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# The Performance of Racialized Bodies and Brecht's Operatic Anthropology

## **Abstract**

Taxonomic tropes and themes, particularly gender and class, but also race, function together in Brecht's plays to create overdetermined characterizations. Parallel to these characterizations, he developed a multilayered theory of performance that emphasizes how those who enact text should approach the representation of diverse human types and groups. His encounter with Chinese acting established foundational elements in this theory. In parallel to his theoretical thinking about performance and race in the mid-1930s, Brecht was developing his stance toward operatic representation. While these two conceptual spheres, race and opera, might appear far apart in their content, they parallel each other closely in their theoretical stakes. The work of Joy Calico reveals that the way the voice becomes fungible through operatic performance both repelled and fascinated Brecht, such that this voice-object of opera accompanied his work as a kind of dialectical foil throughout his career. When read through the lens of race, this insight can be extended to reveal how the acting body itself becomes a fungible object, one that Brecht's theories of estrangement and *gestus* strive, however inadequately, to make aesthetically and politically productive.

## **Disciplines**

Chinese Studies | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Music Theory | Other Arts and Humanities | Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Sociology of Culture | Theatre and Performance Studies

## **Comments**

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Kevin S. Amidon  
28 February 2017

## **Brecht's Operatic Anthropology: Epic Theater, Chinese Acting, and the Racialized Body**

Taxonomic tropes and themes, particularly gender and class, but also race, function together in Brecht's plays to create overdetermined characterizations. Parallel to these characterizations, he developed a multilayered theory of performance that emphasizes how those who enact text should approach the representation of diverse human types and groups. His encounter with Chinese acting established foundational elements in this theory. In parallel to his theoretical thinking about performance and race in the mid-1930s, Brecht was developing his stance toward operatic representation. While these two conceptual spheres, race and opera, might appear far apart in their content, they parallel each other closely in their theoretical stakes. The work of Joy Calico reveals that the way the voice becomes fungible through operatic performance both repelled and fascinated Brecht, such that this voice-object of opera accompanied his work as a kind of dialectical foil throughout his career. When read through the lens of race, this insight can be extended to reveal how the acting body itself becomes a fungible object, one that Brecht's theories of estrangement and *gestus* strive, however inadequately, to make aesthetically and politically productive.

For Angela

Throughout Brecht's body of dramatic work, characters show a wide range of markers of race. Occasionally they derive straightforwardly from geographic references, as in the Asian settings suggested in the titles of *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* or the (reconstructed) *Die Judith von Shimoda*. Sometimes they emerge within the dramatic text, for example in the "Alabama" imagined repeatedly in the early scenes of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*. Brecht's characters also often bear markers of abstract difference that can be read as allegories of race, perhaps most obviously in *Die Rundköpfe und die Spitzköpfe*. Bound up with these figurations of race are also a palette of gendered themes that range from the homosocial to prostitution to the woman in moral conflict. Furthermore, class issues always stand at the center of Brecht's thematics, particularly after his turn toward Marxism.

Taken together, Brecht's wide-ranging figurations of diversity provide productive material for reflection upon what scholars, since the revival and reanalysis of an existing anthropological term in the 1970s, have called racialization. Rohit Barot and John Bird describe the complex history and usage of this term, and come to a cogent summary that points to its usefulness in Brechtian contexts:

Racialization is used consistently to indicate process and change at the cultural level....

This is perhaps its most useful connotation; that...there is no one, fixed ideology of race but a range of ways in which structures and ideas are racialized.... [I]f racialization *is* a process then it is a process that constructs bodies and psyches and may...look very like the forms of visceral hatred of older racial theories.<sup>1</sup>

The gender theorist Jasbir Puar, further emphasizes that markers of difference beyond traditional racial characteristics – in her case sexuality but even gender and class – participate in racialization because it refigures static naturalistic discourses as social processes: “I deploy ‘racialization’ as a figure for specific social formations and processes that are not necessarily or only tied to what has been historically theorized as ‘race.’”<sup>2</sup> Brecht's characters, whether they are marked racially in more concrete or more abstract ways, participate in, and reflect upon, processes through which their bodies are racialized: marked with difference that matters in the dramatic worlds in which they live and interact.

Brecht's taxonomic tropes and themes, represented as embedded in social processes from which gendered, class-marked, and racialized bodies emerge, function together to create the characterizations in his works. Beginning in the later 1920s and proceeding through the 1930s, Brecht argued with increasing sophistication that characters can be rendered effectively only

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<sup>1</sup> Rohit Barot and John Bird. "Racialization: the genealogy and critique of a concept." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no. 4 (2001): 601-618. Here 613-14.

<sup>2</sup> Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke UP, 2007), xii.

through enactment of his theories of *gestus* and the estrangement effect (*Verfremdungseffekt* / *V-Effekt*). His works therefore carry with them a multilayered theory of performance that highlights, even in ways beyond those that Brecht himself foresaw, the representation of diverse human types and groups – contested also through type, stereotype, and caricature – at the center of performance.

Brecht's theories of performance also grew in many ways out of his encounter with a theatrical form that gave him, throughout his career, significant intellectual and artistic difficulty: opera. Opera, with its presentation of the body of the performer through the extremes of vocal display, focuses spectatorship on what can be seen and heard emerging from the body. It offers up the visible and sounding body for spectatorial consumption, and therefore easily becomes readable as what Brecht famously marked it as in his notes on his own operatic text, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*: "culinary."<sup>3</sup> In short, the body matters in all theater, but in opera the stakes of its performance rise to a particularly high degree. Recent theories of operatic performance have emphasized the ways in which the operatic voice emerges as an object, as a kind of mediator between the unique performing body and the represented text. These understandings of the function of the voice add layers of complexity to Brecht's performance theory by potentially interrupting and refiguring the *gestus* and the *V-Effekt*. Furthermore, the taxonomic categories that can mark the performing body – particularly race – appear to be subject to a similar dynamics linking the spectator and the performing body. The racialized body is an object not only of culinary consumption, commodification, and display, but enacts a dynamics of mediation between text and performance similar to that of the operatic voice. Operatic voice and racialized body therefore exist in ongoing and correlated tension with the

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<sup>3</sup> For an exploration of these dynamics of spectatorship see: Kevin S. Amidon, "'O show us...': Opera and/as Spectatorship in *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*," *The Brecht Yearbook* 29 (2004): 222-236.

material of Brechtian performance theory. The potential political-economic *Entfremdung*-alienation characteristic of both the racialized body and the operatic voice exists in tension with Brecht's perception of the necessity for *Verfremdung*-estrangement in theatrical practice and spectatorship. This tension not only contributed to Brecht's own theoretical development during his lifetime, but it continues to characterize the conflicts over Brecht's legacy today.

Among the taxonomic thematics that arise across Brecht's work, race may be the most difficult to trace through his thought and practice, because it seems at once both subtle and obvious in its figuration. Brecht's dramatic characters often carry racializing markers, but through dramatic action they are often geographically or situationally estranged from their spaces and places of origin. This complicates their enactment of processes of racialization – the marking of their bodies with difference – through perception and reception by other characters and audiences. Furthermore, it is difficult – despite the racialization so clearly present in Brecht's characterizations – to find something akin to a race concept in Brecht's theoretical writings. Particularly in the essays and aphorisms that surround the development of the principles of epic theater in the 1930s and 1940s, Brecht often speaks of class and of the human in general, and also of scientific approaches that enable epistemic access to the human, including in particular psychology, sociology, economics and history.<sup>4</sup> Race, however, is largely absent on the surface of Brecht's arguments. Nonetheless the fraught and violent history of the race concept, along with the concept's central deployment in colonial policy, seem as if they would logically have to motivate Brecht's many and overt concerns with exploitation and inhumanity. Rarely, however, do they do so obviously. Thus the friction between Brecht's tentative and

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<sup>4</sup> See for example the essay "Vergnügungstheater oder Lehrtheater," in Bertolt Brecht, *Schriften*, vol. 2, part 1, [*Werke*, Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe, vol. 22, part 1] (Berlin/Frankfurt: Aufbau/Suhrkamp, 1993), 106-116. Edition hereafter cited as BFA. In the section of this essay entitled "Theater und Wissenschaft," Brecht notably does not mention ethnology. Nonetheless German sociology in the 1920s overlapped considerably with the sphere of ethnology. See below.

mediated approaches to race and what appears to be its necessary position at the heart of his concerns requires and rewards close analysis.

A number of scholars have identified, explored, and critiqued the ways in which Brecht's theoretical writings appear to manifest a lack of interest in race, and further how his dramatic works seem to traffic in stereotype and caricature as much as they engage racialization critically. Significant throughout this scholarly spectrum is the history of the emergence of Brecht's Marxism, and the ways in which class appears to subsume race in Brecht's increasingly Marxist thought.<sup>5</sup> An early example is Maria Alter's 1967 essay "Bertolt Brecht und die rassischen Minderheiten [Bertolt Brecht and Racial Minorities]." In it Alter reads episodes in *Im Dickicht der Städte* and *Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reiches* in which racially marked characters appear on the stage. In them, she argues, the characters clearly stage awareness of their own racialized, minority status. She compares them to the abstracted characterizations in *Die Rundköpfe und die Spitzköpfe* to draw out the ways in which apparently race-conscious characters remain exceptions in Brecht's work. Representative moments in which race emerges onto the surface in Brecht's plays therefore serve to demonstrate how, for Brecht – and ever more so as issues of racial prejudice and exclusion became subsumed into his developing Marxism – race conflict becomes an artifact of bourgeois society that requires confrontation through class struggle. She concludes that "Brecht does not see the problem of the relationships between races as a true problem, but rather as a byproduct of the social structure. He appears to be saying that if class consciousness were present, racial prejudice would necessarily disappear."<sup>6</sup> Alter thus diagnoses a central

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<sup>5</sup> For a recent exploration of the tensions in Marxism related to race, racism, and otherness, see: Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Maria P. Alter, "Bertolt Brecht und die rassischen Minderheiten," *The German Quarterly* 40.1 (Jan 1967): 66.

aspect of Brecht's conceptualization of race along lines that have characterized the scholarly discourse ever since.

Christian Rogowski's contribution to the 2004 *Brecht Yearbook* constructs a complex reading of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* around the race-marked moments in Brecht's other dramas. Rogowski identifies the troubled and contradictory valences of Brecht's relationship to the linked spheres of race and gender, and develops a critique of the ways in which Brecht's practice masks rather than highlights them. His consistent use of scare-quotes around "*Rasse*" demonstrates how the race concept seems always to remain at a distance from Brecht's theoretical discourse and theatrical practice, and rarely shows up in Brecht's own words. Brecht's representational strategies point to both race and gender as spheres of conflict, but received forms of prejudice and exclusion receive, in Rogowski's reading, essentially no critical refiguration in the works themselves, and devolve largely into stereotype. The surface-level characterizations in *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, particularly of women and potentially multi-racial people, appear to stage a world in which the dynamics of exploitation become the focus of sustained critical engagement. Nonetheless this promise is not carried out, and Rogowski concludes that Brecht is simply disinterested in the problems of race and gender: "Through its disinterest in gender and 'race,' Brecht's criticism of the capitalistic, bourgeois-patriarchal social order brackets out two central components of the commodification of human relationships."<sup>7</sup> Rogowski thus insists that Brecht's blind spots about human diversity not be papered over with arguments that the social-critical aspects of Brechtian practice redeem the failure to expose gendered and race-marked injustice and exploitation.

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<sup>7</sup> Christian Rogowski, "Schattenboxen: Zum Warencharakter von Geschlecht und 'Rasse' in Mahagonny," *The Brecht Yearbook* 29 (2004): 336. Translation Amidon.

Loren Kruger has also dug deeply into how Brecht's work and theories can be understood in and through racialized contexts. In her *Post-Imperial Brecht: Politics and Performance, East and South*, she argues that "Brecht's legacy should not be mapped only on the Cold War axis of West to East, or only on the post-colonial axis of North to South." Kruger seeks, rather, "multiple lines of force, so as to highlight the intersection and interference of these axes."<sup>8</sup> She places Brechtian texts, methods, and practices into tension with performances, readings, interpretations, and stagings by others, especially those who come to Brecht from outside the European sphere.<sup>9</sup> Her examination of the work of Emine Sevgi Özdamar, who worked with some of Brecht's former students at the East Berlin Volksbühne for a time in 1976, reveals how racial thematics pose a challenge for those who wish to further develop Brechtian principles to address intercultural tension and conflict. Kruger reads Özdamar's plays and memoirs as pointing precisely to race as a key site of absence in the Brechtian toolbox: "Although clearly drawing on Brecht, she [Özdamar] also highlights the limits of Brecht's own relatively unreflected use of racial, especially orientalized stereotypes...."<sup>10</sup> Kruger further develops several other intertextual moments. Particularly revealing is her analysis of the reception of the South African dramatist Athol Fugard's work, with its clear themes of racialization and exclusion, in East Germany.

Exploration of Brecht's critical writings for sites where race becomes readable leads most directly to one essay from the 1930s that stands out because it raises the specter of race both in its general theme and in its specific content. This is the important theoretical text

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<sup>8</sup> Loren Kruger, *Post-Imperial Brecht: Politics and Performance, East and South* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 376.

<sup>9</sup> For a further reading of South African refigurations of Brecht's work (the Junction Avenue Theatre Company of Johannesburg's *Love, Crime, and Johannesburg*, a rewriting of *Die Dreigroschenoper*) that cites Kruger but continues to subsume interpretation of race and racialization entirely into Marxian analysis of capitalism and crime, see: Florian Nikolas Becker. "Capitalism and Crime: Brechtian Economies in *The Threepenny Opera* and *Love, Crime and Johannesburg*." *Modern Drama* 53, no. 2 (2010): 159-186.

<sup>10</sup> Kruger, *Post-Imperial Brecht*, 328.

“Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst” [Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting] that Brecht wrote in the latter half of 1936, but did not publish in its original German until 1954.<sup>11</sup> It has been the focus of discussion by a range of commentators, but only a few have highlighted race as a central theme in it. Katrin Sieg, however, directly confronts the issue of race in this essay. She notes, in keeping with the sense identified by Alter and others, that Brecht avoids the race concept in favor of class-oriented thought. Her critical reading parallels Rogowski’s in taking on Brecht’s blind spots, and she argues that the essay reveals “the point where Brecht’s faculty of tactical thinking fails,” because “Brecht appears to have misrecognized the racial discourse of his time.” This problem represents, in Sieg’s reading, an example of “the failure of the Left...to develop a critical discourse on race.”<sup>12</sup> She critiques how “the Brechtian spectator is thus firmly ensconced in the orientalist dichotomy of domination that empowers the Western subject with its colonial and racist underpinnings.”<sup>13</sup> Her own explorations of “ethnic drag” attempt to address these dynamics of domination by revealing how multiple layers of performance affect the racialized body, from the individual subject’s performance of her own identity to the staging, representation, and critique of performativity that takes place in numerous theatrical and quasi-theatrical contexts. She concludes forcefully that “the texts I examine [Lessing’s *Nathan der Weise*; Karl May’s *Winnetou* novels; Veit Harlan’s *Jud Süß*; Özdamar’s *Keloglan in Alamania*; Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Katzelmacher*] illustrate the necessity – and historical difficulty – of adjusting leftist critiques of representation (exemplified here by Brecht’s

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<sup>11</sup> BFA 22.1, 200-210. References hereafter parenthetical. For dating of the essay see BFA 22.2, 959.

<sup>12</sup> Katrin Sieg, *Ethnic Drag: Performing Race, Nation, Sexuality in West Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 63. Rogowski also notes this reference (“Schattenboxen,” 340n28).

<sup>13</sup> Sieg, *Ethnic Drag*, 61.

essay on estrangement effects) to a critique of race.”<sup>14</sup> That necessity remains alive, and Brecht’s work and legacy continue to stimulate it.

Interpretations like those of Rogowski, Kruger, and Sieg, which highlight the elisions and lacunae in Brecht’s relationship to the race concept, point to still further moments of significance, and their insights can bear further expansion and elaboration.

“Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst” contains, in one of Brecht’s most vivid theoretical formulations from the period in which he was most actively developing the discourses of epic theater and the estrangement effect that became his theoretical legacy, a statement that stands out as one of Brecht’s most straightforward invocations of the visible human traits – in this case skin color – that carry so much of the content of the race concept. This deployment comes at the central point in the essay where Brecht develops his argument that the “V-Effekt” [estrangement effect] “had primarily the purpose of the historicization of the represented processes” (207).<sup>15</sup> Brecht argues here for a “historicizing theater” [*historisierendes Theater*] in specific contrast to “bourgeois theater” [*bürgerliches Theater*], for such historicization carries the potential to unpack the ways in which human beings are falsely “generalized” and made “eternal”:

Bourgeois theater works out the timeless in its objects. The representation of the human being hews to the so-called eternally human. Through the organization of the plot such “general” situations are created that the human being per se, the human being of every era and every skin color can express itself. All events are only great leading concepts, and in answer to these leading concepts comes the “eternal” answer, the unavoidable, usual, natural, simply human answer. An example: the black-skinned human being loves like the white human being, and only when the story has extorted from him the same expression delivered by the white (and they can, in theory, ostensibly reverse the formula) is the sphere of art created. The particular, the different can only be acknowledged in the leading concept: the answer is communal; in the answer there is no difference (208).

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<sup>14</sup> Sieg, *Ethnic Drag*, 259.

<sup>15</sup> All translations from Brecht in this article are by the author, unless otherwise noted.

Brecht therefore indeed does acknowledge, and in this unusual case approaches the deployment of, a race concept, here in the figure of skin color. In “Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst,” in fact, the essay that the editors of the *Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe* declare to be the first dateable written text in which Brecht names and explores the “Verfremdungseffekt,” race provides a central conceptual and rhetorical fulcrum.<sup>16</sup>

As the rather well-known story goes, the writing of “Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst” was motivated in part by Brecht’s encounter in Moscow with the Chinese opera performer Mei Lanfang, whose practice Brecht takes as one of his points of analysis in the text. His rather cursory set of reflections on Mei Lanfang’s technique can of course hardly be considered extensive engagement on Brecht’s part with the traditions and techniques of Chinese theater. Critical commentary on Brecht’s misapprehension of these techniques of Chinese acting goes back decades, and it is clear that Brecht was most interested in exploring how his own perceptions of Mei Lanfang might serve the purposes of his theorization about the practice of epic theater and the V-Effekt.<sup>17</sup> Some of Brecht’s own acknowledged difficulty with the composition of the essay, which Margarete Steffin reported to Walter Benjamin in a letter in September 1936, may have stemmed from this tension between the necessity to provide some kind of reasonable representation of Chinese acting and the polemical theoretical purpose of the essay as an argument about performance practice.

Nonetheless “Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst” is interesting not for what it claims or imagines about Chinese acting traditions, but for the ways in which it raises theoretical and critical questions about race while connecting these reflections to Mei Lanfang and his practice only obliquely if at all. Brecht’s approach throws into high relief the

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<sup>16</sup> BFA 22.2, 959.

<sup>17</sup> An early example of such critical engagement: Renata Berg-Pan, *Bertolt Brecht and China* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1979), 164-65. See also: Joy Calico, *Brecht at the Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 173n47.

discontinuities and contrasts between the local, particular, embodied aspects of his thought and the taxonomic, universalizing aspects of race concepts that tend to mask and distend the individual human beings to which they are applied. Brecht's approach to scientific knowledge in the 1930s reveals sympathy for universalizing epistemic moves, fully aware as he is of the relationships between knowledge, investigation, and social power.<sup>18</sup> Brecht's approach to race here thus makes manifest the ways in which his incipient theories do not always move without friction among the concepts they attempt to distinguish: performer and performed, showing and shown, form and content, discrete and representative.

Furthermore, it is also in Brecht's most complex and fraught reflections on theatrical form – his encounter with opera – that the stakes of these conflicts are raised to the highest degree. Race, in fact, provides a close conceptual correlative of the same issues that made Brecht uncomfortable about opera: the potential for the performative aspects of embodied practice to become politically, financially, or conceptually fungible, and therefore to fixate attention upon that which is falsely individual. Race and opera both troubled Brecht, and they did so because they both carry the potential to turn the performing body against itself by making it falsely particular as fetishizable object. Opera and race both rely at once too much and too little upon the body for them to fit comfortably into Brecht's thought. They therefore redouble Brecht's concern with the voice and the body, and become the focus of the endless wary fascination that he shows for them throughout his career.

In "Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst," Brecht theorizes the imagined Chinese performer as the artist who squares the circle of the problems of race (directly)

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<sup>18</sup> Sieg summarizes this aspect of Brecht's thought expansively: "The fact that, for Brecht, race marked the limits of the social realm as that which could be changed, and was instead relegated to the natural realm, which could only be mastered, attests to the complex genealogy of his scientism – its affiliation with enlightenment anthropology, with Marx's antisemitism couched in class terms, and finally with his own contemporaries' casting of historical processes in crassly racial and eugenicist terms, across the ethnic, class, and political spectrum." *Ethnic Drag*, 64.

and opera (indirectly) by transcending both the limitations of the body as a marked, racialized object that captures fetishistic interest and as a representative specimen in epistemological schemes. Brecht's most far-reaching, and therefore troubling, claim about Chinese performance is that it derives from things that are secret and esoteric, but at the same time proto-scientific. It enables knowledge claims, and therefore epistemological control, because it makes out of theatrical practice a kind of anthropological play that is both mimetic and anti-mimetic at once. Brecht seems to be making a dialectical argument, but one that betrays a measure of ambivalence: he posits that the potential effectiveness of Chinese acting comes from some originary and unknowable sphere of the universally human, but that in becoming manifest through the performer it enables the possibility of knowledge. Furthermore, this is not abstract knowledge, but rather epistemologically generated political power that seeks and makes revolutionary interventions in the world. Brecht therefore represents the Chinese performer as maintaining a privileged relationship to the natural world, enabling knowledge of it:

Out of the secrets of nature (especially human) he makes his secret; he does not allow himself to be looked into as he brings out the natural phenomenon. Nature also does not yet allow him, who brings the phenomenon out, insight. We stand before the artistic expression of a primitive technology, an originary stage of scientific knowledge. The Chinese artist gains his estrangement effect from magic's witness (206-207).

The Chinese actor seems only semi-conscious of the dynamics of her practice, which serves nonetheless to increase further the power of that practice.

Brecht concludes this passage with another of his hair-raising aphorisms, one that mixes economic, political, scientific, and artistic metaphor, and can hardly fail to be read against itself when one remembers that Brecht was in close personal contact with Walter Benjamin as he was writing these words in the latter part of 1936:

One also may not simply declare that the position suggested here is proper to science, but not to art. Why should art not attempt, naturally with *its* own measures, to serve the great

social task of the domination of life? In fact only those who require such a technique for very specific societal purposes can study the V-Effekt in Chinese acting with profit (207).<sup>19</sup>

Brecht has not chosen here the concept “domination of nature” [*Naturbeherrschung*] that became in the 1940s so central to the thought of the exiled Frankfurt School. Rather he has chosen “domination of life” [*Beherrschung des Lebens*]. This choice, directed toward political revolution, points further toward a confluence of material around the race concept that stood among the central moments of the disciplinary sphere of biology in the early twentieth century. Biology at the time, and in the discursive spheres intimated by Brecht here, meant much more than just the investigation of living phenomena. They meant intervention in them, often for the purposes of excluding, penalizing, or destroying forms of life, human or otherwise, considered inadequate to the standards applied to the ‘domination of life.’<sup>20</sup> Here, then, emerges yet another moment of tension in Brecht’s thought, as his thought displays some resonance, or even sympathy, with an epistemological sphere – biology – that carried interventionist strands that could be so useful across the political spectrum.

In the remainder of his essay on Chinese acting, Brecht goes on to explore what he calls “historicizing theater,” specifically for its epistemological potential. Historicizing theater does something at once anthropological and anti-anthropological, for it seeks the particular, but specifically as the source of knowledge: “It throws itself fully and completely into that which is

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<sup>19</sup> Benjamin was working at this time on an essay that gave him several years of trouble in its conception: the essay “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,” in which the relationships between history and representation receive their deepest exploration. A thorough exploration of the relationships between Brecht’s and Benjamin’s reflections upon history and visual representation in the “Verfremdungseffekte” and “Eduard Fuchs” essays – and especially their overlapping interest in the significance of the tensions between generality and particularity – would provide a fruitful basis for a further essay. Nonetheless it is clear from the historical documents explored by the editors of the Benjamin *Gesammelte Schriften* that Benjamin, despite substantial misgivings about the Fuchs project, finally undertook the completion of the long-delayed essay while in Brecht’s company in Denmark in August 1936, at the same moment that Brecht was struggling with the composition of the “Verfremdungseffekte” essay. See: Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* II.3, Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Eds. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 1316-1317; 1326-1327.

<sup>20</sup> See: Kevin S. Amidon, “‘Diesmal fehlt die Biologie!’ Max Horkheimer, Richard Thurnwald, and the Biological Prehistory of German *Sozialforschung*,” *New German Critique* 104 (Summer 2008): 103-137.

something's own, the special, that which requires investigation about everyday processes" (209). Here, the sphere of possibility of the race concept, in Brecht's invocation of skin color earlier in the essay, expands further under the surface of Brecht's discourse, for the Enlightenment core of the race concept begins here to show its dialectical complexity: it seeks the general and the eternal, but at the same time it imposes that generality upon the particular.<sup>21</sup> Historicizing theater reveals this tension, because it appears to generate, precisely through its concern with particularity, the possibility of knowledge. Nonetheless that knowledge itself serves the "domination of life." Brecht raises these tropes here in the service of the specter of revolution, but his language evokes as much the dialectic of enlightenment – knowledge in the service of the direct domination of people – explored ten years later by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* as it does any liberating potential in radical political change.<sup>22</sup>

Brecht's theorization of historicizing theater therefore moves, like his deployment of the race concept, recursively between the general and the particular, between the taxonomic and its necessary specimens. Bourgeois theater seeks to generalize human experience. In this way it participates in the "de-racialization" that Barot and Bird identify as a significant early historical usage of the term in the service of an argument, by the anthropologist Sir Arthur Keith, for the superiority of European and Anglo-Saxon peoples. Here they reference the Oxford English Dictionary quoting Keith's book *Ethnos, or The Problem of Race Considered from a New Point of View* (1931), though the OUP reveals that Keith was not in fact the earliest user of the term:

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<sup>21</sup> See for example: Jon M. Mikkelsen, ed., *Kant and the Concept of Race* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> For a thorough introduction to Horkheimer and Adorno's form of Critical Theory that emphasizes the question of domination see: James Bohman, "Critical Theory", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/critical-theory/>>.

“Where Huxlely went wrong was in believing that when Europeans belonging to separate racial stocks...were planted together...they became, if I may coin a term, deracialized.”<sup>23</sup>

Bourgeois theater thus masks the reality of human particularity, and creates false representations that serve economic exploitation. Brecht’s historicizing theater attempts to enable the representation of that particularity, but in ways that would put it in the service of general goals of political and social transformation. Race therefore becomes the barely acknowledged mediator of the endlessly troubled relations between the individual expressive capacity of the performer and the possibility of political theater. Brecht’s imagined Chinese performer is a performer whose practice potentially transforms this tension between the false universality of the “human being” and the unknowable particularity of the represented individual into something more. That imagined performer is simultaneously Chinese and universal, racialized and generalized, mysterious and scientific, embodied and transcendent.

Formal and technical questions of theatrical practice that Brecht approached at this time further deepen the stakes of these issues. At the time that Brecht was composing his reflections on Chinese theater, he was continuing his conflicted encounter with opera. That encounter points to a tension in his thought that runs in parallel to race as a mediator of particularity and knowledge. The performing body in opera – marked indelibly by its overwhelmingly present vocal display – draws attention to itself and becomes fungible in ways that foreground the friction between the general and the particular in a manner that recapitulates the dynamics of the racialized body. Just as the racially marked individual is subject and object at once, the singing voice in opera is not just an artifact of the performing body, but a mediating instance that renders the voice into object. That object demands such attention to its sublime particularity that it

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<sup>23</sup> Barot and Bird, “Racialization,” 602.

interrupts the dialectics of the particular and the universal that lies at the heart of Brecht's theories of the 1930s and 1940s.

The significance of the operatic voice-object to Brecht's entire theoretical and theatrical corpus has been given an extensive and subtle reading by Joy Calico. Her reading can be elaborated to reveal the complementarity of race and opera in Brecht's thought, and how they worked together to motivate the development of Brecht's theories and techniques. Calico summarizes Brecht's encounters with race on the American stage during his exile, and demonstrates not only that he was intrigued by the possibilities presented by African-American actors on stage in all-Black and mixed productions, but that this fascination overlapped significantly with his ongoing engagement with the forms and practices of opera.<sup>24</sup> She argues that the most interesting root of Brecht's ambivalence about opera derives from the inherent propensity of the operatic singing voice to come apart from both the body of the performer and the content of the singing, and thereby to establish itself as voice-object. This voice-object – the object of both the desire of the audience for vocal beauty and of the performer's own technical strivings – potentially disrupts, in Calico's reading, the possibility of a constitutive element of the epic theater explored and advocated by Brecht in his theoretical work in the mid-1930s, particularly “Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst”: the gestic split between performer and performed. In Calico's forceful expression:

During the mid-1930s, Brecht was forced to develop a highly pragmatic performance theory because his pieces were now performed without the benefit of his direct supervision. Whereas *gestus* had been situated almost exclusively in the performer's visible body in motion or stasis, new circumstances prompted him to locate the *gestus* in

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<sup>24</sup> Calico explores at some length the well-known attempt by Clarence Muse to put on an all-African-American production of *The Threepenny Opera* in 1941-42; the mixed production of *The Private Life of the Master Race* at the City College of New York in 1945-56; and the Broadway production of Brecht's adaptation of *The Duchess of Malfi* in 1946, in which the African-American actor Canada Lee wore something like vestigial whiteface (something the New York Herald Tribune called “a stunt new to the annals of the theater”). Calico, *Brecht at the Opera*, 78-87. On these productions see also James K. Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 132-150.

the fixed, notated score, which was then realized via the performer's temporal, sounding body.... I maintain that Brecht did not anticipate the emergence of the voice-object when he shifted the emphasis from the showing body to the sounding body.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore she argues that the voice-object undermines some of Brecht's arguments about gestus and dramatic technique. At the very least, it highlights the tensions and frictions within those arguments:

I will show that the byproduct of situating the gestus in the musical score, therefore requiring a sounding body for realization, is that the body produces the voice-object in the process, a phenomenon that dominates all else on stage and resists containment in the gestus (44).

These dynamics of the voice-object are congruent with the tensions produced by Brecht's imagination of the gestic techniques of the racialized Chinese actor. Calico in fact notes the significance of Brecht's encounter with Mei Lanfang for his theorizing in the mid-1930s (9; 143n47).

The voice object thus heightens the stakes of the gestic split as Brecht explores it in "Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst." In the essay he sites argues that the gestic split emerges through the act of the Chinese artist "looking upon himself":

In this way the artist divides the mimetic (representation of observation) from the gestic (representation of the cloud), but the latter loses nothing by this, for the posture of the body works backward upon the face and lends it its entire expression.... The artist has used his face as the empty page that can be inscribed by the gestus of the body.<sup>26</sup>

Brecht imagines that the actor's reflection upon his own embodied practice and physicality tears the veil of sentimentalizing, universalizing identification from theatrical practice. This is no straightforward process, however, because the operatic voice-object always holds the potential to interrupt it. The voice-object represents the most extensive form of the singer 'listening upon herself' technically, but (almost) always in the service of the transcendent masking of the

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<sup>25</sup> Calico, *Brecht at the Opera*, 8-9. References hereafter parenthetical.

<sup>26</sup> BFA 22.1, p. 201.

visibility or audibility of the technical effort involved in vocal production. As the opera and performance scholar Carolyn Abbate argues, this overcoming of the limitations of the sounding body to achieve the extremity of operatic representation pushes operatic performance into the sphere of the “drastic,” interrupting and upending not only for the spectator but also for the scholar and critic those “gnostic” moments that emerge from the interpretation of operatic texts and scores.<sup>27</sup> Brecht himself sometimes recognized this possibility – and Calico argues that he in fact “attempted to suppress the voice-object through various performance instructions so that audience members would not succumb to its siren song” (70). Nonetheless it makes, like race, continuous and dialectical trouble for Brecht’s dramatic theory, for it comes between the performing body’s actions and the spectating body’s reception, linking them in ways that make the epistemic goals of Brecht’s theories – the spectator being “driven toward cognition,” as Brecht advocates in his “Anmerkungen zur Oper Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny.” – into something more complex and fraught than Brecht himself imagined.<sup>28</sup>

Abbate’s focus on the drastic in operatic performance points, perhaps, to a means by which performing bodies that reveal the stakes of their own racialization might become something not disruptive to Brechtian theory and practice, but a productive extension of it. Brecht’s blind spots about race might, therefore, become a means to their own overcoming. Abbate stages her arguments from a position that stands against simplistic Brechtian tropes: “Prescribing a critical distance from the performance experience, ever since Brechtian estrangement, has seemed to guarantee liberal credentials. Yet this can foreclose much that is of

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<sup>27</sup> Carolyn Abbate, “Music – Drastic or Gnostic?” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Spring 2004): 505-536. Calico derives her important elements of her discussion from Abbate’s work. See Calico, *Brecht at the Opera*, 201n89; 202n99; 202n100.

<sup>28</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (Frankfurt/M.: edition suhrkamp, 1955), 88.

value, both intellectually and morally, in encountering a present other at point-blank range.”<sup>29</sup>

That present other, as performing, audible body, carrying its marks of racialization, engages the spectator in more than culinary pleasure, more than consumption. It demands to be seen as “I”:

This first person, this I who isn’t going to forget, must be willing to walk onstage once what counts is the live performance that once took place, experienced only by those who were present. That is the reason why casting one’s lot with performance and the drastic has seemed so difficult: there is no place to hide.<sup>30</sup>

This impossibility of forgetting, of the indelible memory of the encounter with the other as performing presence, becomes the threshold to a kind of knowledge that is sufficiently embodied to do justice to the history of embodied, racialized individuals.

Elin Diamond’s work provides perhaps the most spirited advocacy for an approach to Brecht that makes manifest a productive encounter with the other that holds the potential to realize the promise of Abbate’s “drastic,” and thereby make the voice-object itself part of that encounter. The performer’s body and voice must not work separately as moments of spectatorial delectation, but together as direct experience of the other and the processes of othering.

Diamond builds her arguments around the dialectical idea of the “not, but” found in Brecht’s 1940 essay translated by John Willett as “Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect”: the Brechtian actor strives, dialectically, to represent not only what she shows, but what she chooses not to show. Spectators must therefore become productive interlocutors, because the actor’s body always represents more than an object on display. It enacts the historical traces of its gendered, racialized identity:

The Brechtian “not, but” is the theatrical and theoretical analog to the subversiveness of sexual difference, because it allows us to imagine the deconstruction of gender – and all other – representations. Such deconstructions dramatize, at least at the level of theory, the infinite play of difference that Derrida calls *écriture* – the superfluity of signification that places meaning beyond capture within the covers of the play or the hours of

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<sup>29</sup> Abbate, “Music – Drastic or Gnostic,” 532.

<sup>30</sup> Abbate, “Music – Drastic or Gnostic,” 536.

performance. This is not to deny Brecht's wish for an instructive, analytical theatre; on the contrary, it invites the participatory play of the spectator, and the possibility for which Brecht most devoutly wished, that significance (the production of meaning) continue beyond play's end, congealing into choice and action after the spectator leaves the theatre.<sup>31</sup>

Diamond strives to make out of Brecht's ideas, in spite of their blind spots, a basis for engagement with the gendered, racialized other. She insists that the realization of Brecht's vision of an epic theater that does justice to the history of the racialized body is possible: "Yet with all these qualifications, Brechtian theory imagines a polyvalence to the body's representation, for the performer's body is also historicized, loaded with its own history and that of the character...."<sup>32</sup> Brechtian-feminist critical and performance practice therefore offers a means to render out the troubling object-character of both voice and race a means of realizing a productive engagement with the other. Such engagement requires, however, more layers than Brecht himself foresaw.

Brecht's encounters with opera and with race thus function together in ways that not only reveal the gaps and inadequacies within Brecht's own theories, but can point to where they might most fruitfully be extended and expanded: the voice-object as troubled mediator of the gestic split must be understood, represented, and enacted alongside and as part of its correlative, the racialized body. The body as racialized object further mediates and frustrates the gestic split because it is at once something imposed epistemically and investigationaly, but also quasi-performative. Race in the full context of Brecht's ambivalent encounter with it thus becomes something akin to the *Ur-gestus*, the magical-physiological grounds of the possibility of epic theater, and thereby of politics. These moments thus point, without resolution but always

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<sup>31</sup> Elin Diamond, "Brechtian Theory / Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism," *TDR: The Journal of Performance Studies* 32.1 (1988): 86.

<sup>32</sup> Diamond, "Brechtian Theory / Feminist Theory," 89.

emergent through their constitutive tension, to something that will continue to exercise us as long as human beings perceive – and seek to understand, explain, and represent – difference.