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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

How Music Travels: the Opera **Blood Hunger Child**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Music

by

Jon Forshee

Committee in charge:

Professor Anthony Davis, Chair
Professor Katharina Rosenberger, Co-Chair
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2017

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The Dissertation of Jon Forshee is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Co-Chair

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2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

How Music Travels: The Chamber Opera “Blood, Hunger, Child”

by

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Doctor of Philosophy

University of California, San Diego, 2017

Professor Anthony Davis, Chair
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The dissertation elaborates a narrative and an analysis of the compositional process of the chamber opera Blood Hunger Child. The narrative dimension of the dissertation identifies themes functional to the composition of the chamber opera. Because they are functional, these themes are positioned as indigenous to the libretto and to the music of the work. Subsequently these themes provide the foundation of an analysis that is presented as specific to as well as exegetical of the process of composition.

The dissertation first outlines the conceptual background of Blood Hunger Child, and identifies three themes as emergent during the process of composition: an engagement with Yoruban mythology, an investigation of musical unity, and narrative syncretism of Yoruban mythology and the characters of the

opera. After the general presentation of each of these themes, an investigation of Esu, the trickster of Yoruban mythology is presented, an understanding of musical unity is given, and a discovery of narrative and musical synthesis is outlined and proposed.

The musical score of Blood Hunger Child accompanies the dissertation as the realization of the process and the themes discussed in the text.

How Music Travels: The opera **Blood Hunger Child**

Introduction

Keywords: Contemporary Opera, Amistad, Yoruban Music, Trickster god.

The apprehension and engagement of a music artwork through multiple, simultaneous, even competing aesthetic filters contributes to that quality of attention which is the cornerstone of artistic experience. There are as many ways in which this assertion holds true as there are ways of listening.¹ There are particular ways by which to construe this notion as a listener, and it may be useful to pare away some of what this assertion does not entail.

To begin with, this quality of attention is not one which is contingent upon the musical education or “cultural capital” of the listener, nor is it one which is always quantitatively demonstrable in the analysis of a musical score, transcription, spectral analysis, or other graphical representations. For the author, the span of this quality of attention is brief; sometimes a moment. The musical experience is not restricted by genre, occasion, or any intentions or strategies of the composer, though a dramatic work is the chief concern of this text; instead, the varieties of experience being referred to range the gamut: from the blurred perception and ambivalent cognition of instrumental sound color, to the simultaneous discernment of multiple time-frames in works of intentional

¹ The different ways in which we listen to and cognize music is discussed in Mailman (2012), in which the author discusses seven 'modes' of listening, and their combinations, at length.

compositional acculturation, to the manifold emotional framings of a carefully-wrought opera scene. What follows are three cursory considerations from the literature which are offered to positively illustrate more of this quality of listening attention; a fourth example is an image, and embodies a cognitive multi-valence of a special kind which speaks powerfully to details of *Blood | Hunger | Child* discussed in Chapter 7 of this text.

The first example focuses on the blurred perception and cognition of sound color, or *timbre*, alone. In Trevor Wishart's computer music composition *American Triptych*, in which the phrase "Let freedom ring", sampled from the speech *I Have a Dream* by Martin Luther King, Jr., is subjected to various digital signal processing procedures. By processing King's voice, Wishart isolates component frequencies of the analyzed vocal sample, seeming to "stop", "elongate" or "stretch" the vocal sound. To this listener, the sample undergoes a transformation from the "sound of speech" to a "harmony" or "chord" of frequencies. It is during this transformation, and during a unique region of the transformation each time, that the processed sample of King's voice sounds like both his voice, and the discrete harmonic components which contrive to create his voice. Wishart excels at such digital morphologies between sounds, with especially notable moments during his twenty-nine minute work *Globalalia*. Wishart's work is cited in this text as an example of the kind of multi-framed musical experience I am concerned with in a purely perceptual-cognitive modality: the example *sounds* like two sound colors at once.

Consider the finale from Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca*. This sequence illustrates musically emotional multi-valence of a special type as dramatic irony. In this passage, Tosca has been told her lover, Marco, will be freed after facing a “fake” firing squad: Marco will pretend to die, the firing squad will leave, and when the coast is clear Tosca and Marco will be reunited. However, the firing squad is not fake, and Marco is not acting, which Tosca discovers too late. As Marco is led away from Tosca to the firing squad, a march commences in the orchestra. The audience is aware that the march is truly a *marche funebre*, yet empathizing with Tosca, and with what her character surely believes, the march also projects the profile of a parody, as the mere portrait of death march, not real, and the little fillip by the flute that rounds off each four-beat phrase seems placed to reinforce this perception.

Robert Morris' *Motet on Doo-dah* is a subtler instance of the musical multi-valence being discussed, presenting, as it does, a sophisticated case of compositional musical acculturation. Morris' work is scored for flute, piano, and double bass. This very modern instrumental trio treats of several, decidedly *not* modern, musical phenomena, such as 14th-century isorhythm, classical Korean court music, and the music of Stephen Foster. This is a subtle example, because the composer deploys salient features of a diversity of music practices which may only reveal themselves with repeated listenings. Concerning these, Morris writes:

The composition is an isorhythmic motet in the manner of certain French compositions of the fourteenth century. Its cantus firmus is

Stephen Foster's "Camptown Races." Because of the nature of the tune, it was possible to develop a quasi-twelve-tone structure for the piece. The resulting polyphonic web is embellished to provide direct reference to that body of Korean court music known as *Ah-Ak* ("refined music"). To get at the sound of the Korean court ensemble, with its flutes, bells, stone slabs, and drums, it was necessary to use many of the new instrumental techniques that are being developed by many Western composers and performers. Listening to the long sustained tones in the alto flute, one can hear "Camptown Races" ornamented and stretched out over the whole piece. The other instruments also play phrases of the tune or its mirror inversion.²

In works of such decided musical resources, success lay in the music not sounding now "like Korean music", and now "like Foster", and so on, but that the music "goes" like these musics go, and moreover, how they "go" together, if they do.

A final visual may also serve to illustrate the aesthetic multi-valence which is the topic of this introductory portion of this text. This example, discussed in Thompson (1983), is an image of an old man, with white beard, dressed in green robes. In his left hand he holds a staff, and with his right he points to a grouping of snakes on the ground before him. This image is beguiling for several reasons, and it is included here because contemplation of the possible meanings of this image for someone not familiar with the historical figure it portrays serves as a model for the quality of attention which is of special interest in this paper. This image, and the nature of its import to the composition of *Blood | Hunger | Child*, is discussed more fully in Part II of this essay.

In line with the aesthetic proclivities outlined above, I may note that I have

2 Morris, Robert (1973).

always endeavored to nourish a diversity of ways in which to listen to and engage with the music I compose. I have pursued the possibilities of these experiences in different ways in music, though admittedly not always conscientiously during the act of composing. One current along these lines which I detect in my works is characterized by several shared features: a harmonic palette designed to treat each pitch equally as well as allow for intricate relationships between them; short, mercurial rhythmic gestures which often interlink to create larger-scale composite rhythmic phrases; an engagement with melodic ornamentation approaches typical of ancient and varied music practices, ranging from those of the Ars Subtilior to those found in the music of Southern India. A few representative works of this current are *Punch*, for chamber orchestra; *A Gig of Gists*, for piano solo; and the mixed *Sextet*.³ It is not incorrect to describe works of this kind as contrapuntal, and elaborate, and, important to the discussion of this text, I find that these works are richly detailed enough that the ear can not quite “hear” all it wishes to hear on a single listening, yet not so intricate that the music congeals into a single homogenous event. As a listener, pieces of this type offer multiple paths through the music; after multiple listenings, these pieces may be heard in multiple ways at once.

The opera *Blood | Hunger | Child* is no exception to this aesthetic mission, and this text presents a selection of the ways in which I have conceived of and musically elaborated the possibility of such multiple frames of reference in the composition of the work.

3 Recordings of these and the other original works mentioned in this text are available online or by request.

This text is in two parts. Part I outlines the genealogy of an ascriptive proposition that came to bear upon the opera during its composition and which, in part, is taken as the touchstone of a method for reflecting upon the composition of the opera. Part II is organized into two sections. Section I presents the narrative of Blood | Hunger | Child, and a few details concerning historical context are given. Section II locates passages in the opera which detail four ways in which the proposition of Part I is fashioned as an aesthetic principle throughout and within the music I have written.

Chapter 1 – Sources and Background

The conceptual framework from within which I discuss the music of *Blood | Hunger | Child* originates with my listenings to and studies of Anthony Davis' opera *Amistad*. In two acts, this opera dramatizes the 1839 revolt aboard the Spanish schooner *La Amistad*, during which Mende captives successfully take control of the two-mast ship and its crew. Attempting to turn the ship back towards Africa, they instead run aground in the Northern United States at Montauk where the case concerning their status reaches the Supreme Court, who then orders the Mende freed. The case of the *La Amistad* Mende became a rallying call for abolitionists in the U.S., and the event is well-documented in the historical record and in the Arts. The libretto by poet Thulani Davis vigorously depicts many of the actual persons from the 19th-century event, and Davis' score musters impressive instrumental and (especially) vocal forces to reflect the constellation of characters active throughout the event.⁴

At the outset, musical considerations encourage and reward many listenings of *Amistad*. The long interconnections of polyrhythms, especially those enacted by the vocalists in opposition to the orchestra, still seem to trick my ear. At times throughout the opera my ear detects enticing instances of what I can only describe as a kind of “metric legerdemain” in which the orchestra and the vocalists simultaneously each seem to flow in separate tempi entirely; the occasionally-emergent large-scale hemiola(s) may be heard as disrupting the

4 In Forshee (2016) I discuss the narrative and other details of Thulani Davis' and Anthony Davis' account.

harmonic-temporal skein of the music, then resolving back beneath the surface, cuing the presence, for this listener, of the background ocean which first set the story afloat. Such transitive text-painting surely represents one of the powers unique to the genre. With familiarity, nuances of the English text setting become clearer, and the propulsive relationship between speech prosody and rhythmic gesture is clear throughout the score.

Among the many figures dramatized in Davis' opera, the Trickster God, though not a matter of the historical record of 1839, cuts one of the most intriguing personalities of the work, and embodies a character new to the genre. Davis assigns the Trickster God the role of ship's Navigator, and it is due to his unique facilities that the new Mende crew of the *La Amistad* find themselves en route to the United States instead of to Africa as they hoped. In *Amistad*, the Trickster God guides the actions of the narrative, without directly influencing it or implicating himself; he tempts fate, and the crew, by his outrageousness, yet acts without any obvious malice; he is the enabler *par excellence*.

As a supernatural being, the Trickster God is sometimes described as a demigod, sometimes as a creator figure, often as a prankster, and always as unruly and mischievous. He (he is nearly always masculine), makes appearances in mythologies around the world, and is known in Norse mythology as Loki, in Polynesian lore as Maui, and the ancient Greeks identified him as Prometheus. In some areas, the Trickster God is associated with certain, usually clever, animals; this is reflected in his appearance among the peoples of North

America where he is known as Coyote, Bear, or Raven. In Christian mythology, Lucifer is often associated with the Trickster, but to this reader it is the Lucifer of the *Book of Job*, who seeks to challenge the aspirant's faith, which most resembles the Trickster. The Trickster is not an evil character. The presence of the Trickster God in so many cultures around the world should not suggest they each portray the same characteristics of behavior or personality, however; each iteration of the Trickster is textured and shaded by Culture, and everything that entails. And yet, all of these traditions find occasion to depict the Trickster as an intermediary, or mediator, or messenger, between the gods and between gods and humans. The Trickster's propensity for lewdness is also recounted in many stories and traditions, and in some he is even disliked by his supernatural peers because of the trouble he causes.

The Trickster God of *Amistad* presents a personality specific to his tradition, too, and the composer offers contextual details about him throughout the opera. First, the captives of the ship are Mende, a people described as an ethnic group of the Mandé peoples of West Africa, largely in Sierra Leone⁵; second, in the first scene the Trickster God sings to the “Goddess of the waters, Mother of all Gods, Mistress of oceans, rivers”, all allusions to Yemayá (or Yemoja), a Yoruba spirit of rivers and oceans; and third, the crew sings “Anansi,

5 In fact, the captives of the historical *La Amistad* are described as Mende; in Davis' opera, however, the captives-turned-crew sing the names of other peoples from Sierra Leone, such as the Mende and Temne, as well as those of peoples from Liberia, such as the Mano. The names of cities of both Sierra Leone and Liberia are also sung, such as Moyamba and Kenema of the former, and Tapeta of the latter. This proliferation of names of peoples and places from West Africa suggests a generalization of the origins of the captives in Davis' *Amistad*. To this listener, Davis' characterization seems more likely than that the captives were all Mende, or all from a single locale.

anansi,” in Act I. There are other clues, but these are enough to locate the Trickster God of *Amistad* as belonging to one of several mythologies in West Africa. In these lands, the Trickster God is known as Esu, Anansi, Eshu, Legba, or Elegua. Each of these incarnations of the Trickster is shaded to reflect the imaginations of the peoples that give him life through stories, prayers, and the arts.

In light of the personal aesthetic described above, the role of the Trickster in *Amistad* presents a fruitful and poignant area of study for two reasons: first, as a composer taken up with opera for the first time, Davis' musical portrayal of the Trickster seems rife with musico-hermeneutic possibilities which, whether embraced or not, could only serve to inform character development in my own work; and second, the literary character of the West African Trickster's uniquely liminal duality seems to embody the music-cognitive ambiguity I privilege in my own listening and composing. Early readings in the literature on the Trickster figure in West Africa quickly focused my attention on the stories, myths, and practices of the Yoruba, modern representatives of one of the most ancient, and most urbanized, empires of the African continent, and counted among the richest of World civilizations.⁶ The Yoruba recognized the Trickster as Elegua, who is one of many *orisha*, supernatural beings which Karade (1994) describes as closest, in Western traditions, to *angels*. Honored in prayer and offerings as a messenger deity, Elegua is empowered to successfully deliver adherent's

6 The adaptation and survival of the stories, myths, and practices of the Yoruba in the New World is a testament to the power and extent of the Yoruba civilization, as noted by Robert Louis Gates, Jr. (TSM)

prayers to the other spirits and orisha...or not. In practice, ritual offerings are made to Elegua first, though he is never the ultimate object of adherents' prayers, praises, or offerings.

Keeping an ear to the musical dimension of the orisha and the praise hymns associated with them, there are many occasions for transcription and the modes of analysis and description that are the strengths of the practice.

Engaging first-order recordings of the vocal traditions of *oriki* through transcription emerged as an extension of my compositional practice around *Blood | Hunger | Child*, and afforded the opportunity to listen closely to the intricate ornaments and embellishments evident in the singing of this music by musicians familiar with the tradition. Instances where transcriptions of *oriki* assume a functional role in my thinking about and composing of *Blood | Hunger | Child* are discussed later in this text; however, mention of it here is not unnecessary, since it serves to highlight a few of the fundamental musical considerations which motivated my ear throughout the composition of this work.

An early and consistent fund of insight and inspiration concerning the orisha, and Elegua in particular, is found in Henry Louis Gates' *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. As it would happen, in some ways Gates' concerns with Esu-Legba reflect my own interests in this enigmatic figure: in his book, Gates surveys a broad diversity of African-American literature to locate the Trickster-messenger Esu-Legba as a consistent trope of the literary canon. For Gates, the Trickster is a thematic trope, based

upon a feature indigenous to the tradition, which may, by its pervasiveness, serve as an hermeneutic omnibus for the tradition. The Trickster of *Amistad* is not, perhaps, specific to the Mende captives of the event, but he is certainly specific to the traditions of the peoples living in Sub-Saharan West Africa. In my study, the focus does not include the Trickster as a hermeneutic of *Amistad*, as Gates proposes he may serve of the African-American literary tradition, though allusions to Gates' interests do emerge with my considerations of the Trickster's liminal duality as a clew to Davis' vision of the *Amistad* narrative, as well as, possibly, to a fresh perspective on dramaturgy and on operatic character development.

More importantly than any similarities between Gates' and my interests in Elegua / Esu-Legba, Gates interest is, in an important respect, the fruit of a proposition by the author: rather than tailoring a theory about African-American literature to fit Western European paradigms of Literary Criticism, Gates aims his study at identifying and expounding upon themes, or tropes, indigenous to the tradition itself. This exegetical strategy has many advantages, the primacy of the artworks, or tradition of artworks, being not the least of them: within this kind of inquiry, the work, or collection of works, is given voice in terms of its tradition or practice. And additionally, engagements of this kind offer the possibility of discerning subtler details of the tradition, and possibly of hearing the work or the tradition in a new or novel way. Eugenio Montale describes this last gift of the aesthetic experience as the "second life" of Art.⁷

⁷ Montale (1982).

Though formulated differently, the spirit of Gates' position is not foreign to theories of composition or discussions of music. For example, when the Greek composer Iannis Xenakis writes, at the beginning of his essay "Creativity", "First Proposition: rules can only be imposed by the work itself.", and next, "-One always comes back to the same question—what is true or what is false in artistic matters?--or to the only response worth considering, to refuse all rules outside the work is to refuse to be crippled, blind, and deaf."⁸ the composer alludes to an association of the "true" in Art to what is "native" to it, or what is "characteristic" of it.

Regarding developing a discourse around *Blood | Hunger | Child*, Davis' music in *Amistad* coupled with Gates' literary study in *The Signifying Monkey* promise rich possibilities for discovery, elucidation, understanding and application within my own creative practice. For example, my habit of transcribing music that intrigues my ear took on a functional role in the creation of *Blood | Hunger | Child*: what was formerly, to me, a musical document, gained significance as a narrative device (albeit one which also happens to be expressible in a sonic modality).

In Part II of this text, I detail four passages of *Blood | Hunger | Child* which can be described, and heard as, articulations of multiple musical and cultural trajectories at the same time: The role of the transcription of *oriki*, or praise songs, in the opera is outlined, as well as other musical reflections of features of this genre; the modeling, only once, of a musical genre of East Central Africa, is

⁸ Xenakis (1994).

presented and its significance discussed; and finally, a composite narrative, discovered existing alongside the libretto of *Blood | Hunger | Child*, is proposed.

Chapter 2 – The Story

As a collaboration with American poet and novelist Heather Fowler, *Blood | Hunger | Child* represents a work close to my ideals of trans-disciplinary design and production. The genesis and formative ideas behind the initial stages of the libretto are recounted thoroughly in an online interview of the librettist and composer.⁹ It is not redundant to recall here that the libretto, in English, was developed by Fowler from her short story of the same name which appeared in the collection *Elegantly Naked in my Sexy Mental Illness*.¹⁰ Below, the context and narrative of the libretto are given, then follows a discussion of the musical forces involved in the work, along with a brief note on the staging concept of the opera.

Set in Paris in 1793, during the years of the French Revolution known as *la terreur*, the story tells of Ch rie and Natan, two peasants under the *ancien régime* who have become lovers. They live together in a small apartment not far from what was then called *Place de la Revolution*, and the spectre of the busy guillotine, though often unremarked, looms large in the background. The logistical effects of the revolution are also clear and present, and food is scarce, and the garden is empty. The common-law couple is soon expecting their first child. While Ch rie toils at home to stave off famine for the soon-to-be trio, Natan works as an apprentice for a blacksmith, the revolutionary demagogue Monsieur Pagne. Through his association with (and by virtue of his debt to) Pagne, Natan

9 Fowler and Forshee (2015). As of the writing of this essay, the collaborative energies discussed in the interview of 2015 persist.

10 Fowler (2014).

is drawn into participating in the night raids, pillaging and looting of grand estates (and any places at all, really), that characterized this period . There is a fourth character in the spirit of Ch r i e's sister, H I n e, who materializes midway through the work to confront and counsel Ch r i e during her labor pains.

The narrative of the opera takes place in three acts, with the first act containing two scenes, and Acts Two and Three each containing three. A brief instrumental prelude opens the first scene, where Natan is working alone at Monsieur Pagne's smithy, pining for Ch r i e in the first aria, "Until I die I'll think of her", found at measure fourteen (meas.14) of the score. Monsieur Pagne enters, catching Natan in his reverie; Pagne angrily orders Natan back to work, and the two sing the duet "Riots of the free" (beginning in meas. 71), with Natan closing the scene resigned to working hard for his new "free" life with Ch r i e. Scene 2 opens on Ch r i e alone at home, where her struggles with impending starvation accompany her growing concern over the child she carries; singing the multi-part aria "I will survive" / "Perhaps he doesn't love me anymore", (beginning at meas. 159), Ch r i e projects the duality of her character: "I will survive" is an optimistic statement of determination and self-reliance, which is interrupted by crowd noises from the *place de greve*, attracting Ch r i e's attention to the window. Reflecting on the horrific state of the revolution, and upon Natan's growing entanglements with it, "Perhaps he doesn't love me anymore" (meas. 192), is a song of anxiety, doubt, and fear. During the song, Ch r i e spills cinnamon, the last spice in the house, on the floor, hallucinating that she is back in the kitchen of her Lord, where she worked with her sister under the old order. This aria,

particularly as it gains momentum in measure 242, is treated as a focus of the last part of the Act, as the musical paroxysms and fragmented setting of the text transitively suggest Cherie's increasing dementia, and foreshadow the quality of her subsequent emotional states. The last setting of Act One (meas. 286), features both Cherie and Natan, and takes place when Natan returns home to find the spice, and Cherie, on the floor. The couple argue briefly, Cherie soothes Natan, and the act ends with their unaccompanied, unfettered, reconciliation and embrace.

Act Two begins the morning directly after the events of Act One; Natan has awoken before Cherie, and standing outside the apartment sings "Cherie, awaken, watch the Dawn" (meas. 6), before hurrying to the smithy for work. Still in bed, Cherie slowly awakens, and, noticing Natan has gone, feels a pain in her womb as she sings "We should not have made love last night" (meas. 28). The second scene shows Natan back at work at the smithy; with the aria "I'll tell him I will leave today" (meas. 68), Natan steels himself as he prepares to inform Monsieur Pagne he must quit to be with Cherie. When Pagne arrives, he bullies Natan into one last raid with "It's good you're here". The third scene returns to the couple's home, where, in her malnourishment and weakness, Cherie begins to have labor pains, singing "Night enters like a vise." (meas. 123). During her delirium, and between cries of pain, Heline appears to her, singing "Here I have found you..." (meas. 131), first chiding her for her revolutionary ways and association with Natan. As the song continues, Heline seizes upon Cherie's fear, convincing her of the repentance earned by committing the desperate acts of the

opera's denouement.

Act Three finds Natan in bed at the smithy, recovering from a bad wound incurred during the otherwise successful “final raid” of Act Two. After a brief instrumental introduction, Natan sings “What good all the gold in the world?” (meas 8), in which he regrets succumbing to Pagne's bullying, and putting the revolution before Ch rie, this time almost at the cost of his life. Natan rallies, however, vowing to make it home to Ch rie and child and start afresh before briefly collapsing from exhaustion. In Scene 2, Monsieur Pagne has made his way to Ch rie in order to inform her of Natan's serious injuries, and to inquire after her and the child, hoping to carry good news back to his apprentice; he sings “News of Natan, my dear Ch rie” (meas. 63). Ch rie keeps Pagne from entering the house, telling him the child is sleeping and can't be woken, and M. Pagne leaves. Scene 3 finds Ch rie by herself inside, dancing with a bundle while she sings “Beautiful child” (meas. 121). Towards the end of this macabre scene, H I ne appears once more to sing “End this wait, Ch rie” (meas. 153). At the beginning of the finale, Ch rie is departing home to collect Natan (meas. 218), when Natan hobbles up to her at their apartment's entrance, embracing her. Reunited, the couple starts to show some of the earlier warmth and affection, when Natan asks to see their child, who Pagne has reported as healthy and sleeping. As Ch rie explains the moral rectitude of her final decision as mother, she opens the door to the apartment revealing to Natan the child's true fate and final purpose, singing “What better to have done with her?” (meas. 276).

Chapter 3 – The Libretto in Verse

The translation from short story to libretto saw several changes to the text, the change from English prose to English rhymed verse in a variety of French poetic forms being the most evident. All parts of the text, whether a solo reflection by Natan, or the lengthy duet between Chérie and Hélène, are executed as standalone poems in one of several French forms. The forms that appear in the libretto are the rondel prime, lai, sonnet, triolet, ballade, Kyrielle sonnet, rondeau, villanelle, bref double, rondeau prime, virelai ancien, huitain, sestina, quatrain, and the double ballade.¹¹ Each of these poetic forms has its own syllabic weight and rhythmic tendencies, both of which impacted the rhythmic conceptions behind each aria in a unique way.

For example, Chérie's second aria "Perhaps he doesn't love me anymore", is the setting of a sonnet:

Perhaps he doesn't love me any more,
The Revolution plays inside my head,
The garden's fallow – what I'm sorry for
So like my unborn child, will cause me dread -
Yet now each place I walk, I walk alone
Though once we stole the necklace of a queen.
And when we met, he helped me see my throne
Through every moment forward – yet I've been
Afraid of him, unseen: The blade it falls.
Where once his love for me – new rage and ire
As nameless as the babe, his horror calls –
Extinguishing that miracle: desire.
Natan and I, like paupers, kings and queens,
Though he the one enslaved by guillotines...

11 The poetic forms gathered by Fowler include the three renaissance *form fixe*: the rondeau, virelai, and ballade.

Typically, the sonnet is a poem of fourteen lines; these are divided into either eight lines followed by six (*abbaabba cdecde*), which characterizes the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet, or they are divided into three stanzas of four lines each, concluding with a couplet (*abab cdcd efef gg*), which characterizes the English, or Shakespearean, sonnet.¹² The usual meter of the English sonnet is given as iambic pentameter, a meter so evidently reflective of English speech rhythms that Hirsch and Boland (2008) report “The bedrock meter in English has always been iambic pentameter, a five-stress, ten-syllable line. It is the traditional line closest to the form of our speech and thus has been especially favored for the sonnet...”¹³

“Perhaps he doesn't love me anymore” enchants this reader as a poem by the periodicity of the rhyme scheme (e.g., first and third lines), as well as by the poignant rhyming of the English “queens” with the French “guillotines” in the summary provided by the closing couplet. Yet, too close an adherence to this scheme by a composer setting the verse to music carries the risk of creating music that sounds “sing-songy” or overly “lilting”, adjectives which do not reflect the emotional, obsessive aura of the scene. In many cases throughout the opera, I have sought ways to mis-register the rhythmic cadence of the music to the poetic form of the verse, reflecting an instinct to vary the meter of the text. Poet Mary Oliver puts this concern insightfully when she writes:

12 Hirsch and Boland (2008), p. 52.

13 Hirsch and Boland (2008), p. 51. The authors continue: “It has been estimated that three-fourths of all English-language poetry from Chaucer to Frost has been written in iambic pentameter.”

Lines of good poetry are apt to be a little irregular. A prevailing sense of rhythm is necessary, but some variation enhances the very strength of the pattern. The singsong poem is a dull poem.¹⁴

Score Example 1 presents the setting of Fowler's sonnet from Act I of *Blood | Hunger | Child*. Ch'rie is accompanied by clarinet, violin, 'cello, and double bass. In this setting, I sought to over-emphasize and exaggerate the iambic feet of each line of the opening stanza of text. The octave displacements sung by the mezzo soprano here address not only the syllabic weight of the line *in extremis*, but also serve to emphasize key-words, such as "love", "revolution", and "child", among others; the octave leaps also help to emphasize the same words in different ways. For example, one of the few times a line repeats in the music that is not repeated in the libretto is found with Ch'rie's opening line, where the musical emphasis shifts from "perhaps he doesn't *love* me anymore" to the more personal "perhaps *he* doesn't love *me* anymore", and for this listener this shift in emphasis foreshadows Ch'rie's emotional shift in Act II. Throughout, the clarinet and strings pick out and sustain pitches from the aria, holding them *non vibrato*, which coagulates into the tetrad (0,1,3,5).

Interestingly, Fowler composes a smaller, more tightly condensed poem in the form of a *triolet* for Ch'rie just after she finishes the above sonnet. At this point in the narrative Ch'rie begins to break down under the mental strain induced by her circumstances. In the setting of the sonnet discussed above, the feet of each line were exaggerated by the melodic contour of the setting, but the feet are still there, and the structure of the poem remains (mostly) intact: Ch'rie

14 Oliver (1994), p. 44.

was certainly exacerbated, but she was keeping body and mind together. Now, however, Ch'rie is overcome by the burden of it all, and her short triolet becomes a screech against the impoverishment in which she finds herself.

The triolet is an eight-line poem cast in iambic tetrameter.¹⁵ The first, fourth, and seventh lines are identical, and the second and final lines are identical too. The consequence of these two strains of literal repetition is that the first couplet is identical with the final couplet of the poem; another consequence is that the end words of the first two lines are the only rhymes in the poem. The resulting rhyme scheme of the triolet is *AbaAabAB*.¹⁶ This streamlined scheme belies the torment and depth behind Ch'rie's song. Like many of the poetic forms deployed in the libretto, the triolet stems from Medieval French poetry, and is close in form to the French rondeau. Adhering to the tradition of the genre, Fowler finds freedom within the form:

The hunger gnaws inside my mind
This dust is all I have to cook
Look all around, it's what I find
The hunger gnaws inside my mind
What good is spice? I toss what's mine.
The dust can hold what stealing took.
I am so hungry in my mind--

15 Iambic Tetrameter defines four iambic feet per line; Iambic Pentameter is five iambs per line, etc.

16 Model triolets are found in the work of Robert Bridges (1844-1930) and Thomas Hardy (1840-1928). The former's *Triolet* (1876) bears, in the internal variations of lines one, four, and seven, some similarity with Fowler's triolet here.

That dust holds all I have to cook.¹⁷

Fowler's poem avails itself of the limitations of the form. The features which traditionally mark the triolet, the literal repetitions of lines one, four, and seven, and then of two and eight, typically circumscribe the possibilities for elaboration on the part of the poet, and these restraints are surely part of the attraction, and power, of this Medieval form. Regarding the relationship of identity traditionally required of these lines, Fowler addresses this handily by deploying a scheme of antanaclasis: line four preserves the identity of the first line, but line seven diverges from the model by employing internal sonic differences. The iambic feet are preserved, but "The hunger gnaws inside..." has been replaced with "I am so hungry...". And the author exercises the same innovations with lines two and eight. Regarding the directives on lines 1, 4, and 7, Fowler has taken the sunnier view that, rather than serving to restrict, these repetitions serve to privilege those lines which carry no such requirement, lines 3, 5, and 6. The image of the third line is the antithesis of the first, bringing Cherie's attention (and the listener's), out of her head into her surroundings to "look all around", counter-balancing the claustrophobic interiors of Cherie's tormented mind. Lines five and six are most vivid, since Fowler, taking a cue from the privileged status of these relatively unrestricted lines, takes the opportunity to pose the only question of the triolet. The *question* is a special kind of utterance which, according to Myhill, is the expression of an intellectual anxiety.¹⁸ And Cherie has been full of anxieties, beginning with the question of her second aria, as described above. Fowler

17 Act I, scene ii.

18 Myhill (1955). In this article, John Myhill

pinpoints this aspect of Chérie's character with this emotionally tightly-packed triolet.

Musically the case turns out to be different. Usually, there is a proportional relationship between the time it takes to speak a line of poetry and the time it takes to sing it; singing words takes longer (sometimes much longer) than speaking them, and shorter poems usually make for shorter songs. But Chérie's eight-line triolet addresses a more complicated, and more emotional, rubric of anxieties and insecurities than those addressed by her earlier two arias, with even the fourteen-line sonnet more or less focused on her worries over Natan. This reading of Fowler's poetry occasioned a musical setting that is inversionally proportional to the size of the poem, both in length and, compared to the setting of the earlier sonnet, in the size of instrumental accompaniment. Score Example 2 shows the setting of the triolet, up to Natan's entrance right before the finale of the first Act.

Among the many French poetic forms found throughout the libretto, the *sestina* of Hélène's aria in Act II figures among the longest and most intricate. This ancient form consists of six stanzas of six lines each; the number of syllables per line seems to vary, but the average length is ten. At the end of the sixth stanza usually appears a three-line stanza, or *envoi*. The last word of each line of the first stanza appears reordered, in a particular way, as the end word of each line of each subsequent stanza. A look at the first three stanzas of Fowler's *sestina* illustrates the workings of the form most clearly:

Here I have found you, pregnant and alone.
 With child, abandoned by the man you love,
 While blood runs in the streets and stains them red.
 Myself a victim of this crippling life.
 And you, so long ill-kept, you cannot speak.
 But instead see my face, so like a hell.

You were a whore. Of course you'll go to hell—
 Chérie, with him, you're bound to die alone.
 But now, so hungry, you can hear me speak
 As if I came to save you with my love.
 While he goes off, in revolution's life.
 Both love and war are red, as blood is red!

As my blood ran, my children's, poppy red!
 Our necks in grooves, for execution hell
 No winners can be found in killer's life,
 In prayer, I bend to just God's will alone,
 This – after years I begged: save me with love--
 Where god was deaf. And God would fail to speak.

Fowler's sestina follows the reordering of end-words peculiar to the genre: the first line of stanza two ends with the last word of the final line of stanza one; the second line of stanza two ends with last word of line one of stanza one, line three of stanza two ends with the final of line six of the first stanza, and so on. Figure 1.1 shows the relationships of end words throughout the first three stanzas of Fowler's sestina.

Stanza 1 end-word	Stanza 2 end-word	Stanza 3 end-word
Alone	Hell	Red
Love	Alone	Hell
Red	Speak	Life
Life	Love	Alone
Speak	Life	Love
Hell	Red	Speak

Each subsequent stanza holds the same relationship to its predecessor as stanza two holds to stanza one. Like other sestinas, Fowler's concludes with an

envoi that contain the six end words which serve to structure the poem, each only once:

One **hell** is just one man who toys with **love**
Alone you must take back your infant's **life**,
Eat – **speak** in **red** and taste, child's body eat.

Poets still write sestinas today, and there are many discussions of the logic of the end word ordering and its effects.

Regarding the workings of the sestina, Strand (2000) writes:

Elaborate repetitions build up over thirty-one lines: This is the way the sestina operates. These patterns of repetition are constructed across a selected number of key words, so that in the end the sestina becomes a game of meaning, played with sounds and sense.¹⁹

The “game of meaning, played with sounds and sense” aptly characterizes the placement and nature of the poem in *Blood | Hunger | Child*. Fowler's sestina is the vehicle for Helene's ghostly materialization to Ch rie in Act Two, and its length is appropriate, since, as Helene's only appearance in the Act, it occasions several dimensions of character development and motivation. However, as mentioned above, it takes longer to sing than to read or recite a few words of text, and H I ne's sestina comprises more lines of text than any other verse in the libretto.

The setting of Helene's sestina is cast as a duo for soprano and double bass. To address the length of the sestina, the verse is delivered almost at the pace of speaking; the text is rhythmized, with each syllable given a specific

¹⁹ Strand (2000), p. 22.

duration, while melodic contour is left (more or less) up to the exigencies of the delivery of the word or phrase. While in other settings, the adherence to or disregard of the poetic structure in the music lay along a continuum, resulting in the structure of one part of a poem being more concretely realized in the music than another part, the case is attenuated in the setting here. As noted above, rhyming is replaced, in the sestina, by repetition of each stanza's end-words; this difference of poetic structure also serves to warrant special musical attention to Fowler's placement of the sestina here, and seems to occasion an interesting compositional proposition concerning how to treat of structure in this setting. The reasons for this instrumentation and for this performance practice of this passage are discussed below in the section on *inanga*.

There are other musical considerations that arise from the translation of prose to poetry.²⁰ As all the action of the opera is delivered through verse, the nature of the poetic cycle suggests little room for conventional recitative in the opera, with the result that the entirety of the work is through-composed and sung. On a local level, the self-contained nature of each poem meant making decisions concerning how much, if at all, to respect the poetic feet of the form when composing the melodic contour of the text setting. These features of the verse libretto were embraced as compositional stimuli; they are mentioned here as an example of the kinds of problematics that accompanied the conception and composition of this musical dramatic work. These features are also functional in the conception of the music, since the number of poetic feet per line impinge

²⁰ The profile of the libretto as an interconnected sequence of poems is strikingly close to a "crown of sonnets".

directly upon considerations of meter, phrase structure, and even local (and especially) rhythmic gesture. And, the reflection of the Parisian aura of the narrative in the consistent choice of French poetic forms is not a feature of the cycle lost in the composition of the opera.

It must also be mentioned that, during the translation from prose story to libretto there was the necessary triage of contextual details and character background. The distillation of essential details from the story does not affect the internal coherence of the resulting libretto. In many instances, the change has streamlined the action of the libretto, prompting the music to fulfill the narrative function which seems to be the special domain of opera.²¹ A few brief details of context from the story which are absent from the libretto are useful to document for the purposes of this exegetical text.

Variations from the Short Story Blood, Hunger, Child

In Fowler's source story, *Blood, Hunger, Child*, the author writes that Cherie had been raised on a manor, where she worked as a kitchen maid with her sister Hiline before the outbreak of Revolution. When Cherie's psyche begins to fragment, she has visions of the kitchen at the manor, and reminisces about working with her sister amongst the abundance and confections of the kitchen. In the opera, Cherie's "spice aria" (Act I, scene iii), grows out of these visions. After leaving the employment of the manor, Cherie found work only as a prostitute. It was during this time that Natan first sees Cherie with a client on the street, abusing her. When Natan "rescues" Cherie, this is the first time they meet.

²¹ The citation concerning hemiola and Davis' setting in *Amistad* from Part I is an example.

Natan, it is learned from the source story, is tall with a strong build, having worked as a stable boy as a youth. During his early years at the stables, two youths (aristocratic youths), tied him up and poured boiling water on his face to “see if his skin would melt”. Throughout the story, and the opera, Natan is scarred from the event, and speaks with a stutter. Natan first meets Ch rïe when he witnesses her being beaten on the street; after rescuing her, Ch rïe gives up prostitution and the two take up together.

In Fowler's short story, Monsieur Pagne is as two-dimensional as he appears in the libretto: he is a demagogue, a bully, and a self-serving opportunist. There are pretensions to compassion when, in the story as in Act III of the libretto, Pagne visits Ch rïe to have news of her and the child to take back to Natan. Yet, the gesture smacks of “too little too late”, and Pagne's interaction with Ch rïe is marked by a patina of something possibly unscrupulous. H I ne's character, on the other hand, benefits from a reading of Fowler's short story, since in that text the reader learns that when Ch rïe left the manor kitchen, H I ne had become pregnant with the lord's illegitimate child, and chose to stay at the manor despite her low status. Several years have passed since Ch rïe's departure from the manor and the events of the opera. In the short story, Ch rïe witnesses the execution of her former lord and his family through her apartment window which looks towards the guillotine; last in line are H I ne and her two children. Ch rïe cries out to them, but they do not hear. When H I ne appears to Ch rïe in Act Two, scene iii, during Ch rïe's birth pangs, she is appearing after a violent, traumatic death, and her materialization as a pale, disembodied head

signals just this. The setting of Helene's verse during the visitation of Act II is deeply informed by the events of her background, and is discussed in more detail later in this text.

Chapter 4 - Vocal Types and Orchestration

The roles of Chérie, Natan, Monsieur Pagne and Hélène are scored for mezzo soprano, bass, baritone, and soprano, respectively. The instrumental complement is scored for flute doubling piccolo, B-flat clarinet, alto saxophone, percussion, violin, violoncello, and double bass. There were two primary considerations behind the choice of instrumental ensemble: diversity of sound color, and mobility. Concerning sound color, there is the additional concern of providing for the possibility of “reflecting” the timbre of the voices, as well as for that of matching like frequency spectra with like spectra (or spectra that are most “un-alike”); this speaks to the inclusion of both the clarinet and the alto saxophone, for example, which are sometimes treated as timbral analogues to Monsieur Pagne and Natan, portraying increasing difference behind a scrim of similitude.²² The degree of diversity within the ensemble was a consideration that goes in hand with that of “matching” instrumental sound color to vocal sound color; the elaboration of identities (timbral identities), within the ensemble occasions the possibility of imbuing the flow of the music with the antagonisms and special dynamisms enacted by the characters onstage. The concern with mobility in the conception of the ensemble was less a restriction on sound color than a strategic assemblage of essential sound colors which may be combined to resplendent effects.

The assignment of vocal types in *Blood | Hunger | Child* diverges from the convention of many operas, in which a dramaturgical hierarchy reflecting a (long

²² Act One, scene 1.

deprecated) social order dictates the assignment of characters' vocal types: the tenor is assigned to the hero or otherwise “elevated” protagonist, the baritone is reserved for the factotum, paige, or elder; among female characters (at least, as long as women have played female characters on the opera stage), the soprano is the role assigned the nobility or heroine, while the mezzo soprano (and lower ranges), are reserved for the maids and lesser female personages found throughout the opera literature.²³ In *Blood | Hunger | Child*, these relationships seem inverted: Natan and Ch rie, the veritable “heroes” of the story, are cast as baritone and mezzo soprano, where the minor characters Monsieur Pagne and H I ne are assigned the “aristocratic” tenor and soprano vocal types. Though “off model”, the vocal assignments of *Blood | Hunger | Child* accurately reflect the characters' true social statuses under the *ancien regime*: Monsieur Pagne, as smithy and (presumed) guild member, would have held more credentials and a higher position than Natan, suggesting a closer connection to the “aristocratic” tenor than Natan. And H I ne, who remained in the employ of the kitchen and bore the lord's illegitimate children, seems more fitting of the register and “aspirations” of the soprano than Ch rie, whose lowly resume as a prostitute-cum-common law wife would seem to relegate her to the “lower” classes of vocal type.

While engagement with the prosody and pacing of the text carries its own problematics, there are sources to the conception of the musical setting of *Blood*

23 Among masculine roles in opera, the bass vocal type has also become associated with certain character types, particularly the numinous or spiritual; i.e., the Oracle of Neptune in Mozart's *Idomeneo*, as well as his commendatore in *Don Giovanni*, are examples of this, as is Berlioz' Panthee from *Les Troyens*.

| *Hunger* | *Child* that also presented constraints of a special nature. Consistent to my compositional practice has been an embrace of the musics, and musical traditions, which abound within and occupy my attention. This has been the concern of Part I of this text. The music around the Trickster, especially in the form of praise hymns of Yoruba origin, has become central to the studies that informed the creation of the opera. A primary interaction with recordings of this music involved close listening and transcription. How the music I sought out, listened to, and transcribed penetrated the compositional practice around *Blood* | *Hunger* | *Child* may be heard in many ways. Focusing on the fruits of my transcription practice, I outline four of these below.

Chapter 5 - Transcription as Creative Practice

The importance of transcription to my musical practice has been central since early formal studies and transcriptions of Korean court music with ethnomusicologist Ellen Koskoff at the Eastman School of Music²⁴. Those studies continued with composer Lei Liang at University of California San Diego with a study on musical line as well as on transcriptions of the Tang dynasty *guzheng* classic *Chen Xingyuan He Fan*.²⁵ In Forshee (2014) I outline many of the formative motivations behind my transcription practice in general, as well as my method regarding *Chen Xingyuan He Fan* and some of the special approaches this piece required. A general remark concerning a challenge endemic to the practice from that study is appropriate here.

Transcribing music involves documenting a musical performance by listening alone. The practice is crucial to ethnomusicological studies and analysis, where musics without a system of notation, or with systems unique to a tradition, are the object and address of study. Typically, such a practice would seem to rely upon the experience and discretion of the listener to determine what is salient, or important, in a recording, in order to select and notate “what matters”. For a Western musician engaged in transcribing music from another part of the world, “experience” may impact the decision-making process in ways not intended or desired. For example, there may be a tendency to privilege one musical dimension, say melodic contour, over another in what is chosen to be

24 Forshee (2002).

25 Forshee (2014).

notated. The resolution of the detail of the transcription may also be compromised in this way. Generally, my antidote to this tendency is to note everything in the recording. As a paraphrase of an injunction issued by composer Robert Morris, “If a glass breaks in the background, write it down - it might be important!”²⁶

In the transcriptions of West African music that have come to be so functional in *Blood | Hunger | Child*, I have chosen to constrain my attention to only a few dimensions of the musical performance. I have done this because, as a composer, I am conscientious of the kinds of applications, if any, my transcriptions may find in my creative work, and, at least in this case, I have not transcribed this music in order to share it with any readership except that one which harbors an interest in my composition. And particularly, the eventual quality of my attention towards the performances I transcribe has become attenuated towards those dimensions of the music which, conscientiously or not, I have determined to maintain a near lamination with some dimensions of my own.

26 From a personal conversation with Robert Morris, c.2002.

Chapter 6 - ESU-ELEGBA and the Orisha

As noted above, the literary Trickster figure of West Africa, particularly of Yorubaland, became one of the first areas of directed study focused around Anthony Davis' *Amistad*. And it seems natural that the rich Yoruba vocal tradition of praise hymns, or *oriki*, early caught my ear, affording endless occasions for transcription and study. And reflexively, the spiritual culture around the creation and performance of these hymns informed the composition of *Blood | Hunger | Child* almost as much as the many recordings of the hymns themselves. For, Yoruba civilization has cultivated not only an intricate tradition and philosophy of music, but an elaborate tradition of literature and poetry and divination too.²⁷ Thompson (1984) describes the Yoruba people as “the creators of one of the premiere cultures of the world. The Yoruba believe themselves descended from goddesses and gods, from an ancient spiritual capital, Ile-Ife.”²⁸ Some of the ways in which a broader view of the fecund traditions of this culture informed dimensions of the opera are offered, where possible, in the text below. Since, from here on, I am discussing the Trickster figure in his West African Yoruban aspect, I refer to the Trickster as Eshu-Legba, which name also refers to the particularity of duality this character sports among the Yoruba.

In Yoruba belief and practice, the Supreme godhead, Oludumare, is worshiped and charged with maintaining balance in the world through numerous deities, spirits, gods and goddesses. Numbered among the important, most

27 In many instances, the differences between music and literature become blurred, as discussed by Robert Farris Thompson in Thompson (1984)

28 Thompson (1984), p. xv.

powerful of these are the *orisha*, that class of deities “sent by Oludumare to assist in the spiritual development of humankind.” (Karade, 1994) The author of *The Handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts* describes the orisha as close in spiritual bearing to Western Christian *angels*.

Those beings which are deemed angels by western definition are known to the Yoruba as orisha. The aspirant is directed to see the orisha as emanations of the One Source or Oludumare. The orisha are not simply mythological constructions designed to satisfy the lower mind and intent of humans. As “angels” in all religious context they (the orisha) were created and sent by Oludumare to assist in the spiritual evolution of humankind.²⁹

Eshu-Legba is one among many *orisha*; there is Shang , the great god of thunder, and Obba, his wife and patroness of good marriage (and also keeper of graveyards); there is the patron orisha of medicine and herbs, Osanyin; Yemoja is a goddess of rivers and oceans; Og n is the orisha of the hunt, of iron, and of war; Obalayue is the orisha of disease, who spreads smallpox with the swish of his whisk; and Oshun, goddess of sensuality, love and beauty; and there is Obatala, deity of wisdom and knowledge. There are also many others too numerous to mention here, each one holding its own domain of influence and expertise.

When aspirants perform rituals to honor or pray to an orisha, songs or hymns of praise accompany the activity, serving at once to spread word of the

²⁹ Karade (1994), p. xiii.

miraculous orisha among the people and also gain the attention of the orisha in the spirit world. Aspirants may also beseech the orisha for aide or assistance with issues of every sort, including those of health, of one's destiny, of marriage, of finance, of agriculture, and more. Yet, as noted in Part I, before making offerings and prayers to an orisha, prayers and praise are offered to the “one-who-knows-how-to-make-things-happen”, Eshu-Legba. Since, only after Eshu-Legba is satisfied can any hope of the other gods/orisha receiving an aspirant's prayers be held.

The praise hymns of the orisha are members of a class of West African vocal works which share a similar formal design, though details of ornamentation and vocal inflection vary from performance to performance. In the vocal music of the Yoruba traditions, there is a lead singer, or cantor, usually male, and a chorus of singers consisting of both men and women.

In many recordings of performances by the Cuban singer L. zaro Ros,³⁰ the vocal ensemble here is divided into a lead singer, or cantor, and a chorus of singers of indeterminate number. The cantor opens the hymn by singing a florid monody on the words *Eleggua nagdo kere kere ye um, nagdo kere kere ye um, agolorisha...*; after a repetition on *kere kere yeumm*, the chorus enters, heterophonically repeating the verse of the cantor. Again, after a repetition of *kere kere yeumm*, the cantor begins his verse again, with the chorus following as before. This “cantor – chorus” exchange repeats XX times, though the cantor

30 Though Ros was a renowned Cuban performer, his recordings of the music of Nigeria are well known, and I have come to find his recordings reflect the performance tradition evident in other field recordings from the continent.

elaborates his verse over the course of this passage. After XX iterations of this format, around 2'45" into the recording, the cantor's verse changes to a *farajegan faragen jegan jegan jeganso*, accompanied by a change in melodic contour; this second verse is executed between the cantor and the chorus with the same dynamic as the first. After a brief presentation of the second verse, a salient change in the profile occurs when the cantor continues with the next verse, *jana jana fodun eleggua jaña jaña fodun eleggua we*. Now the flow of the hymn seems faster and more elaborated, and this heightened energy seems reflected in the more lively dynamic between cantor and chorus.

The features described in this transcription of *Canto a Eleggua* by Larazo Ros agree with those ascribed to the practice by Nkitia (1974), where the author writes:

Pieces intended to be sung by choruses are generally designed for a lead singer or cantor, or for a group of lead singers and a chorus. The simplest form is the one in which the lead singer sings an entire verse through, repeated immediately by the chorus.

Nkitia continues:

Other songs are organized in clear sections for a lead singer and chorus. In the simplest type, each section consists of a single phrase, sung by the lead singer and answered by the chorus with a set response. This response phrase may be similar to the lead phrase or it may be a continuation of it.³¹

This *canto* exhibits many of the features that are typical of the genre. Several of

31 Nkitia (1974), p. 141.

these features entice this listener's ear. For example, in the interaction of the cantor and chorus, there are intimations of the dynamism enacted between the Navigator and the orchestra in Davis' *Amistad*; the repetition-with-variation of the proposed A-B-C-B-D-B design of the performance's form is intriguingly aligned with my compositional proclivity for "theme with variations" designs; and the micro-embellishments of the cantor's variations and inflections, and the challenge of capturing these in transcription, encourage reflection on my own vocal writing and setting. Not least among the musical attractions are the hymn's deployment as a musical offering designed to attract, appease, and beseech the orisha (i.e., forces of Nature). This is music with a purpose; and, with a purpose so grounded in the adherents' beliefs about destiny, purpose, adversity, morality, and right action, this is a purpose worth listening to.

There are as many *oriki* as there are orisha being actively worshiped, and it would seem that each appeals to or calls upon the special power of each. There are four which became functional in *Blood | Hunger | Child*; these include hymns to *Shangó, Obba, Ogún, and Oshun*.

The music of the hymns to these orisha becomes embroidered into the music of *Blood | Hunger | Child* in a unique way with each instance. However, there is a consistent scheme of correspondences between orisha and human throughout the opera, and this over-arching correspondence is based upon stories from the Yoruba literary corpus which have come to characterize and enliven each orisha as well as their domains of influence. These

correspondences are not meant to impart the qualities of one personage for another, deity for human, etc. Instead, these correspondences were slowly emergent during the composition of the work, and were embraced piecemeal as a way through which to establish a hermeneutic for the composition of the opera (which is discussed later), for reflection upon the opera, and for a discourse around the opera.

Syncretism

There exists historical precedent for correspondences similar to the type I have proposed and worked with throughout the composition of this opera.

Syncretism, especially as it has come to describe the relationship between the Yoruba worship of orisha in the New World and the Catholic veneration of saints, offers a conceptual template for the correspondences I have imagined for *Blood | Hunger | Child*. In Religious studies, the phenomenon of combining or merging different, even contradictory, beliefs, has served a variety of purposes, and occurs under a variety of circumstances. In some cases, religious aspirants have evaded identification, oppression and persecution by masking the practice of their beliefs in the vestments of another more “accepted” or sanctioned religion. In other cases, aspirants have “misread” expressions of another religion, such as images of Holy leaders, saints, or angels; or, put more accurately, aspirants have properly “read” such images according to their own mythology, which entailed a “misreading” of them according to the devotees of the target belief system.³²

32 The term “misread” is used here as an extension of the “misprision” formulated by Bloom (1973).

This latter case of “misreading” seems to aptly characterize some of the colorations and shadings that occurred within Yoruba practices upon their arrival in the Caribbean during the decades of the Middle Passage. Image 1 of the Introduction to this text portrays a man with a white beard, dressed in green robes. In his left hand he holds a staff, and with his right he points to the snakes on the ground in a gesture of command. To a worshiper of the orisha, especially to one versed in the mythology of the orisha and in the lore of the *odu*, the green robes are the robes of the orisha *Og n*, deity of the hunt, of war, and of iron and everything iron becomes. In Yoruba, the serpent is an animal representing great potency, as it is identified with *Oshunmare*, the divine rainbow serpent associated with procreation. *Oshunmare* is also said to represent a link between the worlds of humans, their ancestors, and the world of the orisha.³³ The pointing gesture of command issued by “*Og n*” towards the serpents underscores the indomitable power of the bearded figure. And such power might stand to reason to one who remembered that the color white is the color of *Obatala*, kindly father to all the orishas and to all of humanity. The elderly figure's white beard signals the presence of *Obatala* in the image, in the green robes of *Og n*. The intersections along this lattice of sign and inference conspire to create an image-based relay of metaphor and significance un-concieved of by the Christian Catholic who sees an image of St. Patrick ordering the snakes out of Ireland. The two interpretations of this image are not mutually exclusive.

Some of the syncretisms that have emerged through Yoruban beliefs'

33 Citation.

survival in the New World include those listed in Figure 1³⁴:

Og n, orisha of the hunt, war, iron, et. al.	- St. Michael, patron of police officers, firefighters, and the military.
Shang , orisha of thunder, fire, dancing, et al.	St. Barbara, patron of armorers, mathematicians, and engineers; her legend is associated with lightning.
Babaluaye, orisha of smallpox, disease, et al.	- St. Lazarus, patron of lepers and leprosy.
Oba, orisha of marriage, fertility, cemeteries -	- St. Rita of Cascia, patroness of impossible causes, abused wives, et al.
Oshun, orisha of fresh water, sensuality, feminine sexuality, and love. -	- Our Lady of Charity, patroness of the Cuban people.

Figure 1: Select Syncretizations of Orishas with Catholic saints

Cherie is the true protagonist of the narrative of *Blood | Hunger | Child*, and her role offers the sole instance of a dramatically dynamic character; Cherie is the only character who *changes* over the course of the story. Section I of this text describes Cherie's resolve, then subsequent "dementia", and the transition from the one to the other that takes place in her first aria ("I will survive / Perhaps he doesn't love me anymore"), serves as an archetype for the transition her character undergoes throughout the three acts of the opera.

Obba is the musical counterpart of Cherie. Also spelled Oba, she is the patroness of good marriages and home life. Obba is also written about, through

34 A complete listing of syncretizations between orishas and Catholic saints would be much longer than this, with many variations (e.g., Og n is also syncretized with St. Peter in some accounts, which syncretization he shares with Eshu in others, etc.)

the many stories of the Odu and Ifá corpus, as the first wife of Shangé, and 'sister' of Oyo.³⁵

Shangé is a well-known and powerful orisha, and it is in him that Natan finds a musical counterpart. This orisha is the deity of the drum and of the dance. Often identified with earthy qualities, aspirants “approach him for legal problems, protection from enemies, and to make bad situations better.”³⁶ Natan has already been noted for how he 'saved' Chéris from a life on the street, and the earthy-ness of Shangé's character is not unconnected to the deformity suffered by Natan. In the stories that constitute the Yoruba mythology, Shangé has three wives: Obba, Oya, and Oshun (usually listed in that order).

Monsieur Pagne, master and employer of Natan, has his corollary in Ogún. Pagne is identified first by his proximity to the accoutrements of war and battle, to steel, and to iron, all found in his smithy. Ogún is the patron of blacksmiths and hunters, and is associated with iron and all that iron becomes. Thompson (1984) notes that the power of Ogún is sited along the *edge* of the machete blade, and it is surely the dual power of the blade to destroy and to build that allows Ogún to be called “the liberator or executioner in the world.”³⁷

Héléne is the sister of Chéris, and her character is musically echoed in Oshun, a river deity and 'sister' to Obba.³⁸ Though Héléne's presence in the

35 The relationships between Obba, Shangé, and Oshun is discussed in the last example of this text.

36 Karade (1994), p. 27.

37 Karade (1994), p. 26.

38 There are variations in the literature on the kinship of Obba, Oshun, and Oya, with some sources describing them as sisters, and other sources reinforcing their differences and rivalries.

opera is the briefest of the characters, her role as tormenter and ultimately as advisor to Chérie positions H I ne as an indispensable intervention to the psyche of Chérie, and her music reflects that. More on H I ne's connection to non-West African music is discussed later in this text.

Table 2 shows a table which illustrates the correspondences between the characters of *Blood | Hunger | Child* and the four orisha Obba, Shangó, Ogún, and Oshun, with additional details regarding their respective personality traits also provided. The relationships suggested by the similarities shared between the supernatural beings and opera characters become functional as a 'frame of reference' later in this text. As the music from the opera is discussed below, these correspondences, and the musics associated with them, are noted.

Chérie - Obba (Oba)
Natan - Shangó
Hélène - Oshun
Monsieur Pagne - Ogún

Figure 2: Correspondences between characters of Blood Hunger Child and orishas.

Chérie's first song, "I will survive", represents her character's first appearance on the stage, and is compositionally executed as an elaboration of several musical sources that each speak to Chérie's state of mind in a different way. A fundamental aspect to Chérie's character at this point is her role as a homemaker and wife: she worries over the home, and over Natan, and the paragon of domesticity, motherhood, hovers over her scenes much as H I ne literally does later in the story. The aria "I will survive" of Chérie finds Chérie

working alone at home, and may be heard as Ch rie singing to herself...first to pass the time, then as an expression of self-doubt and anxiety.

This aria begins gently on the voice with soft held notes in a comfortable region of the vocal range and step-wise melodic motion. The vocal range of the aria is early proscribed by the setting of the text, with silences audibly punctuating the spaces between lines of the stanza. In the time of the drama onstage, about 8 minutes have passed since the beginning of the opera before Ch rie's entrance, and this aria was conceived of as a “tuning” or “warming up” of the mezzo soprano voice. As it is Ch rie's debut, it is also the first iteration of the music of an orisha, Obba, in some ways suggesting a template for similar musical transferences to come.

The praise hymn for Obba that informed the music of Ch rie is taken from a performance by the group Abbilona. This hymn follows the format and design of the *Canto a Eleggua* discussed above, with many of the ornamental vocal inflections also shared in common. Evident in this recording are many of the intriguing performance dynamics that initially attracted my ear. One feature that seems unique is the opening 'flourish' of notes that descend the 5-note scale. Such a quick movement cuts a stark profile of the opening of the hymn, and throughout my listenings this “motive” became rooted as a melodic “hook”, or identifier, for “Obba”.

In the aria of Ch rie presented above, the pronounced melodic contour of Obba's hymn is deployed as a means of bolstering the emotional charge of the

text through melodic prolongation – the melismatic treatment of “survive” and then of “will not be made a fool of” provides an alteration to the pacing of the melodic contour which draws attention to the text of the passage. In this aria, the hymn of Obba is not appropriated wholesale, nor is the transcription used as a “basis” for the aria. Instead, the music of the aria is *draped* around a salient feature of the praise hymn, which allows Ch rie's aria to retain musical features that may be heard as connections to other musical entities throughout the scene (and throughout the opera), which are not explicitly informed by the music of Yoruba hymns.³⁹

The aria “I will survive” is the first part of a three-part aria that shapes Scene 2. At the conclusion of this brief song, Ch rie is attracted to the window by the sounds of the crowd coming from the *place de greve*, and, stricken by the horrors of the revolution, sings the second part of the aria, “Perhaps he doesn't love me anymore”, where mezzo soprano voice is joined by flute, violin, 'cello and double bass; the third and final song, “The hunger gnaws inside my mind”, features the full instrumental complement, and concludes with Ch rie, along with the couple's remaining spice, on the floor.

Call and Response

Not all traces of the *oriki* transcriptions are found in the embrace of salient melodic segments, as in “I will survive”. After transcribing many, and listening to many more, *oriki*, certain features of the genre have become embroidered in the

³⁹ This might include music that was composed freely according to the pacing of the text, music that was informed by musics other than West African, or music which was composed according to a pitch-class array designed by the composer.

music of Blood | Hunger | Child in a generalized way. For example, in all of the praise hymns studied, the vocal forces are deployed into two parts, cantor and chorus, as described in Karade (1994). This arrangement is musically realized by the “solo verse-chorus response” format that is consistent from performance to performance. This format is often discussed as “call and response” in the literature, but this designation belies the sophisticated dynamic enacted between the cantor and chorus, wherein the cantor “conducts” the flow of the performance by signaling the chorus through variations on the sung verse.⁴⁰

In the second act of the opera, the first scene opens with Natan greeting the morning and singing to Ch rie to “awaken, and watch the dawn.” After Natan hurries off to work, Ch rie starts to awaken with the aria “We should not have made love last night”, during which the mother-to-be. The text to this song is delivered unaccompanied by Ch rie, with the ensemble reserved for interjections / commentary at the end of each line of the song's poem. The “mezzo verse – orchestra commentary, repeat” format is reflective of the “solo verse-chorus response” format common to the Yoruba genre. This dynamic of “one against many” is most evident in this aria, though it is pervasive throughout the score to different degrees.

The INANGA

40 This format, in the way I discuss it here, is remarkable for the transference of energy (musical, kinetic, and psychic) that occurs (or is potential) between performers, whether the orientation be one of cantor/chorus, Trickster/orchestra, mezzo soprano/ensemble, or even solo/solo. In this way, the opening of Mozart's KV. 521 with its “answer/response” introduction, is not substantially different from the verse / response format of the West African *oriki*. This is not to suggest, however, they are the same.

The role of H I ne posed special considerations in the composition of the opera. She appears only twice in the work, but her presence and influence figure prominently in the motivations behind Ch rie's desperate behavior, as mentioned above. In the world of the libretto, when H I ne speaks, she speaks from another world, from the nether world. Due to the nature of her death by guillotine, H I ne has “lost her voice”, suggesting anything but the full-voiced singing practice usually valued in terms of sound color and projection.⁴¹ Due to the deep trauma of her death, she is filled with venom at Ch rie's survival and at Ch rie, whom she chides at length. And due to the violent loss of her own two children, H I ne has only curses for the unborn child of Ch rie, darkening her profile as sister and her role as spiritual consul.

The scene (Act II, scene iii, “Night enters like a vise”) that brings H I ne into the story is a central focus of the second Act: Ch rie, visibly malnourished, begins to go into labor, and in her fever speaks out for H I ne, seeking for comfort in her older sister. The explosions of pain and fear are reflected in the broad array of rhythmic gestures and sudden leaps in melodic contour that characterize the setting of Ch rie's verse; Ch rie's side of the aria is punctuated periodically by pauses in her visions and murmurings until the child arrives. H I ne's situation contrasts with Ch rie's: lifeless and childless, H I ne is decidedly *not* dynamic, is immune to the shudders of emotion which shake Ch rie, and she almost seems to delight in Ch rie's misfortune. The question

41 Especially in works intended to be performed on stage, projection of the voice is a crucial consideration. If electronic diffusion or amplification is not an option, architectural solutions need to be considered.

“How do the dead speak?” was posted in the periphery of my compositional endeavors for weeks while I wrote “around” this scene, and H I ne's setting accounts for the highest number of assays which ended up in the bin.

As I continued my transcriptions and listenings, ever searching out different performances of a favorite *oriki*, or other recordings by a newly “discovered” drummer, cantor, or group, it seems natural that my ear eventually picked out the performances of the singular “whisper song” genre, from Rwanda and Burundi. Performances of these songs feature a performer on a 7-stringed “trough zither” called the *inanga*. This instrument represents but one of the many chordophones found throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, and consists of a concave (i.e., hollowed-out, similar to a shallow raft), wood sounding board stretched with six to nine strings (in my listenings, the instrument has always had eight). The musician holds the instrument horizontally, plucking the strings with both hands. In the “whisper song” tradition, the musician accompanies her playing with praise poems, stories of past events, or events from daily life which she whispers along with, and in time with, her playing. Since this is music that lives mostly in East Central Africa, these praise poems would not be associated with the orisha of Yorubaland as this text has so far been discussing.

The first performance of “whisper song” I encountered was provided by the Ocora label from a 1967 pressing called *Musique du Burundi*.⁴² Clearly, the

42 Develle (1967): OCR 40. The Ocora label, founded by French composers Pierre Schaefer and Charles Develle in 1955, is the recording arm of Radio France and specializes in field recordings of World Music. The history I have read states that the project was started by Schaeffer and Develle as a way of preserving the musics of the African continent which, it was believed by the composers, was in danger of being lost in the age of the Radio. Ocora is responsible for many of the excellent recordings I have obtained, and a review of the Ocora

first feature of the performance which entices the ear is the susurrations and sibilance of the performer's whispered words over the perpetual, almost motoric, rhythmic flow of the plucked zither strings. Since the strings of the *inanga* each project a definite pitch, the non-pitched whispered words of the performer stand in relief against the melodic patternings of the *inanga*, achieving a projection of the performer's voice both unexpected and mesmerizing. Most striking is the clarity of articulation that seems to be achieved in the recording (notwithstanding the probable close-mic necessities of this early field recording); this is notable even though the language is unknown and the ability to parse individual words may remain blurred to a Western listener. The prominence of the whisper in the ear of the listener is also noted by Ruth M. Stone:

The haunting vocal illusion of the "whispered song" of East Africa is hard to forget. The performer plucks a trough zither to make low, resonant sounds while he whispers nonpitched syllables. The listener mentally attaches the zither's pitches to the performer's whispers and imagines that the performer is really singing them.⁴³

While the last characterization of *inanga* whisper singing above may seem subjective, the author's characterization speaks to the numinous aura surrounding this practice to a Western ear. This aura is nurtured by the physics of the practice, and Fales (2008) notes:

The illusion appears to consist of the fusion of primary harmonics of the

discography is rewarding.
43 Stone (2008), p. 20.

inanga with the whisper. According to this hypothesis, a listener experiencing the inanga illusion will hear the whispered component 'following' the melodic movement of the inanga, due to a perceptual transfer of frequencies from the inanga to the whisper, incorporating frequencies into an acoustic unit which has no discrete frequencies.⁴⁴

One may only conjecture as to how this performance practice developed, and it seems remarkable that such a practice would come to the fore in a land otherwise marked by musics of projection, such as the rich percussion traditions and singing traditions discussed throughout the literature.

The *whisper* is a remarkable mode of utterance. Lacking definite pitch, whispers still carry enough breath to articulate consonants, especially fricatives; the increased aspiration required to activate consonants and fricatives results in an efflorescence of transients and noise, which adds to the distinctive spectral profile of the whisper; given the difficulty of “loud” vocal production, there is a psychological connection to close proximity of the sound source, a state of awareness described as “intimate”. With these antinomies at play in our perception of a whisper, and with the numinous, otherworldly aura around the performance tradition, the features of the “whisper song” presented a musical possibilities that seemed suggestive of the kind of composition I had imagined for the appearance of H I ne.

In Act II, scene iii, the setting of H I ne's appearance to Ch rie, is

44 Fales (1995).

modeled after the performance practice of the *inanga* whisper song genre described above. Two compositional constraints posed by the narrative are constructively addressed by the “whisper song” model. First, the nature of H I ne's death by guillotine has resulted in the loss of her next and use of her vocal chords, and this is handily reflected by the raspy hissing of whispering. Second, H I ne's text here is in the form a lengthy Sextant, and would require time to sing; whispered, however, and the verse flows smoothly and quickly. The sound of the *inanga* in the “whisper song” is also used as a sonic model for H I ne's accompaniment on the double bass. As in the *inanga* whisper songs, the rhythmic gesture of the accompaniment matches that of the whisper; melodic contour is determined by pitch-class structures found throughout the opera, while a focus on four- and five-note pitch sequences was suggested by the performance practice on the eight-string *inanga*.

As mentioned above, concerns over projection of the voice from the stage is a primary consideration, and the challenge posed by setting an aria as a whisper brought this consideration to the fore. Amplification of the voice was the first and easiest solution, though the construction of a sound panel situated behind the soprano also seems like a possibility.

Chapter 7 – The Story within the Story

The correspondences between the characters of Blood | Hunger | Child and the four orisha of Yoruba belief take on a functional role over the course of the opera. This dimension of the composition was not forecast in early conceptions of the work, but came about *pari passu* with my studies of the Trickster Eshu-Eleggua and my listenings to the praise hymns associated with him and the other orisha. This dimension of the musical narrative of the opera also presents an occasion of *discovery* during the course of its composition.

As mentioned above, the correspondences listed in Table 2 were embraced as a hermeneutic, or as a “way in to”, the composition of the opera. As I sought ways to fortify the musical relationships between the characters of Blood | Hunger | Child and the *oriki*, I also sought deeper connections between the personalities of all these characters. Reading from the *odu* and other accounts of the origins of the orisha, my understanding of the inter-relationships of the orisha became clearer. Intrigued that there may be deeper similarities between the relationships among the orisha, according to the myths and legends, and the relationships among the revolution-weary characters of the opera, according to Fowler's text(s), I discovered there were alignments among these stories which exceeded the depths of those I imagined.

In the introduction to the orisha given above, Obba is described as the wife of Shang , the thunder god, reflecting the choice of their correspondence to Ch rie and Natan. Just as with Ch rie and Natan, there are further details behind

the story of their relationship. Obba was Shang 's first wife, and she loved him passionately. However, Shang 's affections wandered, and he became beholden to one of Obba's fellow river deities, Oshun. Oshun is the orisha of sensuality and feminine sexuality. Obba became desperate to win back the attentions of her husband, and approached Oshun for advice on how to do so. Oshun gives Obba a special recipe to prepare for Shang . The recipe requires Obba cut off one of her ears to use in the recipe; assured of Oshun's strategy and wisdom, Obba does just this. When she serves the dish to Shang , her husband is disgusted by the ear in his dish, and horrified by Obba's deformity. He banishes Obba from his sight, and the heartbroken wife takes up vigil in graveyards, becoming the patroness of cemeteries in addition to her patronage of marital love and homemaking.

There is more to the relationship between Shang and Og n, too. According to the myths in the Ifa corpus, Og n was married to Oya, one of the three major river orisha.⁴⁵

Discovery of this story, and the parallels it maintains with the characters of Blood | Hunger | Child, made available an additional motivation behind aspects of the large-scale design of the composition. Table 3 shows some of the alignments between these personages in light of the new dynamics which have emerged.

Ch rie: wife desperately worried over losing her husband accepts advice from her	Obba: wife desperately worried over losing her husband
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⁴⁵ The other two river deities were Obba and Oshun, as noted in this text. Some of the sources in the literature present Obba, Oya, and Oshun as sisters, while other sources present them merely as different river deities. In any case, the three deities are strongly associated with specific rivers in Nigeria:

sister, resulting in disaster for the couple.

Natan: wayward husband who commits to decisions that keep him away from his wife

H I ne: sister of desperate wife who gives disastrous council on saving wife's marriage.

Monsieur Pagne: hawkish iron master

accepts advice from her sister, resulting in disaster for the couple.

Shang : wayward husband who commits to decisions that keep him away from his wife

Oshun: sister of desperate wife who gives disastrous council on saving wife's marriage.

Og n: hawkish iron master

Figure 3: Narrative parallels between BHC Characters and Orisha.

There are details of the story of Obba and Shang that do not align with the story of Ch rie and Natan. For instance, in the Yoruba story, Shang has found a new object of his affections and desires in Oshun, another female deity; in *Blood | Hunger | Child*, Ch rie has lost the attentions of Natan to Monsieur Pagne and the bloody revolution he represents. In the Yoruba story, Obba *seeks out* the counsel of her sister, while in the opera H I ne taunts and counsels Ch rie uninvited. And the most evident difference lay in the nature of the repast that is served to the husbands: Obba serves a dish containing her ear, and Ch rie serves one where the couple's child is the ingredient.

The differences between the stories of Obba and Shang and Ch rie and Natan certainly distinguish them, yet I found that following up on the alignments between them may also bolster a conception of *Blood | Hunger | Child* as a musical work with multiple dimensions. At the point that I discovered these

alignments, I was deep in the composition of the work. I had already embroidered the music of the Yoruba praise hymns into my music, or draped my own music around them, as explained above. Differences aside, the dynamics of the Obba/Shang story became more deeply encrusted in the musical fabric of the opera. Now, with the story of Obba and her relationship to Shang always in the background of my thinking, I began to tailor aspects of the opera to reflect the most salient features of the Yoruba story.

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