

# Braxton's Operatics as Constructive Tricksterism

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## *Introduction: Race*

The casting of the 1996 world premiere of Anthony Braxton's four-act opera, *Shala Fears for the Poor*, was typical of his projects. Calls went out to those in the New York community of vocalists and instrumentalists who had solid grounding in classical and operatic training as well as experience with new and experimental music. Those calls originated, again typically, with Braxton and his then-immediate circle of musical collaborators, players and singers who called people they knew or had worked with, or those whose work they knew and thought appropriate for this project. One call led to another on this grapevine, and the result was eighteen white singers and players--again, typically.<sup>1</sup>

My sense of this situation, as one of those white players in that immediate circle, resonates with what I have also seen happen with other major African-American artists, such as Miles Davis, Sun Ra, and Cecil Taylor, in various ways and degrees of racial cast: the musician, who enjoys an unquestioned (if controversial) place in African-American musical history and discourse, has a new creative vision; he creates an expression of it that elicits as much or more interest and support from white American and/or European audiences/critics/musicians as from their African-American counterparts. This is so because the artist's identity, whether or not it is steeped in and shaped by his own culture, is as heavily invested in the persona of cosmopolitan artist-intellectual, and in connecting with kindred spirits and allies from everywhere. The importance of such connections with white American and European (or, inclusively, "Western") cultures, of course, has traditionally lain in the fact that those are the ones, specifically in this music, with which black culture has been in the most visceral dialogue, in which it is in his best interests to participate, possibly influence (as is also the case for those whites who recognize the artist's genuine musical authority).

Be all that as it may, an interesting thing happened on the way to this opera. One of the baritones had to back out, and the replacement he brought us was an African-American singer, Melton Sawyer. It so happened that his character, Ashmenton, had a leading role as the husband and father in the second act's one long scene. In it, a couple see their only son off into the world to start his life as an adult; then they muse, American dreamlike, over the history and nature of their life as decent, diligent, working-class people with struggles, fears, and hopes--

and, ultimately, a peaceful love and trust--in themselves, in each other and their child, in the future and in the universe.

The interesting thing about this turn in the casting is that it was neither intended nor defended against as a statement about race. The libretto itself decidedly *was* conceived with overt social and political points--both the depiction of the characters and the actual lines they sing (examples forthcoming) carry clear positions--but the whiteness in place before Melton and the interracial cast he brought both were left to chance, in the assumption (thankfully widespread in theatrical casting these days) that the universal human themes and personal archetypes are the rule, the details of racial dynamics and images more the exception (and not always the action that needs to be affirmed).[2](#)

However, the pairing of an African-American man with a European-American woman and son, in this particular scene, obviously worked on a mythopoeic level that an all-white or all-black cast would not have. It could be read as easily as they as "humanity" more than "race," but it could also invoke American racial problems and solutions beyond the pale or ken of the homogeneous. The way it did do that for me lay in my knowledge of the way Braxton's casting unfolded, but it is a way I think I might have divined as an uninformed audience member from the sheer feel of the music, libretto, and other aspects of the production. Somehow, knowing the universe is telling you something is more compelling and engaging than feeling you are watching a person grind an axe; it is even more so--this may sound cold--than feeling you are watching a person reveal, in all sincerity, dignity, and honesty, his or her most cherished inner truths or wounds. Of course, all three together--universe, axe, bared soul--make for the best combination.

This paper, then, looks into the literary, artistic, choreographic, theatrical, and musical assumptions, processes and products that reflect and embody Braxton's work in this opera, through representative samples from this second act. Some background about the composer, his development of a musical philosophy and system, and his application of same to the opera genre will precede that look. Throughout and following it are musings over this work's implications in terms of current discourse about the African- and European-American dialogues embedded and embodied in American music.[3](#)

### *The Composer*

The combination of fertile chance and fruitful result in the casting that forms the kernel of this look is itself no fluke. Braxton's musical philosophy and thirty-year body of work (over two hundred scores, well over a hundred recordings, a steady stream of performances) articulates

and demonstrates a healthy respect for and interest in both the processes of determination--notation, organization, intention, orchestration--and indeterminacy. The latter, however, he distinguished early in his career from the way his (and American music's) major influence practiced it.

John Cage understood indeterminacy in music as a way of subverting the determiner; his own musical project saw human intention and narrative as intrusive, the issue of an ego that had to abdicate control over and even presence in the musical event, once conceiving and setting it in motion. His was clearly a reaction, informed by Eastern worldviews, against a Western dominator model of anthropocentric, egocentric creativity.

Braxton both appreciated Cage's idea and thought it went too far (Carey 1984: 8-10). He developed his own music to include chance elements, but from the beginning he saw the connections between the African-American improvisatory tradition (Ochiogrosso 1976: 49) and Cage's and others' introduction of aleatorism to Western art music. That meant a tradition in which *engagement* with the universe and its "divine influences" (per Cage), *participation* in rather than control over or passive abdication to it, was developed.

In Braxton's work, this engagement has developed in an unbroken line from the unactualized vision of a young visionary in the 1960s to the character of Ashmenton--the *Shala* role sung by Melton Sawyer--in 1996 that is as traceable as a good genealogy, through Braxton's own documentation.<sup>4</sup> Briefly, here, going backwards from fruit to root:

- Ashmenton is one of the pool of twelve characters (six males and six females) who enact the stories of a planned thirty-six one-act operas that can be performed alone or in any combination and sequence (*Shala* combined four of them). These characters are conceived as archetypes in human form; they play a range of different roles from act to act, sometimes "villainous," sometimes "virtuous" (from the human perspective). The effect is sort of a tableau of reincarnation, or simply a view of the same timeless human dramas playing out from people to people and time to time;
- these characters are personifications of the twelve "sonic units" Braxton worked out on his alto saxophone over time, beginning in the 1960s, when he first conceived that instrument as a tool for composing (as an alternative to the piano). These sonic units began as his "language musics:" musical gestures such as long tones, trills, multiphonics and others to which he felt led as a player as means to his own personal voice and statements. From similar experimentation in the "woodshed" he developed thirteen of what he called "geometric schemes"--strategies for working and sequencing his sonic units, from conventional diatonic to more idiosyncratic approaches; finally, he postulated twelve "identity states" he perceived as defining the outcome of this musical experimentation. These include "dreams" and "sound imagery," to name two that pertain most directly to

the process of composing the operas;<sup>5</sup>

- Ashmenton is the character that grew out of the second "house" (Braxton also calls his sonic units "houses," or even "lands"), the house of "accented long sounds" (which can vary in pitch when sequenced).

In other words, Braxton's whole project as composer-improviser has been to devise a rationalization of the distinctly trans- (not ir-) rational process of making a music he understands as an unprescribed engagement in the moment with the creative-destructive forces of the universe: through music to trance, through trance to possession, through possession to distinct meanings and messages, as well as mysteries (both distinct and not). Some of these trance experiences lead to inner visualizations; thus his graphic titles. Some of those blossom from abstract geometry to realistic scenes that suggest stories; thus his purely instrumental pieces with stories in the program or liner notes, and his pieces for actors. Some of them move him to move his body in different ways, especially as he plays; thus the list of stick drawings depicting different poses and motions that he gives to students and the performers he hires to do his work. All of these literate-graphic devices spawned by oral-aural processes serve to pull literate players (indeed, the literate impulse itself) into those processes, however "clinical" they initially may seem to oral-traditional consciousness.

### *The Opera*

*Shala*, as operas generally do, combined virtually all of the aesthetic possibilities (dramatic, choreographic, literary, visual-artistic) that spring from this approach. Examples:

- velcroed to the characters' limbs were styrofoam-tinfoil-hangerwire replicas of the three geometric symbols at the heart of Braxton's "Tri-Metric" (or "Tri-Centric") system: the square (for fixed logics, such as notated music), the circle (for unprescribed, spontaneous musication),<sup>6</sup> and the triangle (for improvisatory alterations of fixed material). Again, these symbolize for him the forces of cosmic and universal processes, not just musical or human-cultural ones. The evocative effect--to draw on another familiar concept that (like reincarnation) Braxton himself does not refer to--is an image of invisible Platonic ideals and their contingent expressions in spacetime (people) walking around together in a visible connection;
- the characters, in the course of realistic movements, within the story, about the stage, would suddenly strike poses--from Braxton's pictorial list--that seemed disjunct from all else but had expressive resonances of their own (such as Nazi salutes, or ballet gestures, or the pose of Rodin's statue, *The Thinker*);
- the ordering of the separate acts was an aesthetic decision, signaled by the title given the

opera--but it was underlain by the chance operation of writing each act independently. Yet another of my comparisons: author William Burroughs' process of writing by cutting up blocks of prose and recombining the pieces to form a new whole.

Two important points emerge from these details:

1. they are examples of a synthesis of the Afrological and Eurological (George Lewis' terms)<sup>7</sup> treatments of improvisation and chance in music that broaden and maximize the potential for those divinatory messages--surprising instances of synchronicity and order, epiphanous revelations and inspirations--that arise, along with equal measures of chaos and mundane meanings, from such approaches, and are sought by those attracted to them; and
2. in keeping with the nature of this process, the means are conceived so as not to overdetermine--or sometimes even determine--the ends. The fun in writing independent acts to be combined variously lies in the surprise of the combinations; the fun in giving all the characters a big box full of geometric symbols to grab and don at random lies in the symbolism that emerges of itself when they do so. And the fun in bringing to life a character called Ashmenton from the sound-induced trance that dreamed him up is to let him take over his own life, tell his own stories, not walk around the stage as a puppet-symbol of his creator's saxophone sound, strategy, or even vision (every good writer knows her characters have their own lives that she had better respect).

One more aspect of this opera one should know before the following musical-textual study: as hinted in my opening lines, each of the characters--whose parts were entirely notated, with no improvisatory sections--was accompanied throughout the drama by an associative solo instrumentalist. These were all dressed in hooded black robes, without personal identity or visible gender or race, and they did both improvise and play written lines. They came across as shadow figures from the spirit world, guardian angels or demons, influencing and being influenced by "their" people (however, this spiritual persona of theirs--like race--was not specified in the score, rather emerged by chance through director and players in the course of production). All virtuoso improvisers, they provided some of the most striking and exciting musical moments of the entire production.

### *The Music*

"The story comes first," Braxton says of his way of writing an opera. After writing his own libretto on the word processor, he breaks it down syllabically into one long penciled line at the tops of blank sheets of 11 x 17 paper set in the horizontal "landscape" rather than the vertical

"portrait" position. Underneath that line of text he writes rhythms derived from the cadence and accents of the words, in the form of conventional notes, free of staff or meter; these may rise and fall to suggest the pitches suggested by the inflected speech, but mostly details of pitch are worked out after the rhythms.

From those rhythms Braxton roughs out the flow of meters suggested by the spoken phrases; he might add counter-rhythms that occur to him at that point to assign to particular instruments. Often the process of beginning to derive music so from speech turns around and influences him to write more words, or to change them slightly for delivery and/or meaning.

This outline moves to score paper and, in that draft, to greater definition. Orchestration is determined, sections and instruments are worked for color, timbre, volume, texture; the pitches of the vocal line suggest their lines and harmonies. But two things should be said about that:

1. Braxton prides himself on composing in what he calls "moment time," not according to the rules of any system (his own system is more descriptive than prescriptive), diatonic or serial; [8](#) nevertheless, the sound and other aspects of his music are as influenced by his early immersion in that of Schönberg as it is by a host of other obvious influences. He has assimilated and internalized the discourse of pantonality Schönberg initiated so as to Signify on it, in the same way a jazz player does on the blues or the American songbook; yet
2. pitches, while mostly as fixed (except for improvisational spots) in the orchestral parts as in the vocal parts, are not as strictly enforced. That is--not in this opera's orchestra, but in many similarly pantonal scores--Braxton does not determine the clef, or even provide a staff, for a given part, and he tells players to put the pitch wherever they feel it on their instrument and in the group, adhering strictly only to the rhythm. The practical result is usually something intervallically close to what is written anyway, just by virtue of how the players do hear and interact with each other and the material--which reflects Braxton's usual indifference to exactness of pitch, favoring instead the rhythmic, inflective, intervallic and textural-timbral effects often served best by suggesting rather than ordering pitch. Thus even in a project such as this, in which the players (most of whom are also his regulars in those other projects) *are* provided with definite clefs and pitches, the composer himself did not put the soul of his meaning into their matrices, and did not work them in rehearsal with a microscope to make sure each one was executed with an imposed or cajoled expressivity. Even the notes of the most pitch-specified parts--the singers'--all come with the "x" on their stems that denotes *sprechstimme* ("speech voice," that half-singing, half-speaking style Schönberg used for his work).

What I mean to show with the following examples is what we might call Braxton's "trialectic" here between orchestra, soloist, and singer, something suggesting call-and-response and chorus

and individual. The vocal line stands as a clear point of definition, unfolding at roughly twice the rhythmic pace as the orchestra; the solo instrumentalist Signifies closely on the vocal line, both as improviser and reader of complementary written lines; and the orchestral lines comprise a ground, chorus-like, that, as we have seen, was unearthed through that point of definition--much like Schenker unearthed his *Urlinie* from the surface elaborations on it that he saw in post-Baroque European works. (This is also very much in line with Braxton's approach to composition through the single-line alto saxophone: a surface is immediately intuited, then depths it may imply are intuited through it--the reverse of a pianistic, theme-and-variations composer who establishes a foundation in harmonic-metric matrices and melodic flows, then elaborates on them for surfaces more arbitrary than they. Braxton's depths [in the orchestra] are rather the more arbitrary, in expressing potential implied by, and less definitive than, its actualization in the singers and soloists [it could as well have been expressed in other notes; in this it is also reversing Schenker's emphasis]).

The image displays a musical score for a full orchestra, labeled 'Example 1'. The score is arranged in a vertical column of staves, with instrument names listed on the left. From top to bottom, the instruments are: Flute 1, Flute 2, Flute 3, Piccolo, Clarinet in B-flat, Clarinet in A, Bassoon, French Horn, Trumpet, Trombone, Bass Trombone, Tuba, Euphonium, Percussion 1, Percussion 2, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, Double Bass, and String Bass. Each staff contains musical notation, including notes, rests, and dynamic markings such as *pp* and *mf*. To the right of the score is a diagram consisting of a vertical oval with a horizontal line extending from its right side. Below the oval is the label '259c'. To the left of the score, there is a double-headed horizontal arrow.

**Example 1:** From *Shala Fears for the Poor*, Anthony Braxton, mm. 1232-1233.

Example 1 (259c)<sup>9</sup> shows the full orchestra ending its opening eleven bars of long tones morphing through increasing shifts of pitch, duration (of from seven to one beats), and volume (*pp* to *mf*). (This shapeshifting roil moves through moments defined by conventional meter--

everything from 2/4 to 6/4--moments we will later see tailoring the lengths of the sung phrases.) The double-arrow signals a grand pause, and a player from the orchestra, picked on the spot during rehearsals, takes the part signaled by the oval, of free improvisation; the K(o) means one should play something moderately (K) opposed (o) to what the orchestra is doing, so this will likely be a lively, bright articulation in contrast to the amorphous sound painting; the strings make four short statements, two with tremolos, during this improvisation. The effect of the whole event is of a spark igniting out of some ruminant mass, illuminating that mass in turn. Braxton the conductor cues the entrances and exits of such improvisations and written accompaniments (and the improvisations, scored so, are virtually always conceived as *part* of the flow and texture of the score, more than some showcase of virtuosity riding wildly above it). The orchestra resumes its ruminations.

Throughout these moments the curtain has risen onto the scene with Ashmenton, his wife Ntzockie, and their son David relaxing convivially around a humble kitchen table, finishing a meal. Ashmenton is the first to speak. Example 2.a (261) shows his second phrase. Braxton makes much use of duplet figures, from divisions of three (as at the start of this passage) up to seven, to get the phrases to float above the pulse and meters; he conducts the beat very clearly throughout to anchor such floats.

The image displays a musical score for Example 2.a. It features five staves: Asimenton (bass clef), Clarinet (treble clef), Bass Clarinet (treble clef), Violin 1a (treble clef), and Violin 1b (treble clef). The vocal line (Asimenton) has the lyrics "I can't be-lieve how quick-ly the time has past". The vocal line includes dynamic markings *mp*, *f*, and *mp*. The instrumental parts include triplets and dynamic markings *mp* and *fp*. The score is in 2/4 time and includes a key signature of one flat.

**Example 2.a:**

**From *Shala Fears for the Poor*, Anthony Braxton, mm. 1263-1265.**

Example 2.a shows six orchestra parts that echo the vocal line (the rest of the orchestra continues to play too, but these are selected for those echoes): the clarinets echo the word "believe" and the violins, more loosely, reflect "the time has past." This is the score's first example of such links, and they increasingly occur throughout. Example 2.b, some pages later (280), shows them in more developed form: the winds and harp effect a condensed presentiment of the words (in 3/4) "I will call you" with their triplet and following note; the strings and brass, conversely, expand the rhythm in their various sets of three, imaging "things settling." Example 2.c (309) exemplifies an orchestral gesture mirroring the idea (of the boy's quickness) expressed, rather than the expression itself.

3/4

David

I will call you as soon as things set-tle

Piccolo

Flute

Alto Flute

Oboe

E $\flat$  Horn

F Horn

Trumpet

Trombone

3 Trom/Tuba

Harp

Example 2.b: From *Shala Fears for the Poor*, Anthony Braxton, mm. 1351-1353.

The image shows a musical score for a scene from *Shala Fears for the Poor*. The score is written for four parts: Asimentera (bass clef) and three Flutes (treble clef). The time signature is 3/4. The Asimentera part features a melodic line with a 5-measure phrase and a 3-measure phrase, both marked with asterisks. The lyrics are: *mp* he has his ways but the boy is quick. The flute parts provide accompaniment, with the first flute starting on the second measure and the second and third flutes starting on the first measure. The first flute has a *mp* marking at the beginning of its part.

**Example 2.c:** From *Shala Fears for the Poor*, Anthony Braxton, mm. 1483-1485.

The image displays a musical score for a vocal line and an orchestral accompaniment. The vocal line is in 3/4 time and features the lyrics "What are we going to do, De?". The orchestral accompaniment includes parts for Flute, Clarinet, Oboe, Bassoon, Trumpet, Trombone, Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The score is marked with a tempo of *mp* and a dynamic of *p*.

**Example 3.a: From *Shala Fears for the Poor*, Anthony Braxton, mm. 1363–1364.**

Sometimes the transparencies of musical stillness and silence are preferred over imitative motion to enhance the emotional charge of the words. In Example 3.a (282), the orchestra frames the seven syllables of the first phrase with one note, thus foregrounding its identity *as a*

phrase, a thought, more than the musicality of its syllabic-inflective flux; it distinguishes that phrase poignantly from the single-syllable second one, "pa?" by changing notes, then resting. Example 3.b (315) is another particularly elegant (through the harp) such application, to a particularly powerful statement.

Musical score for Example 3.b, featuring a vocal line (Mzookie) and an orchestral accompaniment. The score is in 3/4 time. The vocal line includes the lyrics: "somehow he became strong enough to weather the misadventures that surround our people". The orchestration includes Flute 1, Flute 2, Flute 3, Oboe, E♭ Horn, Clarinet, Bass Clarinet, Bassoon, and Harp. The harp part is notably silent throughout the passage.

**Example 3.b:**

**From *Shala Fears for the Poor*, Anthony Braxton, mm. 1509-1510.**

Asi mentos  
the concept of attraction in this context can help clarify what fundamentals really are

Woodwinds  
mp

Brass

Harp

Perc.

Strings

**Example 4: From  
*Shala Fears for the Poor*, Anthony Braxton, mm. 1410-1412.**

Example 4 (293) exemplifies another kind of line for which such emphasis seems to be inordinately favored: "the concept of attraction in this context can help clarify what fundamentals really are" is so much the kind of Braxtonian phrase that has been represented by journalists and critics as so abstruse--and, conversely, functions for Braxton himself so like a clarifier--that I can't help but read into the spare wisps of accompaniment a clearing of the air for the speaker and his audience, and into the choice of two-beat patterns of movement a move

to stress the words "context" and "concept."

Example 4 opens up other areas of interest. First, we now see Ashmenton's "shadow" soloist. The diamond clef sign signals the player's option of any (or no) clef; the symbol in the 2/4 bar signals only an improvisation (not range or duration or anything else, despite its suggestiveness) that accompanies the speaker's next two pensive lines. The effect: Ashmenton wanders into the heart of something with his abstract generalization; that evokes a sudden thrashing of the implications of his statement's potential by the soloist, which in turn provokes Ashmenton to clarify what he means specifically in the next two lines; those lines and the soloist's improvisation comprise a duet that fleets through a few bars as such things (vague realizations, little bolts from the blue, cogitative thoughts) do come and go through life's moments.

Improvisational and written-out sections occur in roughly equal measure in the soloist parts throughout; unlike the singers' notes, naturally enough, those of the soloists have no *Sprechgesang* indications. An ear trained by only a couple of rehearsals, or even by the performance on the first half-hour of its unfolding, can instantly discern between their improvisations and their renderings of notation. The latter provide definition from a realm--thought, spirit--where it is most often either obscured (by too much merely suggestive dimness, as in the orchestra) or overwhelmed (by too much brilliant declamation, as in free improvisations) to the realm of human life (that of the singers), where it is always uncertain.

Note also the meter flow. Framing the duple rhythm in the four key words--CON-cept, CON-text, (at-)TRACT-ion, CLAR-(i)fy--are, satisfyingly, two 4/4 bars (both limned and offset by the orchestra); the 3/4 frame of the phrase's wrapup serves to blossom its climax; finally, the 2/4 serves as both ending pause and transitional pickup to the next phrase (each of the three phrases unfolds in similar configurations of four, three, and two). Other parts of the score have condensed versions of this pattern of fluxing meters tagged by the shortest one--sometimes as short as 3/8 or even 1/8, after phrase-based meters that may themselves go down to 1/4. The effect is of a flexible iambic musicality throughout; pulses come and go through variously sequenced ups and downs, longs and shorts, strongs and weaks, rather than through well-defined channels of repetitive rhythmic bedrock. This approach to pulse has been long and carefully cultivated in Braxton's work, and it clearly aligns him with the tradition of the lone *jali* singer-player-storyteller much more decidedly than with that of the master drummer who has developed his own soloisms through learning the interacting parts in an ensemble--reflected in the jazz drum kit--which he then internalizes and Signifies on.<sup>10</sup> It also, again, stems from Braxton's composerly orientation to the nature and role of his single-line instrument.

These musical examples adequately convey the core of Braxton's approach as a composer. Consider now his libretto, that "story that comes first" from which such music derives.

## *The Libretto*

Ashmenton and Ntzockie are seeing David off into his new life as an adult; he may be going on his first trip away from home, to college, or even to war, it is unspecified. David appears only during the first few lines of the scene, sung mostly by his parents as proud, confident, morale-building encouragements. The boy affectionately deflects their fusses with the mix of humility and fearlessness of a good (and untested) youth, says little else for himself, then leaves. The talk of the parents then turns cloudier.

For the rest of the scene, they express a mixture of their worst fears--the inability to help David for want of power and money in a corrupt, corrupting society--and their fondest memories of love and family life, their hope and trust in a good outcome despite the odds. Their intermittent declarations of love for each other move through this act as its unifier, the light guiding them through the darkness of an evil society where good can yet survive "in the cracks" healthily enough. After airing these deepest fears, loves, and hopes, they call it a day and go to bed contented and fulfilled.

This act works as a ray of goodness against the portrayals of evil that define the other three acts. In Act One, Ashmenton is the head of a venal board of directors planning the ruin of the general economic and social good for its members' personal gain, and Ntzockie and David are among his most eager minions; in Acts Three and Four they are key players in, respectively, a mob-hysterical attack on innocent scapegoats, and a powerful cult's initiation of an initially-naïve and later-cynical aspirant into their deepest, most esoteric evil. Through all four acts, good and evil unfold through a certain pattern: the voices for good always end in succumbing to the greater number for evil--if they are alone. Shala's is the *one* voice for good in both the first and last acts, but both times she must confront a *collective* constituting evil, and both times her individual integrity fails. On the other hand, in the two middle acts, the love of a man and woman together, while not changing the threatening evil collective, keeps the lovers safe from it even in its midst. Act Three portrays (different) lovers even more vulnerable and threatened than Act Two's, and craftier and bolder in response.

Ntzockie, as Ashmenton's wife in Act Two, utters the most pointed social and cultural critiques, in lines more typically given (by others) to male characters. Here, Ashmenton, between the two, expresses his thoughts about general sociocultural issues in terms of his domestic situation and roles (provider, husband, father); Ntzockie too speaks in her own such terms, but then breaks into a less personal, more public voice in lines such as "the reality of attraction in this context involved gaining correct information about the historical complexities of our situation and balancing that knowledge with present-day political decisions" (317). As she articulates those

complexities and decisions from the high ground and climax of this scene for a good five or ten minutes, she breaks off sporadically to exchange declarations of love with Ashmenton. The man here is the earth, the woman his tree of life in her proper soil; *he* supports *her*, *she* reaches for the sky and sings *their* best song. When she subsides from her inspiration, his gravity wells up to receive her.

Now, again, all this would carry a powerful charge as a racially homogeneous scene. The devotion of the man bespeaks qualities of manhood that counter the prevailing images (in both the opera and, by implication, the real world) of violence, misogyny, lust for power and dominance; white or black, this man would say much to us as people and Americans. Similarly, the clear ability of the woman to cultivate a self-actualization that liberates not only her womanliness but the humanity of her collective, to speak as intellectual and activist, *in the context* rather than in defiance of her family ties, also says much and counters much (both images, by the way, are themselves deeply rooted and cultivated in Braxton's own publicly expressed feminist concerns and academic agendas over the years).[11](#)

Moreover, staying with this emphasis, this scene would have much to say to us too if the casting were *specified* as interracial, and gendered either of the two possible ways--but what it would then have in common with the homogeneously casted versions would be its feel as a script, something someone intended to tell us, something someone crafted carefully to make points he wishes us to take.

Consider what it instead says to us when we know, or intuit, that it is not prescribed nor intended so, but is the result of an aesthetic approach that values chance as something more rather than less powerful, aesthetically, than prescription. For me, in this instance, it is like the difference between seeing two people who have come together for reasons they know well and moralize about--the political-social "correctness" of marriage, or of interracial marriage in America; something conceived and embraced by an idealist, a moralist, a person of principle--as opposed to two people who have rather simply fallen in love, in mystery, are compelled to make it work whatever the odds because . . . well, just because, they are that they are, they can do no other. When I rule chance out of the aesthetic approach, I can suspend my disbelief; I can let the artist intend and shape these characters and their issues for me, assess them on the basis of their conditional believability. But once I acknowledge divinatory, revelatory results in the chance approach at all, I see that this is their nature, this similarity to life as it is, to the blossoming of any and all things out of unmanipulated potential. How, after that, can I go "back to the farm" of art bereft, or comparatively starved of it?[12](#)

Applying this acceptance to this scene, I find that it de-problematizes nuances such as, for example, the image of an African-American man taking on the supporting, nurturing role in his relationship with the European-American woman--an image problematic indeed when

considered as black manhood and white womanhood, or black culture and white culture in America. If the casting were prescribed, a conscientious critic would have to question the thought and sensitivity in the prescription. Since it is not, what can one say? The same thing, as far as I can imagine, one might say to such a couple in real life. What critic could himself be so thoughtless and insensitive as to challenge such a couple (or their gender-reversed counterparts, equally "problematic") on such grounds?

In fact, this question leads us perfectly into our concluding look at Braxton's role and persona in the arenas of music and culture.

### *The Issue*

Braxton has always been an "outcat's outcat" (per Davis, 1990). Not only in the jazz- and concert music-critical community but also by African-American intelligentsia he has often been represented as 1) a dismissably flawed jazz player (who can't swing or play the blues), 2) a neglectably superficial composer, dated to a sixties experimentalism and/or a "Third Stream" sort of approach, and 3) an African-American voice too given to European tradition.[13](#)

Why? Several reasons. Having come of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s with his parent organization, Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), his words in interviews and liner notes were initially among the more articulate and visible expressions of the militant nationalism of the times. Later, when he distanced himself from many of these pronouncements and positions (again, passionately, articulately, and publicly) his critiques of what he began to see as chauvinism and parochialism struck many (also in keeping with the times) as breaking ranks with racial-ethnic solidarity. Added to such things, his musical decision has been to work what he started in the 1960s to a mature expression and philosophy, rather than to abandon it at some point as an immaturity to be grown out of. That decision led him to Europe of necessity, in the tradition of "jazz exiles" from America who find there a better reception. This tradition waxed greatly for Braxton and others associated with "free jazz," a musical movement that became the virtual individuation of European jazz from its African-American parent. While it was consigned in America to the naïve excesses of its times, giving way first to the commercialization of a rock-jazz fusion music, then to a revival of pre-1960s styles and paradigms led by a new generation and an emerging black middle class, free jazz took root and was developed in Western Europe into an idiom and scene ("new and improvised music") that honors the contributions of John Coltrane's later recordings, of Sun Ra, Albert Ayler, Cecil Taylor, Braxton and others by forging from them its own European extensions on them, on a continuum with the contributions of earlier masters such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell and others.

At the same time, not surprisingly, Braxton has his champions from all three circles: Art Lange, John Corbett, Bill Shoemaker, and Kevin Whitehead are some examples from mainstream jazz journalism; Ben Ratliff, Ronald Radano, Mike Heffley, Graham Lock, Peter Niklas Wilson, and Francesco Martinelli from American and European critical and academic literature; and George Lewis, Anthony Davis, Wadada Leo Smith, and Muhal Richard Abrams from the African-American intelligentsia and artists in both discourses. The thing to do, then, is to understand what lines are being drawn here and what roles being played, and how they might work in concert rather than conflict.

Braxton has clearly inherited a role in a contemporary American and African-American music-cultural conflict, one akin to the loved-hated persona of, for example, activist-intellectual-social critic Noam Chomsky. Like Chomsky, Braxton (1) gained distinction for his original and brilliant contribution to his field, and (2) continually spoke out publicly about the larger social, political, and cultural implications he saw in and through that work. Like his fellow MacArthur-Award recipient Cecil Taylor, when Braxton brings something new to New York--to the scene, the culture, the world there--it is often at his own expense and is virtually an alternate universe to that proffered by, say, Jazz at Lincoln Center. My point in that comparison is not to attack the latter, but to argue the case for complementary rather than competing agendas. That case, I think, encompasses both African-American and European-American cultural concerns and constitution in the same way.

Let me come to this conclusion by way of the musical-textual study above. Just as my analysis was a thoughtful exposition in the same terms I might have applied to more conventional scores by white or black, male or female American composers, or to transcribed performances of improvisers, so was the material I analyzed. That is--as unique and original and brilliant as its conception and execution might have been--it was embedded in the Western discourse and conventions of staves and clefs and notated pitches and meters, of the jazz improviser, and of the concert composer and performer.

More specific to African-American culture, it revealed elements deemed essential to the music thereof by Floyd (1995): strong bonds between speech and music (12, 28, 32, 56, 141); *both* informal *and* formal in approach (27, 56, 145); high in expectations of both individual and collective, in cooperation rather than conflict (33); improvisatory, and inspired thereby (62, 141); antiphonally, timbrally-texturally, kinetically, and rhythmically conceived, and dense (262); and mythically charged (274). Also specifically African American (while shared with other cultures) is the lack of understanding or respect and instances of hostility, for various reasons, that Floyd alludes to in the context of other composers and improvisers (133, 135, 145, 229, 274).

To bring in virtually the only producer of academic monographs about Braxton's work besides me, Radano has done that work, and scholarship in general, a great service with his framing of his subject in the postmodernist discourse of cultural criticism. That said, I distinguish my own experience of Braxton and his work from Radano's for what I sense as an awkwardness, even discomfort, with what a true-believing academic might perceive as Braxton's rough edges. For all his undeniable intellect and extramusical scope, Braxton has not come up the way of the musician and scholar who accepts academic agendas and criteria of professionalism. For all his sophisticated, competent, and original treatments of influences such as Schönberg, Stockhausen, and Cage, he (like Charles Ives, Harry Partch, or Ornette Coleman) strikes me as someone many academics would most comfortably relegate to the categories of folk artist or eccentric pastiche--categories themselves fraught with problematic assumptions--if the magnitude of his achievement did not tower over the threat of hubris, covert or overt, potentially lurking in the prestigious social status of the Western academic.

These thoughts provoke in me a sudden distaste for the word "outcat," and for any romanticization thereof. It has always been Braxton's badge of honor to accept such a moniker if that was the price to be paid for integrity of artistic vision and basic humanity--but its associations of youthful rebellion against tradition, of the isolated loner going his own way, of reactive, impulsive, compulsive shock tactics that are ultimately superficial bespeak themselves an unseasoned, unwise, uninformed, uncharitable and narrow understanding of that trickster spirit Floyd (7) puts at the heart of African-American music culture.

The African mythos of Esu resonates with trickster figures throughout the world. Its tradition in Hermes in the West includes the usual traits of sheer childish mischief, the outrageous and egregious pranks of the outcat--but it also includes the discipline of the scholar and seer. Hermes, like the Egyptian Thoth, governs arts and letters, draws the lines of borders (as well as crosses them freely), regulates and guides the concourse of a people. In what way do these seeming poles of constructive responsibility and disruptive irresponsibility converge? In the fact that people are resistant to change, even if it is an inevitable and desirable thing. It is experienced as an insult to the soul of what is immutably good, what tradition confirms, even when it is in fact the very engine of that tradition.

The case I would make is for a distinction between archetypes--spirits, *orishis*, *loas*--and the people who embody them. There are gods of the house and hearth, and there are gods of the field and wilderness; different people are constituted and/or situated for an affinity to one or the other of those (among a host of) different gods. But to demonize or cut off those of the field from those of the house, or vice versa, is to deny the unity of the world and people playing their rightful roles. The trickster's havoc has to be respected--indeed, embraced, even as he himself embraces the very tradition he re-orders--for the trickster's gifts and graces of order to be



11. Braxton's many feminist statements in interviews and his own writings figure crucially throughout my book; and one of his regular courses, first at Mills College and currently at Wesleyan, is a history of women in Western, American and African American music.

12. As Braxton himself has said in print, "Given structures will make certain things happen. That's what structure is. It doesn't have anything to do with me telling somebody what to feel" (Lock, 231). Structure in this discussion includes the elements and effects of chance.

13. See Radano (1986), for the rise and fall in the jazz media of Braxton's reputation; see Gray's (1991, 120-126) section on comprehensive sources about Braxton for its lack of academic or the sort of "high culture" critical discourse expended on composers such as Cage or Stockhausen; see Braxton in Lock (56-57, 60, 199) for Braxton's own rueful words about criticisms from African American writers.

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