Painter made *Black Sea Composite Map 4 Historic Map* (left) and *Black Sea Composite Map 7 Washed Away* in 2012, as part of her Odalisque Atlas project.

excerpts from Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* have been transformed into imagery though digital projection and hand-painted lettering. A playwright friend commissioned images of Ella Fitzgerald and Hilton Als to illustrate an edition of her work; stage flats commissioned by an opera company feature Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Everywhere in her work, towering figures of the historical black pantheon make glancing eye contact with the viewer, before slipping out of sight.

Painter understands better than most the roots of the demand that black artists and public figures make themselves legible and unthreatening to a white audience. Much of her career as a historian focused on how figures like Sojourner Truth evaded and manipulated society's gaze. When she began her memoir, the same conviction that brought her to the top of the ivory tower (and the *New York Times* bestseller list) assured her that she had a story worth telling; writing the book was, in a way, "claiming a privilege" that readers would find her interesting, Painter admits. But telling her story isn't the same thing as explaining herself, or making her life digestible or even political. Instead: "I'm standing up for my right to be myself," she says. "And that can seem odd."

At the far end of the basement studio, one white wall has been cleared of framed images, photocopies, and sketches; a bright light shines over it. 2018 has been the year of the book, but soon there will be time for new projects, Painter hopes. She wants to make an artist's book—something between a folio of paintings and a text-driven work like the memoir—about Emmett Till. Last year, the art world was seized by controversy around the exhibition of Dana Schutz's painting *Open Casket* in the Whitney Biennial. Critics questioned whether Schutz, a white artist who is an acquaintance of Painter's, had the right to make, distribute, or profit from an image based on an iconic photograph from Till's funeral. Painter wants to make her own version of the painting to consider critically what she calls the history, the forgetting, and the rediscovery of Till. "I do this not to better the world or necessarily to make art history," Painter says. "It's not art history. It's mine."

"Little Shards of Dissonance"

An oratorio adapted from Langston Hughes

by SOPHIA NGUYEN

At some point, while preparing for the Rockport Chamber Music Festival, Davóne Tines '09 and Michael Shachter '09 were freshly struck by their circumstances. Their piece *Were You There*, a musical meditation on racial violence, starts with Handel and ends with Tines inviting the audience to join him in singing "We Shall Overcome." The friends were rehearsing in the Massachusetts town's soaring concert hall, its entire back wall made of glass. Out that window they could see people partying on Cape Ann, enjoying the water, celebrating the Fourth of July.

"Davóne and I had a moment when we looked at each other," Schachter recalls. "We're singing about police brutality, and we're amidst a lot of wealth and people who could go through years of their lives without confronting—not only any racialized violence, but literally any other *races*. We felt like, it's bizarre—we have to be messengers or evangelists for something that people might otherwise have no real need to confront."

This is a contrast they've grown familiar with, as creators of classical music: presenting art about injustice in gracious venues. It's one they'll likely face again with their next collaboration: *The Black Clown*, with music by Schachter and its title role sung by Tines, adapts text by Langston Hughes for the stage, and will open the American Repertory Theater's (A.R.T.) new season.

The poem is obscure, its structure strange. Introducing it as "a dramatic monologue to be spoken by a pure-blooded Negro

Paintings courtesy of Nell Painter

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Davóne Tines (left) and Michael Schachter presenting *Were You There* at the American Repertory Theater last December

in the white suit and hat of a clown, to the music of a piano, or an orchestra," Hughes lays out the text in two columns. "The Poem" contains the Clown's lines, and "The Mood"—itself a kind of lyric verse—provides cues like, "A gay and low-down blues," or "Flinching under the whip." Mourning his position as "the fool of the whole world," the narrator recounts the history of slavery and "the long struggle for life" in its wake.

Shachter and Tines, who met in the Harvard-Radcliffe Collegium Musicum, began the project at a tumultuous time for both. In 2010, Tines was working various gigs, including singing in the choir of the National Shrine in Washington, D.C.; during a lull in rehearsal he emailed Schachter to propose collaborating on something new. Schachter, who'd landed at the University of Michigan's master's program in composition after a year studying music in India, had recently read Hughes's poem. They decided to set it to music. By 2012, Schachter had sketched out some ideas while writing for the Michigan orchestra. Tines, meanwhile, had enrolled at and grown frustrated with Juilliard, where the faculty kept changing their assessments of his vocal range—a bass-baritone with an equally strong falsetto—and what repertoire he should train in. For a spell after his 2013 graduation, he thought he might go into artist management instead.

Eventually the friends developed a 20-minute song cycle from the Hughes poem, thinking they might record an album or perform it in concert ("with Davóne in a tux, and his hand on the piano," says Schachter). Things accelerated when, in 2015, Tines joined the A.R.T.'s production of the Civil War opera *Crossing*, in a role written for him by his friend Matt Aucoin '12. Schachter and Tines performed the cycle for the A.R.T.'s producers, who said they were interested in it—but as an evening-length work.

Now, some eight years since that first email exchange, Schachter is working on various choral and orchestral commissions and a monograph on musical aesthetics; Tines has a densely booked performance schedule, including roles in new operas by John Adams '69, A.M. '72, D.Mus. '12, and Kaija Saariaho. And *The Black Clown*, running about 80 minutes, will premiere with a cast of 13 and an orchestra of 10, using dance-band era techniques like growling and sliding.

Even as the production expanded, they hewed to the original text, says Schachter: "We treated it in a way that is more typical of a Handel oratorio." *The Messiah*, for example, tells a single, simple narrative, but "You create power through repetition and cyclical musical behavior, within a pocket of the story." They call theirs a "vaudeville oratorio." It jumps through different genres—from blues narratives, which use a 12-bar form and nested repetition to drive at a musical idea, to South Indian music, where the text repeats, rising in pitch and complexity—to sound out the idea of inheriting oppression across generations.

The only other lyrics come from spirituals specified by Hughes in "The Mood": "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" and "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." The influence of religious music is also on full display in the oratorio's climax, which builds on gospel idioms. The Clown's declaration—"Rise from the bottom,/Out of the slime!/Look at the stars yonder/Calling through time!"—is set to a standard chord progression (a two chord, a four, then a five, resolving on a one). It then repeats at double speed, then triple, then sextuple, overlaid with new harmonic layers. "The last time, you hear these supervening chords, which are quite dissonant, underneath the structure. Davóne and I nicknamed them 'space chords,'" Schachter explains. "It's this otherworldly, not quite human glint of light that's cascading on the whole thing."

"We get to have fun with plumbing the depths of that cadence," adds Tines. "Really stretching it out, to further illuminate what Hughes is trying to say: We are subjects of an entire lineage of oppression, but we can look to the stars out yonder. We are calling from all of time, for all that we've been through, and all that we hope might come."

Schachter says, "Getting to that point took us literally years," much of it spent deciding how to interpret the poem's ending lines: "I was once a black clown/But now—/I'm a man!" "Is his journey a success? Is it something that's a personal success amidst a larger futility?" asks Tines.

The creators don't want to give away the oratorio's ending—but what they say about the score offers hints. Even the biggest and most up-tempo chords, swelling with emotional catharsis, are embedded with what the composer calls "little shards of dissonance." "I wanted to get this feeling that though we're in a certain present, we can't escape the past," Schachter says. "That we're in these histories that brought us to where we are now."

Photograph by Evgenia Eliseeva/American Repertory Theater

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