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# Leontyne Price: The Woman of Action behind the Facade of Passive Artistry

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Leontyne Price:

### The Woman of Action Behind the Facade of Passive Artistry

When Leontyne Price stepped onto the public stage in the early 1950s, the world had never seen anything quite like her. Even ten years before, the concept of an African American prima donna being paid the Metropolitan Opera's top salary to draw audiences all over the world would likely have been seen as highly improbable, if not impossible. However, Price broke through the boundaries imposed on her because of her heritage to become one of the most sought-after singers of her generation. She has been called the "Prima Donna Assoluta of the international music world"<sup>1</sup> and "the Stradivarius of singers,"<sup>2</sup> a woman "born with a miracle of a voice"<sup>3</sup> that many sources describe as being so beautiful that it transcended social prejudices against her skin color and ensured her a place in the history books.

While the prejudice-defying qualities of Price's musicality are commonly acknowledged, there is a tendency in the scholarship to portray her contributions to civil rights as a side effect of her musical career, not as an intentional and thoughtful initiative by Price herself. However, a careful survey of Price's actions and publicly voiced opinions reveals that Price's contributions to racial equality were active and intentional. Further, her public persona of pure devotion to her art, "unmarred" by a political agenda, may very well have been carefully cultivated by Price herself to give her art the most power to forward racial equality. Her intelligent management of her career, culminating in her decisive retirement from opera against the expectations of her audience, elevates her legacy from that of a devoted African American artist who incidentally contributes to civil rights simply by being black, to the legacy of an essentially human woman who fought back against the oppressive forces of the majority culture and intelligently cultivated a more inclusive space in society for her African American peers.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Jacobson, in *Leontyne Price at the Met* (RCA Records, 1976), vinyl.

<sup>2</sup> Harold C. Schonberg, "Voice Comes First: Sutherland, Price and Corelli Raise Standards in the Art of Singing", *New York Times*, sec. X, March 19, 1961.

<sup>3</sup> *Black Women in America, 2nd Ed.*, s.v. Leontyne Price

## Upbringing, Early Career, and Early Public Reception

Leontyne Price was born in 1927 to a lower-middle-class family with two working parents; her mother was a midwife, and her father worked at a sawmill. From the time Price was a young girl, her mother invested large amounts of time and money in her daughter's musical education. In a 1960s interview with Samuel Chotzinoff, the general music director of NBC,<sup>4</sup> Leontyne recalls that "at times somebody in the house had to go without something in order for me to have a piano lesson," and remembers her mother buying her an upright piano "at great personal cost" when Leontyne was eight or nine.<sup>5</sup> Her mother was a driving force behind her continued study of piano, getting her involved in public playing and eventually encouraging her through high school and Central State College in Ohio with a scholarship.<sup>6</sup>

In interviews, Price describes her parents raising Price and her brother with dignity and pride, impressing on them the importance of "being the very, *very* best that [they] could be" at whatever they did and frequently reminding the children that "Being your best has no color. Period. None."<sup>7</sup> This attitude, coupled with Price's mother's driven support of Price's musical pursuits and her haste to make Price's talent publicly recognized, has similarities with the ideals of Harlem Renaissance-era scholars such as Alain Locke. Locke and many of his contemporaries believed that racial equality could be achieved by the "Talented Tenth," an African American intelligentsia of sorts, the members of which would excel in the higher arts and literature with the goal of proving that black people were capable of the

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Chotzinoff played a formative role in the world of televised opera, commissioning made-for-television operas such as Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. Although he was racially progressive for his time in that he approached Price and hired her to star in a televised role as Tosca, a traditionally white character, there are few scholarly sources on his racial sensibilities or his role in the Civil Rights Movement, suggesting little involvement. The tone of his interview with Price and of his reviews of African American musicians such as Marion Anderson earlier in his career suggest an eagerness to be considered progressive countered by an undercurrent of benevolent racism. (see Raymond Arsenault, *The Sound of Freedom: Marion Anderson, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Concert that Awakened America*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2009., p. 84.)

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Chotzinoff, *A Little Nightmusic* (New York: Curtis Publishing Company, 1964), 75-76.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 83

<sup>7</sup> "Leontyne Price in interview," YouTube video, 9:58. From 1981. Posted by Onegin65, September 5, 2009. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hlih1-XsdAY>.

<sup>8</sup> F. Paul Driscoll, "Leontyne Price," *Opera News*. <http://www.operanews.com/operanews/issue/article.aspx?id=3671>.

same artistic and scholarly genius as were white people.<sup>9</sup> This approach to fighting for civil rights was problematic in that it facilitated white voyeurism and relied on white culture for approval, continuing to give white people the active role in the establishment of racial equality and relegating African Americans to a passive role.<sup>10 11</sup> Price would come up against this stereotype of the passive black artist later in her career, as white culture attempted to claim her musical talent as separate from Price herself and downplayed her active contributions to her career and to civil rights.

This process of relegating Price to a passive role began as early as her time at Central State College. While there, she began to be sought out more often to sing at public events, although she did not take lessons until later in her college career. Eventually, as she became something of a fixture at official college events, the president of the college recognized her talent and, with her consent, sent in her application to Julliard. With generous funding from the Chisholms, white family friends with whom she had become more friendly through her piano playing during her high school years, she was able to make the trip to New York for the audition and pay for housing during the two years she spent there on scholarship. Price seemed to be on her way to living out an updated lifestyle of an artist of the Harlem Renaissance, encouraged by white patrons; it is easy to overlook the fact that Price herself sang the audition and received the scholarship that made her attendance at Julliard possible.

During her second year at Julliard, in 1951, Price fell in love with opera and began to frequent the school's opera workshops. Price was eventually cast in a production of *Falstaff*, in which she sang the role of Mistress Ford. At the time, it was presumably not too uncommon for a black woman to sing a traditionally white woman's role in Julliard's relatively small-scale opera productions because there is no evidence that controversy existed around the casting or the performance, which proved to be the

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<sup>9</sup> Jon Michael Spencer, *The New Negroes and Their Music* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), xv.

<sup>10</sup> Alain Locke, "Toward a Critique of Negro Music", in *The Works of Alain Locke*, ed. Charles Molesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 138.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Nathaniel Dett's artistic struggles [see Lawrence Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878-1943* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 108-138] and the fall into obscurity of William Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony* [see Gwynne Kuhner Brown, "Whatever Happened to William Dawson's Negro Folk Symphony?", *Journal of the Society for American Music* 6 (2012): 433-456].

springboard for Price's career. A number of big names in opera came to see the show, and it was not long before Leontyne was making a name for herself in productions such as *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *Porgy and Bess*, both of which took international tours and firmly established her as an up-and-comer in the opera world (albeit the racially segregated opera world of the public, which unlike Julliard was not so ready to cast her in traditionally white roles). It was at this point that Price dropped out of Julliard to focus on her career.

The public reception for Price's early performances was mostly positive, with critics hailing her "rich, well-placed dramatic voice"<sup>12</sup> and noting in 1954, after only three years in the public eye, that she was "[taken] to heart" by her audiences.<sup>13</sup> However, relegated to black roles as she was, her skin color seems to have always been at the forefront of her reviewers' minds. She is often introduced in early reviews and articles as some version of "the black singer, Leontyne Price," who, in spite of her skin color, has quite a striking voice.<sup>14</sup> This presentation of Price - "she's black, BUT she can really sing!" - along with her early relegation to black roles, is a very telling sign of the racial discrimination that she faced, even while she was being lauded for her vocal talents. Reviewers were also often quick to note that it was Price's innate talent, and not necessarily the result of conscious musical genius on the part of the singer, that made her a truly glorious vocalist;<sup>15</sup> in a 1955 review of Price's performance in a production of *Tosca*, Downes writes that although Price's talent was unpolished, she "surmounted [that] obstacle by her remarkable voice [and] her native intelligence and sincerity".<sup>16</sup> By insisting that her beautiful voice was an inborn part of her, apart from any conscious design on her part, Price's early reviewers betrayed their conceptualization of her as merely a vessel for her talent rather than as an active, thinking human.

Other later reviews continued to paint her in passive and racialized terms. In a 1964 review, journalist William Bender states that "she got [her early roles in *Porgy and Bess* and *Four Saints*] because

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<sup>12</sup> Howard Taubman, "Julliard Offers Verdi's Falstaff," *New York Times*, sec. A, February 21, 1952.

<sup>13</sup> R.P., "Song Recital Given By Leontyne Price," *New York Times*, sec. A, November 15, 1954.

<sup>14</sup> Olin Downes, "Leontyne Price Sings Tosca: Soprano Heard on TV in N. B. C. Theatre," *New York Times*, sec. A, January 24, 1955.

<sup>15</sup> R. P., op cit.

<sup>16</sup> Downes, op cit.

she was a Negro.”<sup>17</sup> According to this perspective, not even Price’s voice is given the credit for her artistic accomplishments. Reviews like these encouraged a public perspective of Price as an object, nothing more than a beautiful voice and an African American identity. However, there was one positive outcome of this objectification: the combination of this objectifying approach with the fact that Price’s biggest roles thus far had been traditionally black ones likely made it easier for reviewers and the public to assimilate Price into their ideals of musicianship and the operatic stage, making Price’s transition into opera relatively uncontroversial.

However, Price’s relatively neutral racial symbolism was not to last long. In 1954, Price was cast in the title role of an NBC Opera TV production of *Tosca*. This casting was a significant event, for Price’s career, NBC Opera’s social relations, and the entire civil rights movement. Not only was a black woman appearing in an opera, she was appearing in an opera on national television. Most radical of all, this black woman was singing a role traditionally given to white women. In *Hop on Pop*, a collection of essays focused on the relationship between black music (such as hip hop) and popular culture, African American essay author Diane Brooks writes about the statement that Price made as a prejudice-defying prima donna, “representing the possibility of beauty and dignity in a world which maligns and disrespects [African American women] and assumes [them] to be coarse, ugly and tasteless.”<sup>18</sup> As strongly-worded as this statement is, it is a painfully accurate portrait of the 1950s United States, and Brooks makes an important point about the huge social statement that Price made simply by agreeing to perform in this production. Not only was she defying society’s prejudiced view of black women, she was also, as Brooks goes on to articulate, asserting her equality in unambiguous terms by portraying a character that the public was used to seeing played by a white woman.<sup>19</sup> Price was no longer simply singing alongside white women - she was demonstrating her ability to represent them and effectively take their place.

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Amelia Hadley, “Leontyne Price: Prima Donna Assoluta,” in *Black Women and Music: More Than the Blues*, ed. Eileen M Hayes and Linda F. Williams (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 202.

<sup>18</sup> Diane Brooks, “‘They Dig Her Message’: Opera, Television, and the Black Diva,” in *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*, ed. Jenkins, McPherson, & Shattuc (London: Duke University Press, 2002), 300.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 301.

Given the radical statement that Price's performance as Tosca made about the potential of an African American woman not only to be equal with but also to surpass a white woman, the public backlash that followed the television premiere of *Tosca* was inevitable. One woman, identifying herself as one of many "irate white viewers" who saw the production, wrote in to the NBC president shortly after the opera aired saying she was "shocked and dismayed by your casting of a negress vis-a-vis white men in such necessarily romantic scenes." The outraged citizen's letter continues, "Since there is no dramatic excuse for this casting, as there would be in *Aida*, for example, I find this deliberate inter-racial propaganda extremely offensive and misguided" (The letter's author was quick to add that she had "no objection to Miss Price personally" because of her "excellent voice", adding insult to injury by making it clear that her prejudice was purely racial and not influenced by artistic sensibilities).<sup>20</sup> However, despite the outrage of the white public, the NBC corporation did not suffer any lasting PR damage, and in fact cast Price in three more race-defying appearances in its productions of Mozart's *the Magic Flute* and *Don Giovanni*, and Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*.

While Price was in San Francisco performing in the Poulenc opera, the Italian prima donna Antoinnetta Stella, who was singing with the San Francisco Opera in the title role of *Aida*, fell sick. At the request of the company, Price stepped in to fill her spot for the remainder of the opera's run. Price's performance as Aida garnered widespread acclaim and the work became a staple in her repertoire. Although this performance signified a return to a traditionally black role, and could be interpreted as a step back for Price's personal role in fighting for civil equality, the circumstances of the performance - specifically, Price literally taking the place of a white singer - cast the performance in a different light. Price herself certainly did not see the role as a form of oppression; by contrast, she was outspoken about her love for the role and saw Aida as a noble, not a slave.<sup>21</sup> Clearly, in Price's eyes, the role was empowering, not oppressing.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 308.

<sup>21</sup> Nan Robertson, "Farewell Role for Price: Verdi's 'Aida' at the Met," *New York Times*, sec. A, December 31, 1984.

Although she did return to a traditionally black role after *Tosca*, Price was not finished turning the racially segregated world of opera upside-down. After her performance in *Aida* (and an appearance at La Scala in Milan in that role – the first performance there by an African American artist in a traditionally white leading role) she went on to star in a San Francisco Opera production of *Il Trovatore* in which she sang the lead role of Leonora, another role traditionally given to white performers. Scholarly accounts of the public’s reaction to this race-defying role are much less plentiful than those recounting the social fallout of *Tosca*, and their very scarcity serves as an indication of the relative acceptance with which Price’s role in *Il Trovatore* was met. The Metropolitan Opera, which had been showing signs of interest in her for several years, courted her for a Met production of *Il Trovatore* in which she would continue to sing the lead role of Leonora. Price accepted.

The premiere of *Il Trovatore* – the first full production at the Met starring a black woman in a “white woman’s role” – was a staggering success. Reports of the length of the standing ovation that the premiere received vary from thirty to forty-five minutes; in any case, it was unprecedentedly long. *New York Times* critic Harold C. Schonberg showered Price’s performance with praise, writing that “Her voice, warm and luscious, has enough volume to fill the house with ease, and she has a good technique to back up the voice itself . . . Voice is what counts, and voice is what Miss Price has.”<sup>22</sup> This review, although it falls slightly into the trap of praising the voice over its possessor (“voice is what counts”), at least praises her voice in the context of what she does with it (“she has a good technique to back up the voice itself”), a credit both to the reviewer and to Price’s status as an artist; in portraying a white character in a lead role at the Met, Price had become more than just her voice in the eyes of at least one reviewer. Price continued to perform at the Metropolitan Opera until her retirement in 1985 in dozens of productions including *La fanciulla del west*, Barber’s *Antony and Cleopatra* in a role written especially for her, and several more productions of *Aida*.

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<sup>22</sup> “Il Trovatore {320} Metropolitan Opera House: 01/27/1961,” Metropolitan Opera House Archives. [http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/scripts/cgiip.exe/WService=BibSpeed/fullcit.w?xCID=186960&limit=2500&xBranch=ALL&xdate=&xedate=&theterm=1960-61&x=0&xhomepath=&xhome=\\*\\*](http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/scripts/cgiip.exe/WService=BibSpeed/fullcit.w?xCID=186960&limit=2500&xBranch=ALL&xdate=&xedate=&theterm=1960-61&x=0&xhomepath=&xhome=**)



## Public Perceptions of Price

Although Harold C. Schonberg gave Price her due as an artist and some reviewers followed suit, most reviewers continued to overlook her artistic role into the 1980s. The album notes for an authoritative collection of Price's performances, titled "Leontyne Price at the Met," include the following sentence: "The voice was warm, lustrous, easily produced, sovereign in technique, soaring above the staff."<sup>23</sup> As complimentary as these statements are, Price herself is not directly connected with any of them, not even via a possessive pronoun; "The Voice" gets all of the praise.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in the introduction to a 1981 interview with Price, the presenter opens the segment saying, "many of us would aspire to be like the voice of Leontyne Price. It's been called the voice of the century. . . ." He goes on to list the many accomplishments of "the voice", neglecting to link said voice back to Price herself even as he describes its origins: "but it first was heard publicly here, in . . . Laurel, Mississippi, where Leontyne Price grew up."<sup>25</sup> Not only is the presenter's grammar incorrect (it is doubtful that anyone would "aspire to be like" a voice of any kind), he betrays a mindset that originated in Price's early career and persisted through her retirement by steadfastly failing to acknowledge Price as the artist and controller of her voice. In these excerpts, as in many other articles and exposés on Price, "The Voice" is praised as the genius while the woman who produces it is relegated to a passive role.

This early conceptualization of Price as a passive vessel for her voice paved the way for the public's ignorance of her commitment to racial equality and of her active role in using her career to forward the cause. According to contemporary reviews that deified and disconnected Price's voice from Price herself, it was her beautiful voice that was offered a role in *Tosca*, and it was her beautiful voice that stunned its white audience into the realization that blackness could hold surpassing beauty. Aside from Price's acceptance of her roles, an act that tends to be (erroneously) taken for granted, Price's personal role in the strides that her career made for civil rights is portrayed as incidental. The actors in this

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<sup>23</sup> Jacobson, *Leontyne Price at the Met*, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> In contrast, Price's white contemporaries such as Maria Callas were described in more active terms, e.g. Howard Taubman, "Opera: Maria Callas Sings in 'Norma' at 'Met': Soprano Makes Debut as Season Begins," *New York Times*, sec. A, Oct 30, 1956. Pg. 43

<sup>25</sup> "Leontyne Price in interview," op. cit.

depiction are her white employers, who shuttle Price upward through the ranks of the artistic elite on the strength of the sound that resides in her voice box. While her interviews and actions make it clear that she sang with pride in her race and an active goal of racial equality, her reviewers' language neatly disconnected her musical talent from her person, making it possible for the public to laud the voice without having to recognize the human behind it. It was easy to see Price as a vessel, a relatively non-threatening novelty that would remain contained on the opera stage, dependent on the approval of her audience and submissive to the mostly white elites who employed her.

Along with the under-appreciation of Price's personal musical genius, the perspective of Price as a novelty, especially evident in the earlier reviews that persistently called attention to her blackness, established her during her formative years as an object rather than as an entity capable of purposely enacting change. A relatively early example of this preoccupation with Price's race is an interview with Samuel Chotzinoff, the long-time director of NBC Opera who gave her the role of Tosca in the groundbreaking television production. The pair are clearly, if not old friends, at least very friendly, as their small talk about their lifestyles and their past acquaintance indicates.<sup>26</sup> However, despite their apparent closeness, Chotzinoff betrays a certain fascination with Price's race in the interview, which he published in a 1964 compilation of interviews with famous musicians titled *A Little Nightmusic*. Price mentions playing for the "Ladies Club" during her childhood; Chotzinoff's first response is to ask whether the Ladies' Club was segregated.<sup>27</sup> Price references her time at Oak Park high school; "is that a segregated school?" Chotzinoff asks.<sup>28</sup> Price describes touring with the Met in Dallas, Texas; Chotzinoff is quick to find out, "was it desegregated?"<sup>29</sup> The interview is full of these types of interjections by Chotzinoff in the midst of seemingly neutral topics. The apparently purposeless, inquisitive way in which Chotzinoff refers Price's skin color suggests that Price's blackness was central to his concept of her not

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<sup>26</sup> Chotzinoff, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 82.

because it was seen to signify her political purpose, but because it made her a novelty, giving her persona an edgy allure.

The perspective of Price as a passive pawn is also reflected in modern scholarship, which has suggested that Price's career was enabled partially as a publicity stunt intended by the United States to send a message about racial equality to the rest of the world. In the 1998 documentary *Porgy and Bess: An American Voice*, social historian Darlene Clark Hine speaks about the pressure on the US to present an equal and accepting picture of black people in the midst of reports of the brutal response by state officials to the activism of the Civil Rights Movement. Hine lays the stage, saying, "America is merging as a world power. The economy is booming. Whites and blacks are moving farther and farther apart, but at the same time, the Civil Rights Movement is coming on center stage. America needs to send different kinds of signals abroad, doesn't it? It needs to show that in spite of all of this turmoil and strife and all of this racism... our black people truly are happy."<sup>30</sup> As Hine goes on to express, one way that the United States could achieve that was by putting black artists onstage and on TV. *Hop on Pop* article contributor Diane Brooks directly connects Price's career with this preoccupation with presenting an image of equality, writing, "... the United States . . . realized the need to expand its cultural markets both domestically (from just whites to whites and blacks) and internationally. It needed to project an image of tolerance and inclusion. Television, opera, and Leontyne Price were employed as the vehicles of this integrationist task."<sup>31</sup> Although this picture of Price's career may be partially accurate, in it Price's role is once again erroneously relegated to the passive, and her legacy as a crusader for civil rights is further minimized.

### **The Reality: Price as an Active Agent for Change**

Although propagandist ulterior motives may have played a role in smoothing the way for Price's transition onto the integrated opera stage, confining Price and her career to the role of a white culture-directed propaganda stunt fatally undervalues Price's intelligence and talent. Despite the general tendency

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<sup>30</sup> *Porgy & Bess: An American Voice*, directed by Ruby Dee (1999: Princeton, N.J.: Films for the Humanities & Sciences), VHS.

<sup>31</sup> Brooks, op. cit., 301.

to overlook Price's active role in fighting for social equality, Price makes it clear in interviews throughout her career - especially during her later years - that she viewed her singing not only as a musical expression, but also as a method of communicating and advocating for her values. Price states this plainly in a 1981 interview, saying, "Music is the international language...I have statements to say about my country, I have statements to say about my people, I have statements to say about art in general. . . Shouldn't [you] express what you have to say the best you can? I think singing is the best way for me."<sup>32</sup> Music was valuable to Price not only because of its aesthetic appeal, but also because of the active role it allowed her take in national and international conversations and the way it facilitated her expression of her social and political concerns.

In a majority of her interviews, Price also makes it clear that she had a strong sense of purpose and of motivation to make use of this unique and subversive form of communication. In the 1981 interview cited above, Price says, "I just believe that the gift came from the man upstairs and I have the duty to perfect it, to use it for positive things. . . early in the career [I was] singled out for a certain responsibility . . . I still consider it a most fortunate, fortunate responsibility because there's never a time that I do not perform, that I do not believe that I have something very positive to say."<sup>33</sup> Price saw her artistic talent as a gift, and with that gift came a certain responsibility, first and foremost, to bring joy to others for "as long as I possibly can."<sup>34</sup> Contrary to popular belief, she had motivations outside of the purely artistic realm of making music, and she felt strongly drawn to act on them.

And act on them she did. Price thought carefully about singing in racialized roles, and even gained a reputation later in her career for being "difficult" because of her selective and methodological approach to accepting job offers (apparently, the idea of Leontyne Price thinking critically about her next role was deviant enough in the eyes of the public for her to merit the label).<sup>35</sup> However, Price herself never made a point of declining roles or making demands, and in fact often covered up her active role in

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<sup>32</sup> "Leontyne Price in interview," op. cit.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> *Black Women in America*, op. cit.

running her career with modesty. In her interview with Samuel Chotzinoff, Price describes an integrated concert that she gave in her hometown of Laurel, Mississippi in 1963. Price initially portrays the integrated audience as something that fell into place naturally, but belies the difficulty with which it occurred in her description of her role in bringing it about. Although she insists that integration happened "organically," she also mentions "begging" the various newspapers and magazines wanting to cover the concert not to come because the presence of the media would make a segregated audience seem necessary (ostensibly because an integrated audience would be too progressive for the popular media).<sup>36</sup> Further, she says, she "would not sing without its being nonsegregated," and communicated that conviction to the relevant parties.<sup>37</sup> Despite her downplaying of her personal role in bringing the integrated concert off, it is apparent that the role was much more important than she overtly stated.

This anecdote illustrates not only Price's deceptively active role in bringing about the gains for civil rights that her career engendered, but also suggests that Price even played an active role in maintaining the myth of her passivity. Her modesty about her influence and how she made use of it to further civil equality facilitated the popular view of her as purely artistic and politically neutral. In fact, the public's tendency to overlook her intentional fight for racial equality arguably made it possible for Price to have the effect that she did. As a purely artistically motivated opera star, she was a symbol of racial equality that fit white culture's expectations. She was still a non-threatening object; the white public could still feel that they had control over her. This was a transition to racial equality according to white ideas of how that should happen, and what it should look like. This sense of complacency paved the way for Price to become more and more popular, more and more a mainstay of white culture, thus giving her more and more power and influence with which to fight for racial equality on her own terms, all the while throwing a metaphorical veil over any protesters' eyes with her modest and unthreatening public persona.

Price made the ultimate statement of her equality when she retired from the opera in 1985 in spite of strong continued public demand. She was still in fine form, even at the relatively advanced age of 57;

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<sup>36</sup> Chotzinoff, *op. cit.*, 80.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 79-80.

one 1984 announcement of her impending retirement commented that “her voice continues to move her enthusiastic audiences”,<sup>38</sup> and reviews of her operatic performances also affirm the same vocal beauty and audience enthusiasm.<sup>39</sup> However, Price had struggled with vocal problems throughout her career, and had no intention of singing herself hoarse to please anyone else. In her words, “I prefer to leave standing up, like a well-mannered guest at a party. My mother always told me to leave a little bit of dessert on the plate to show good breeding.”<sup>40</sup> This quote suggests that Price viewed her career as an equalizer - her renown affirmed her personal sense of her “good breeding”, and rather than gorging herself on her fame to the detriment of the equalizing message that it sent to those who would stereotype her, she preferred to prove her nobility once and for all by leaving voluntarily before she could be sent away.

However, this is not to imply that Price viewed her art dispassionately. On the contrary, she spoke openly about how “glorious” and “astounding, exhilarating, [and] stupifying” her successful performances felt to her, the “feeling of love and acceptance” that she got from the audience and the inherent reward of using her voice to create music.<sup>41</sup> Price’s love for her profession is shown especially convincingly in a video clip of her singing “O, Patria Mia” (Oh, my country) from her farewell performance of *Aida*.<sup>42</sup> As the aria winds to a close, the audience erupts into applause and cheering. Price holds character for about thirty seconds before her staid, tragic look crumples briefly into an expression of intense gratitude and sadness. Months before, Price was quoted in a New York Times article saying “the words of Aida’s aria, “O, Patria Mia,” are exemplary of everything I want to say. It begins, ‘oh, my beloved country - I will never see you again.’”<sup>43</sup> Although Price saw her retirement as necessary and “a true sign of success,” she did not make the decision without sadness about what she would be leaving

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<sup>38</sup> Nan Robertson, “Soprano Leontyne Price To Leave the Operatic Stage,” *New York Times*, sec. C, December 7, 1984.

<sup>39</sup> Donal Henahan, “Concert: Leontyne Price And Chicago Symphony,” *New York Times*, sec. C, April 30, 1980.

<sup>40</sup> Robertson, “Farewell Role for Price,” op. cit.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> “Leontyne Price Opera Farewell ‘O patria mia’,” YouTube video, 10:51. January 5, 1985. Posted by Onegin65, September 8, 2009. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGfP38nd-U0>.

<sup>43</sup> Robertson, “Farewell Role for Price,” op. cit.

behind.<sup>44</sup> Price's unique strength lies in the fact that she could bring joy to people and, at the same time, make meaningful contributions to correcting a prejudiced way of life, both while doing something that she truly loved.

With her retirement in 1985, Price proved once and for all that she followed her own agenda over the agenda of her white patrons and admirers. By retiring against popular opinion, she asserted ownership of herself and of the voice that reviewers had been going to great pains to dissociate from her person since her first days on the concert stage. While society was ready and willing to fit her with the relatively unthreatening stereotype of the African American artist passively representing her heritage by becoming a prominent figure in white culture, Price's retirement was a statement that transcended that stereotype and proved Price to be her own person, unrestricted by the box in which her audience tried to contain her. Rather than taking what white culture offered her and expected her to take, Price surveyed what it could offer her - what it was falling head over heels to give her - and she declined it, communicating her equality by proving that she was not subordinate to the desires and opinions of white culture. In this act, Price forced the public to acknowledge that Price, like the other black activists of the Civil Rights Movement, was not an object at all; she was capable of acting purposely to overcome the boundaries within which white culture tried to contain her. She was, first and foremost, a woman with pride in her heritage and self-assurance in her worth. Speaking of her impending retirement to a *New York Times* reporter in mid-1984, Price said, "I want to go out as the glorious Ethiopian, Aida. She is not a slave at all. She is a captive princess - she is of noble blood."<sup>45</sup> Leontyne Price saw her skin color as an honor and her departure from the opera stage as a triumph, a statement about her nobility as a black woman and as a truly free human being.

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<sup>44</sup> Susan Heller Anderson, "Leontyne Price - Still the Diva," *New York Times*, sec. D, February 7, 1982.

<sup>45</sup> Robertson, "Farewell Role for Price," op. cit.

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