera. The American people want climaxes. They want many of them and in quick succession. Hence jazz. An American opera will have to be in jazz tempo.”\textsuperscript{108}

The previous year, a number of newspapers had announced that Otto Kahn—banking magnate, philanthropist, and chairman of the board of the Metropolitan Opera—was interested in producing a “jazz opera” at the Met.\textsuperscript{109} This caused something of a stir,\textsuperscript{110} and significant coverage was given to possible composer candidates for the job—Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, and George Gershwin (who had in fact composed the “jazz opera” \textit{Blue Monday} for the Paul Whiteman band in 1922). While most of these articles exclusively mentioned white composers, there was one signal exception. In 1924, \textit{Billboard} named Freeman as “perhaps the best fitted of all the American composers to fill the suggested need for the jazz opera that Otto H. Kahn, millionaire patron of music, states will represent the spirit of America.”\textsuperscript{111}

That same year Freeman in fact began work on \textit{American Romance}, which he subtitled “a jazz opera,” apparently in response to Kahn’s announcement. \textit{American Romance} is set in New York City. The time is “Today.” But this is a distended “today,” spanning five years of compositional labor from 1924 to Christmas Day, 1929. In this work Freeman notably

\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{107} Privately, Freeman seems to have generally referred to the opera by its original designation.

    \item \textsuperscript{108} Quoted in “Creators of Jazz Don’t Want It in Grand Opera—Playing It in the Metropolitan Would Be ‘Best Way to Ruin It,’” \textit{Boston Daily Globe}, December 22, 1925, A24. A few sentences earlier, however, Berlin is quoted as saying, “Twelve years ago . . . I determined to write a ‘rag-time opera.’ Since that time I have changed my mind. I don’t believe now that any man ever will consciously write a jazz opera. I do believe, however, that some day a great composition will be written in jazz tempo.”

    \item \textsuperscript{109} See “Jazz Opera in View for Metropolitan—Otto H. Kahn Tells Berlin and Kern That He Would Be Glad to Consider One—On ‘Grand Opera’ Scale,” \textit{New York Times}, November 18, 1924, 23. See also Malkiel, “Awaiting the Great American Opera,” 405. Carolyn Guzski suggests that Kahn may never have exactly called for a “jazz opera” at the Met: “by 1925, Otto Kahn (whose son Roger led a jazz band) was busy denying persistent rumors that his organization was due to premiere a ‘jazz opera’”: Guzski, “American Opera at the Metropolitan,” 29–30. He did, however, approach Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, and Jerome Kern with some plan for an opera (ibid.).

    \item \textsuperscript{110} The magazine \textit{Musical News} solicited readers’ ideas about Kahn’s proposed jazz opera: “Everybody’s talking about it! Everybody has an opinion—so, let’s have a symposium”: “Kahn Wants a Jazz Opera,” 365.

    \item \textsuperscript{111} The blurb continues, “Due to the African base of modern jazz a Negro composer of American birth and training no doubt will be better able to achieve this than will one of another race”: \textit{Billboard}, December 13, 1924 (Box 57, Freeman Papers).
\end{itemize}
dispensed with his epic treatments of the “dark skinned races” of the world. Indeed, it might come as a surprise that in his “jazz opera” the characters are all white, with the sole exception of a black maid. On one level, this is readily explained: Freeman would have known that the Metropolitan’s management and audience would balk at an opera featuring a predominantly non-white cast. He would even appear to have taken a cue for the setting and subject matter directly from a statement attributed to Kahn to the effect that the kind of opera he was looking for would concern modern, urban life. It might be about a shopgirl, a typist, or “any one of the American types whose life is one of bobbed hair, subway riding, movies, and flapperism.”

(American Romance was at one point titled The Flapper.) These probable factors in Freeman’s choice of topic notwithstanding, the whiteness of American Romance is not just a tactical maneuver; it reflects the complex relationship between jazz and the modern in the 1920s.

The work’s central theme is the conflict between tradition and modernity as symbolically played out in the romantic adventures of two women, Adele and Joy. On the surface, both are characteristically modern: they live in Manhattan (although hail from the South) and work as typists in the “splendidly appointed outer-office” of “Roger Eggerton, financier”; they ride the subway; they use the telephone. But Adele is secretly an old-fashioned sentimentalist: she uses words like “‘twas”; she likes to waltz. Joy, on the other hand, is a full-fledged modernistic sensualist and something of a jazz maniac. In the opening scene, Joy tries to convince Adele to attend a “jazz party” (“one every night—sometimes two or three”) and then “places her arms about her reluctant companion and forces her to jazz.”

If we wonder precisely what “jazz” signified for Freeman in 1924, there would seem to be a clue in the opera’s system of leitmotifs, which the composer labeled, as was his customary practice. The overture introduces the

112. Observing that the Metropolitan Opera declined to premiere Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein’s Four Saints in Three Acts (1928) and Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess (1935), Guzski refers to the institution’s “unwritten but de facto racial barriers then in effect”: Guzski, “American Opera at the Metropolitan,” 9.

113. “Plans Jazz Opera for Metropolitan—Kahn Offers Composers Chance of Production—Prefers Tragedy of Bobbed Hair, Shop Girl and Flapper,” Boston Daily Globe, November 18, 1924, 6. Additionally, journalist H. I. Phillips’s satirical response to Kahn’s alleged call for a jazz opera contains, in kernel form, a number of the themes and events of American Romance (flappers, subways, unintended disrobing): “Carmen, the flapper, comes down the subway stairs . . . She manages to enter the train with only minor injuries, but upon getting inside discovers that in the rush she has lost her clothes. Don Jose, the Subway Guard, finds and returns them to her. It is a case of love at first sight. (Here the jazz orchestra begins playing a tune of no importance and the action begins.)”: H. I. Phillips, “The Once Over—A Jazz Opera for Mr Otto Khan [sic],” Boston Daily Globe, November 22, 1924, 10A.

114. Freeman changed this line to “forces the latter to dance” in the later (ink) manuscript.

115. For a consideration of the cultural and musical meanings of jazz in the 1920s, see Ogren, Jazz Revolution.
principal motives in rapid succession. Chief among these are “Joy,” melodramatic in its chromatically inflected, late Romantic tonality; a lyrical “Love” motive; and the tempestuous “Irresponsibility” (see Figure 12). The contemporaneity of the setting is signified through a number of additional motives that mimetically register the urban soundscape, from electric buzzers to the rumble of the subway. That the subway’s low, semitone oscillation distinctly recalls the musical depiction of a lion’s roar in An African Kraal renders it a particularly striking example of the period’s modernist/primitivist dialectic (see Figures 13a and 13b). Reigning over these signs of modern life is the opera’s master trope and leitmotif: “Jazz.”

At its first appearance in the overture’s fifth measure, the “Jazz” motive bears little resemblance to the various styles that went by that name in 1924. There is no obvious syncopation; on the contrary, the accents fall squarely on strong beats (see Figure 14a). The pentatonic motive perhaps recalls black spirituals, and, intriguingly, resembles a “Mississippi” motive from

![Figure 12](http://online.ucpress.edu/jams/article-pdf/72/3/719/383838/jams_2019_72_3_719.pdf)
Freeman’s 1902–4 opera *The Octoroon* (see Figure 14b). But over the course of the overture “Jazz” undergoes substantial transformation. It is first splintered and placed in a syncopated position above the “Subway” tremolo.

116. Freeman appears to have omitted two eighth rests in the left-hand part. I suspect that the written alignment of the two hands indicates the intended rhythm (i.e., there ought to be eighth rests in the left hand on the offbeat of two and four). But if the F–C# dyad is in fact supposed to fall on the fourth eighth of the measure (the offbeat of two), then my statement that the motive lacks syncopation would be incorrect, although the rest of the measure would not make much sense.
Subsequently, it is expanded, the austere fifths harmonically filled out, and a one-measure, ragtime-style syncopated tail added (see Figure 15). Developed from an elemental figure into a series of fragments, “Jazz” becomes marked by playful, or pathological, skipping-record stutters. Eventually, the fragments are collected without the mechanical repetitions into a four-measure statement that is answered by another four-measure phrase to form what I will call the “Jazz” theme or sentence (see Figure 16). Significantly, these closing four measures suggest a return to the motive’s initial stark simplicity, this time grounded even more firmly in the sound of spirituals.
Figure 15  Expanded “Jazz” motive, *American Romance*, p. 19. Box 2, H. Lawrence Freeman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. Used by permission.
“Jazz” would seem to be both the privileged symbol of urban modernity and in some way connected to an ancestral South, a double valence that becomes clearer in the theme’s fragmented occurrences across the first act. When Dover, Joy’s would-be husband from her unnamed Southern hometown, shows up to seek her hand, his cloying song is followed by an ode to the “dear old Southland,” after which the orchestra chimes in with a few measures of “Old Folks at Home” (better known as “Swanee River”).

Unlike Ernst Krenek, who quotes the same song in part 2, scene 4, of Jonny spielt auf—the most famous “jazz opera” of the decade—Freeman would have known that it is no “altes amerikanisches Negerlied” (old American Negro song) but a product of the exceedingly popular nineteenth-century white composer Stephen Foster. He would have known, in other words, that its depiction of a former slave’s yearning for “de old plantation” was a ventriloquizing act in line with the blackface minstrel tradition, and thus he

117. American Romance, pp. 36–44.
returns the song to its proper subject: a sentimental, white traditionalist. Strikingly, Dover’s rather unpersuasive proposal (“let the grey-haired parson over there slip a wedding ring upon your finger”) is accompanied by a figure derived from the four measures of the “Jazz” theme that most distinctly recall spirituals.

“Jazz” is enmeshed, then, in both urban, Northern modernity and white fantasies about the Old South. Any attempt to further interpret the motive’s signifying ambiguities by following its dramatic progression is thwarted by the fact that, unlike the other motives, it drops out of the opera almost entirely after the first act. This in itself provides a strong clue to one attribute of jazz for Freeman: namely, that it must be ever contemporary, and ever renewed. What bore the name in 1924 no longer satisfied the concept in 1927, when he started work on the second act. Thus in acts 2–4 he drew upon multiple jazz styles of the later 1920s, roughly tracking the music’s development during the period in which he was composing.

These jazz moments include a song titled “Come Live in My World of Love.” In the opera, a band performs the sentimental tune in the “gorgeous dining room of the famous Ritz Carlton Hotel,” where Joy and Adele dance with their new boyfriends. In real life, Freeman had already published the song twice in 1925—first for piano and voice and then as a lushly orchestrated “Symphonic Jazz Fox-Trot.” By the mid-1920s, the decidedly non-improvised “symphonic jazz” of the Paul Whiteman Orchestra (among others) was being widely touted by white critics and musicians as the more sophisticated, less racialized descendant of the “negro” or “hot” jazz of a few years earlier. (According to Valdo Freeman, Whiteman’s group had tried to play “Come Live in My World of Love” but found it too difficult.) If one were looking for a distillation of the symphonic jazz ideology, the illustration on the cover of the piano-vocal score of Freeman’s tune would not be

118. The song was written for the influential white blackface troupe Christy’s Minstrels. For a fine discussion of the distinction between jazz and “Negro song” in Jonny spielt auf, see Wipplinger, “Performing Race.”

119. The “Jazz” motive can occasionally be detected in later acts as a rhythm and contour (for example, in act 3, p. 216), but it largely disappears in its straight form.

120. In the opera, the song is heard first in its original lilting 3/4, then in the elaborated fox-trot version, and finally as a “Charleston” variation, with an increasingly nuanced melodic line and the typical underlying clave rhythm.

121. Freeman, “Interview with Valdo Freeman,” 33: “I think Vincent Lopez promised to play it for me. I went to see Pops Whiteman. They were going to do it—Pops made special arrangements for them. They couldn’t begin to play that stuff. Pops would see his folks put down the sax, kept the clarinet and all that stuff. He had all that in there. They wanted something simple, these dance bands. Took it up to the country with him. They couldn’t even play the regular orchestration we had printed. Then I had another [tune by H. Lawrence Freeman]. That’s the one I was trying to get Duke to use—the ‘Yazoo River.’ Duke hasn’t played it yet for me. He said he was going to use it. I don’t know what stopped him.”
a bad place to begin. It features an elegant redheaded white woman casting a sultry glance at the viewer (see Figure 17). We might imagine her as Joy.

Though *American Romance* depicts a white milieu, Freeman also included in it explicitly black jazz styles. In the opera’s most dramatic jazz
scene, Duke Ellington makes a kind of appearance. By this point (the third act) Joy is rich, having married a businessman, but she has grown bored and indolent. She wakes at two in the afternoon and takes a curiously long bath while a group of partygoers file into her Park Avenue apartment. The guests raucously dance to music on the radio: “the Charleston Orientale as only Duke Ellington and his inimitable band can play it,” the radio announcer proclaims. Ellington never actually composed a “Charleston Orientale,” and a quick look at Freeman’s score makes it clear that this is not Ellington at all (see Figure 18). At the climax of many minutes of winding pentatonic figures, semitone dyads (for a “blue note” effect), and apparent riffs on *Rhapsody in Blue* over a I–iv–V left-hand pattern in Charleston rhythm, Joy finally emerges from the bathroom “like a streak of light, apparently nude,” and “springs” behind a dividing screen that is improbably placed in the middle of the party. A drunken and dejected suitor promptly hurls the screen through the air, exposing the “horrified” Joy with only “a bath towel pressed to her form.” These events precipitate a series of catastrophes that lead to the suitor shooting Joy’s husband (he survives) before an ultimately happy ending in which modern sinfulness is renounced and lovers are reconciled.

The many currents integral to the notion of modernity that Freeman drew upon throughout his career—Wagnerism, primitivism, and popular music—come together in *American Romance* as a series of transformations: lions become subways; Mississippi becomes New York; and jazz, like modernity itself, keeps metamorphosing. These motivic palimpsests register change, but what of progress? Freeman’s civilizationist faith in development, even in respect to the oft-maligned minstrel tradition, would appear to have finally been suspended. If his “jazz opera” was an attempt to capitalize on the jazz vogue, it was also a critique of the Jazz Age. Although we know that Freeman very much respected the “inimitable” Duke Ellington and his “beautiful compositions,” the “Charleston Orientale” serves as the emblem of a debauched age whose fascination with the modern is shown to be facile.  

122. The statement by the radio announcer occurs in the manuscript executed in pencil but not in the ink version (the music itself is the same). In the manuscript in pencil the radio announcer also introduces a blues ballad that precedes the “Charleston Orientale” as “the original foxtrot ‘I’m All Alone’” by “Duke Ellington and his famous Cotton Club Orchestra situated at Lenox Ave and 142 St.” As far as I can tell, this composition is also by Freeman rather than Ellington.

123. In “The Negro in Music and Drama,” Freeman wrote glowingly of “beautiful compositions by the celebrated Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway and Don Redmond, replete with racial characteristics, [which] have succeeded in placing our own artistic contributions high upon the scroll of artistic excellence”: Freeman, “Negro in Music and Drama,” 99. He also proudly observes that, according to ASCAP, more radio themes employ excerpts of pieces by Duke Ellington than by any other composer (317–18). The respect was apparently mutual. Valdo Freeman recalls Duke Ellington “talking about my father as one of the giants of music in the race”: Freeman, “Interview with Valdo Freeman,” 34. According to a program, there was also at least one performance in the 1930s by Hemsly Winfield and his Concert Dance Group (produced by
Valdo Freeman’s Friends Amusement Guild) that featured music by both H. Lawrence Freeman and Ellington. Freeman provided music for a “Slave Ballet,” and Ellington’s “Mood Indigo” was choreographed. See “A New Negro Art Theatre Dance Production,” Box 55, Freeman Papers.

124. Freeman, “Musical Outlook.”

Figure 18  Beginning of the “Charleston Orientale,” *American Romance*, pp. 208–9. Box 2, H. Lawrence Freeman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. Used by permission.
Toward a Conclusion

*American Romance* may have registered broader historical and musical developments but it did not quite participate in them. Its critique of modern mores found no audience, and its prolonged “Today” never saw the light of day. Like many of Freeman’s works, the opera remained unorchestrated and unperformed—an ultimately private document all the more poignant for its
enmeshment with the very public vogue for jazz. Indeed, Freeman’s relationship with the public haunted his career. Continually negotiating what Houston Baker once called the Harlem Renaissance’s quintessentially modern mass/class dialectic, he sought to “elevate” black culture—to “develop opera among his people” and to position the Negro Grand Opera Company as “the pivot around which the colored aristocracy of Greater New York in particular and the United States in general will abound” — while simultaneously drawing on vernacular black styles in the hope of forging a truly popular American opera.

Freeman certainly hoped that his operas would reach a mass audience. During the late 1940s, he drew up plans for an organization called the Aframerican Opera Foundation, a kind of American Bayreuth that was to provide for the perpetual performance of his works. The plan, never executed, included the construction of an opera house built “on the outskirts of New York City, with a seating capacity of seven thousand people, and parking lot for two thousand automobiles.”

A decade and a half earlier, Valdo Freeman had tried to entice Hippodrome Theatre director and conductor Alfredo Salmaggi to stage his father’s Voodoo, bombastically estimating that a production of Voodoo would “attract most of the 350,000 Negroes in greater New York.” Perhaps intended to draw crowds and to popularize opera, a handbill for a 1937 production of Vendetta at Harlem’s Park Palace club invited the audience to stay for post-performance “dancing until 2 a.m.” The same year Valdo tried to interest Rudy Vallee in airing some of his father’s works on the radio (“American youth is aspiring to appear in American opera”).

Freeman did reach a very large audience on at least one occasion, with the inclusion of excerpts from his operas in the aforementioned pageant extravaganza O, Sing a New Song, presented at Chicago’s Soldier Field in 1934.

126. Baker, Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, ch. 10, esp. 93.
127. The first quotation is from a journalist’s characterization of Freeman’s ambitions: “Celebrate Him,” New York Amsterdam News, January 24, 1934, 6. The second is from a letter written by Valdo Freeman to a prospective sponsor: Valdo Freeman, letter addressed to “Dear Patron,” November 5, 1923, Box 36, Folder 4, Freeman Papers.
128. Freeman, letter to Eleanor Roosevelt.
129. Valdo Freeman, letter to Alfredo Salmaggi, November 27, 1933, Box 49, Folder 3, Freeman Papers. He added, “The race pride of the Negro is unquestioned.” In a letter to baritone Pasquale Amato requesting an interview about Voodoo, Valdo wrote, “We estimate an audience of upwards of 10,000 people waiting to hear this score”: Valdo Freeman, letter to Pasquale Amato, May 30, 1934, Box 49, Folder 3, Freeman Papers.
130. “Handbill for Vendetta,” Box 50, Freeman Papers.
131. Valdo Freeman, letter to Rudy Vallee, November 28, 1937, Box 49, Folder 3, Freeman Papers.
132. The composition team collaborated with a group of choreographers (including Katherine Dunham) to portray the history of black music in three acts titled respectively “Africa,” “Plantation Days,” and “America.” Excerpting and adapting scenes from his operas, Freeman contributed primitivist depictions to the African section (“Suddenly, from out of the
One source estimated that 60,000 people attended the event.\footnote{Spectacular ‘O, Sing a New Song’ Draws 60,000 to Soldier Field,” Chicago Defender, September 1, 1934, 5.} The previous year, three one-act operas by Freeman were presented at Salem Methodist Episcopal Church in Harlem to a capacity audience of 2,500 people. The performance featured his American Indian opera, \textit{The Tryst}; a one-act version of his Mexican opera, \textit{Vendetta}; and a work for which no score exists titled \textit{My Old Kentucky Home}. An article in the \textit{Chicago Defender} titled “Harlem Gets Chance to Learn If It Really Cares for Opera” reported that the church was “taxed to its capacity, with hundreds standing.”\footnote{Cleveland G. Allen, “Harlem Gets Chance to Learn If It Really Cares For Opera,” Chicago Defender, February 17, 1934, 5. See also Frances Moss Mann, “Packed House Lauds Freeman’s 3 Operas,” New York Amsterdam News, January 31, 1934, 16. A later article exaggeratedly claimed that the church’s “doors had to be closed after 33,000 Harlemites had been admitted”: Edgar T. Rouzeau, “Stardust” column (unidentified newspaper, probably \textit{Norfolk Journal and Guide}, no date), Box 56, Freeman Papers.} With \textit{Voodoo}, Freeman also had the distinction of being, by some counts, the first composer to have a full opera broadcast live over radio, the emblematic live mass media technology of the day.\footnote{The broadcast, on May 21, 1928, on WGBS (three months before the Palm Garden performances), in piano-vocal reduction, featured Freeman on piano.} In 1947, toward the end of his career, Freeman managed to present his early opera \textit{The Martyr} at Carnegie Hall in a production featuring soprano Muriel Rahn (see Figure 19).

But these were exceptions in a career marked by never-ending struggles to procure performances, audiences, and money. Freeman’s numerous manuscript submissions to the Metropolitan Opera were returned. Solicitations to Eleanor Roosevelt (among others) to support his Aframerican Opera Foundation apparently went unanswered. His incorporation of the Negro Grand Opera Company does not appear to have been very fruitful. The most publicized and reviewed performances of his career, the 1928 run of \textit{Voodoo} at the Palm Garden, were poorly attended and the run ended earlier than scheduled.\footnote{The opening of one review reads, “In the presence of almost nobody, the Negro Opera Company [sic] is presenting the first negro grand opera in the Palm Garden in West Fifty-Second Street”: Garland, “Mr. De Wolf Hopper and Casey.”} Perhaps most disappointing for Freeman was the relatively small black audience at those performances. The \textit{Evening World} reported that “Harlem did not turn out for an event which was without precedence in the progress of the Negro race.”\footnote{J.B.C., “Realm of Music.”} A Lydia Bass wrote to the \textit{New York Amsterdam News},

I was standing near Mr. Freeman when the World reporter asked “Where are the prominent people from Harlem? Where are the members of the
Figure 19  A performance of Freeman’s opera *The Martyr* at Carnegie Hall in 1947. Box 51, H. Lawrence Freeman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. Used by permission.
Association for the Advancement of Colored People?” I was as much embarrassed as he. I heard a reporter say outside “I guess it’s beyond the rest of the jazz babies.” Where were my people? There were fifty whites to one black.138

A few years later, Alfredo Salmaggi did, in fact, agree to produce Voodoo at the Hippodrome, on condition that, as stated in an advertisement for advance sale copies of the opera’s libretto, Freeman himself raise $2,000 toward the cost of the production (see Figure 20). This set off a debate in the Amsterdam News about Freeman’s place—and that of opera more generally—in the black community. A Eulala S. Barker wrote a letter suggesting that the paper start a fund in order to raise money for the production of a work of inexpressible importance “to every Negro man, woman and child of today and our progeny.” The paper’s drama editor and critic, Romeo L. Dougherty, replied that he would be pleased to do so, except that there was not the “slightest chance of success crowning my efforts, and it would conclusively prove to our white friends how little we care for such things [i.e., opera].” If just “fifty letters come to me suggesting that I try to interest the public in supporting the professor,” Dougherty continued, then he would “gladly jump in and help.”139 The critic received, and proceeded to publish, a handful of remarkable letters. A Lucy L. Carsdale proclaimed, “Of course I don’t know anything about opera, but I do love music. Of course I recognize opera to be the highest type of music, and if one of our race has reached that height where he can compose opera, if I understood that article by Miss E. Barker of East 153d street, that the white people would help him if he could raise part of the money, I do not see why anybody should hold back in helping.”140 A letter from a Clifford Martinez described Voodoo as “a great Negro opera” and stated that “every Negro who has race pride and would like to see his sons and daughters reach the highest peak in the musical art should support it.” He concluded by suggesting that people of color across the world would be invested in a production of an Afro-American opera (“I am a native of the Canal Zone through Central and South America, and all the black Latins are supporting the world’s


Figure 20 Advertisement for advance sale copies of the libretto of Voodoo (1934). Box 36, Folder 2, H. Lawrence Freeman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. Used by permission.
greatest musical art, grand opera”).141 But in the end the number of responses did not reach ten. The necessary funds were never raised and the Hippodrome production of Voodoo never took place.142

My intention is certainly not to retrospectively castigate the denizens of a metonymic “Harlem” for overlooking the “genius” in their midst, as an Inter-State Tattler column of 1930 would have it.143 The failure of Freeman’s grand opera to gain a deeper foothold in Harlem, and in the musical world at large, reflected a concatenation of aesthetic, cultural, and, not least, financial impediments. In 1937, Freeman received a letter from an Ella May Caldwell that read as follows:

Dear sir, All my life I wanted to see your operas. So when I read of them in the paper I thought this was my [illegible]. You called on operas for Harlem and with half a Harlem on relief (even nice people on relief these days) you charge Park Ave. prices to get in. I only had 55 [cents] cause my check wouldn’t come til Saturday but they wouldn’t let me in. If the [illegible] had been 99 [cents] you’d a packed the place. I know lots a people who wanted to come but couldn’t afford $1.10. Cause you charged what you wanted, but sometimes what we want aint always grand sense.144

The history of twentieth-century music would have had to unfold very differently for grand opera to become (or remain) a popular art as Freeman dreamed. Even so, it is gratifying to observe that when Voodoo was presented in June 2015 for the first time in almost ninety years, at Miller Theater in New York, both performances sold out and were attended by a diverse audience.

My argument throughout, however, has been that Freeman’s “modernity” does not need to be shored up by his budding historical recuperation, as if “modern” were but another word for success. In its contested, contradictory, ever-shifting appearances, modernity was already the ground and stakes of his life and work. This could be characterized as a historicist line of argumentation: what matters is not so much how we think of the modern as how we think of the modern.

141. Clifford Martinez, “Letter to the Editor,” New York Amsterdam News, October 25, 1933, 7. In view of a misspelling common to Freeman and Martinez (“Marion Anderson” for “Marian Anderson”), I wonder whether the two men may be the same.

142. An article in the New York World-Telegram, however, suggested that the fundraising campaign was on the verge of success: “The response of the Negroes to the Salmaggi proposal, conveyed through the Freemans, was intense and spontaneous. Behind the eager contributions of a handful of serious-minded Harlemites is a story of race pride and idealism that now can be told”: Irene Kuhn, “Harlem Raising Funds for First Negro Opera,” New York World-Telegram, December 11, 1933 (Box 55, Freeman Papers).

143. “And Now We Turn To Opera,” Inter-State Tattler, June 13, 1930 (Box 55, Freeman Papers): “We can do better if we want to. The TATTLER is staking its judgment that we will. By giving Prof. Freeman our heartiest support we will not be honoring him so much as demonstrating our own appreciation of the finer things of life.”

144. Ella May Caldwell, letter to H. Lawrence Freeman, 1937, Box 49, Folder 3, Freeman Papers.
Freeman and his contemporaries thought of it.\(^{145}\) It would appear, then, that I have implicitly taken sides in a debate of sorts between, on one hand, theorists such as Baker and Gates, who have mapped out a distinctive and largely autonomous tradition of “Afro-American modernism” (to use Baker’s term), and, on the other, scholars such as Hutchinson who have regarded those theorists’ allegedly “binary” division of the modernist field (“black” and “white”) as a retrospective fiction.\(^{146}\) There is certainly much to commend in Hutchinson’s fine-grained study of the Harlem Renaissance and the institutions of interwar modernism, especially its attention to patterns of influence and social networks. My interpretation of Freeman’s music and career broadly supports his thesis of a modernist field that resists stark divisions along the “color line.” Yet even though I, too, have taken issue with elements of Baker’s argument, there is something irksome about the tendency of a certain kind of historical scholarship to preclude revisionist interpretations that are deemed insufficiently empirical. In the case of studies of “modernity,” this is not just a matter of foreclosing lines of thought that could be useful or liberating, but, I think, of misconstruing the concept’s very relationship with history.

Paul de Man once wrote that modernity constituted a kind of counter-historical phenomenon, a “way of acting and behaving” fundamentally opposed to its conceptualization and historicization.\(^{147}\) We need not go as far as de Man to concur that there is something about the temporal implications of modernity that has made it a particularly slippery object for historiography. But rather than regarding modernity as a concept inherently resistant to historical contemplation, I would argue that a mode of historical revisionism is internal to it. The flipside of the modern’s ineluctable tendency to slip out of joint with itself is its capacity to be discovered retroactively, as may be seen in the case of Voodoo’s recent revival. But it is not only a dynamic that plays out many decades later, in after-the-fact expansions of the modernist canon.\(^{148}\) When Voodoo was premiered in 1928 it was already the announcement of a modernity recovered. I have argued that American Romance represented the erosion of Freeman’s faith in modernity as a necessary union between the passage of time and the progress of civilization.

\(^{145}\) I am using “historicist” in the broadest sense—to denote an emphasis on a historical approach to cultural phenomena—rather than to evoke the historical “laws” of, for example, Ranke or Hegel.

\(^{146}\) Hutchinson, *Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, 4–5. This is not to suggest that Baker and Gates reach similar conclusions; Gates has been a severe critic of the Harlem Renaissance ideology.

\(^{147}\) See De Man, “Literary History and Literary Modernity,” 142.

\(^{148}\) That canon, anyway, was always after-the-fact. The term “modernist” may have been used in the first decades of the twentieth century, but it is only since the 1940s that modernism has been institutionalized as a supposedly coherent phenomenon.
In that opera, “jazz” symbolized a kind of tautological modernity, the pure temporality of the next new thing, a cynical frivolity expressed in white appropriations of black culture. But Freeman’s rechristening of Voodoo as a “Negro Jazz Grand Opera” implied another take on the jazz/modernity pairing. Discovering that an opera he had composed in the early 1910s had been, all along, “Negro Jazz,” Freeman was, perhaps, not simply marketing the piece, but also reclaiming jazz from the Jazz Age, and hence modernity from bare temporal succession. Thus, I conclude with a kind of paradox. “Modernism” may turn out to have been a culturally hybrid yet singular historical phenomenon, only imperfectly divisible into separate traditions. Yet its underlying principle, “modernity,” is inherently plural, a name for the endless potential to revise and redeem.

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Books and Articles


H. Lawrence Freeman’s “Negro Jazz Grand Opera,” Voodoo, was premiered in 1928 in Manhattan’s Broadway district. Its reception bespoke competing, racially charged values that underpinned the idea of the “modern” in the 1920s. The white press critiqued the opera for its allegedly anxiety-ridden indebtedness to nineteenth-century European conventions, while the black press hailed it as the pathbreaking work of a “pioneer composer.” Taking the reception history of Voodoo as a starting point, this article shows how Freeman’s lifelong project, the creation of what he would call “Negro Grand Opera,” mediated between disparate and sometimes apparently irreconcilable figurations of the modern that spanned the late nineteenth century through the interwar years: Wagnerism, uplift ideology, primitivism, and popular music (including, but not limited to, jazz). I focus on Freeman’s inheritance of a worldview that could be called progressivist, evolutionist, or,
to borrow a term from Wilson Moses, civilizationist. I then trace the complex relationship between this mode of imagining modernity and subsequent versions of modernism that Freeman engaged with during the first decades of the twentieth century. Through readings of Freeman’s aesthetic manifestos and his stylistically syncretic musical corpus I show how ideas about race inflected the process by which the qualitatively modern slips out of joint with temporal modernity. The most substantial musical analysis examines leitmotivic transformations that play out across Freeman’s jazz opera *American Romance* (1924–29): lions become subways; Mississippi becomes New York; and jazz, like modernity itself, keeps metamorphosing. A concluding section considers a broader set of questions concerning the historiography of modernism and modernity.

**Keywords:** H. Lawrence Freeman, modernism, Afro-Wagnerism, Harlem Renaissance, black opera, jazz opera