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Nothing Is as It Appears: Anthony Braxton’s *Trillium J*

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ABSTRACT

Anthony Braxton’s *Trillium J*, part of an ambitious planned “complex” of 36 one-act operas, premiered in 2014. Very little writing—anecdotal, journalistic, nor scholarly—exists on these works, so this research provides a critical introduction, contextualizing the operas within Braxton’s oeuvre and discussing the works’ fundamental musical materials and organization. Examples from *Trillium J* illuminate general characteristics of the composer’s approach to operatic form. This document analyzes the composer’s approach to narrative time and place, characterization, and the relationship between the libretti and Braxton’s 1985 philosophical treatise.¹ This research also offers a reading of how Braxton’s operas may be understood as “ritual music,” the designation he gives them. This analysis draws on religious studies and anthropological theories of ritualization,² as well as studies of innovations in modernist theater.³

I suggest that *Trillium’s* potential for ritualization exists, in part, because of the nuanced way the Western operatic, the American experimental, and improvised music traditions intersect and inform Braxton’s work. Also important are the frustrated attempts at community formation in the operas’ stories and the significance of self-realization for the participants that motivates Braxton’s compositional approach. Ultimately, this document proposes that the collaborative practices of realizing these music-theater works is central to these processes of ritualization. Therefore, in addition to studies of the libretto and score, this research draws upon the author’s first-hand experience of performing in the opera’s orchestra and interviews with the composer, significant collaborators, and experienced performers.

¹ Braxton, *Tri-Axium Writings*
² Specifically the works of Catherine Bell, Richard Schechner, and Victor Turner.
³ Specifically the work of Anthony Sheppard.
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CHAPTER ONE
ANTHONY BRAXTON’S TRILLIUM OPERA COMPLEX:
AN INTRODUCTION

Premiered in April 2014 at Roulette Intermedia in Brooklyn, New York, *Trillium J: The Non-Unconfessionables* is the most significant manifestation of Anthony “Monteverdi Boy”\(^4\) Braxton’s *Trillium* opera “complex” to date. The four acts of *Trillium J* are a fraction of Braxton’s plans for this ambitious series of one-act music theater works. He intends—and has been planning since at least 1980—to compose a total of thirty-six autonomous single-act operas. He bundles these individual acts into groups of one to five and titles each with a distinct letter. As of 2017, he has completed eighteen individual acts: *Trillium A* (one act), *Trillium M* (one act), *Trillium R* (four acts), *Trillium E* (four acts), *Trillium J* (four acts), and *Trillium X* (four acts). Braxton is currently finishing the five-act *Trillium L*, after which he plans to complete two more three-act operas, two two-act operas, and a final three-act opera requiring triple the performance forces the others demand.

Braxton is a wildly prolific composer. Since the 1960s he has composed over four hundred pieces\(^5\) and released more than one hundred albums on major labels such as Arista, art house imprints such as Leo and Delmark, and most recently on his own Braxton House and New Braxton House labels. He has performed and recorded as a soloist, toured with quartets and small

\(^4\) Braxton, conversation with author.
\(^5\) Testa, email to author.
ensembles, and realized works for orchestra in concert halls and for other large ensembles in less conventional spaces such as ice hockey rinks to allow for spatialization and audience mobility.

Unlike some composers who move from one self-contained piece to another, Braxton conceives of his extensive and diverse body of work as all part of one musical system. In his “Introduction to Catalog of Works,” written in 1988 while he was teaching at Mills College, Braxton explains that “[t]he body of ‘musics’ that make up this Catalog of Works represent the ‘best I could do’ when confronted with the incredible gifts of beauty that the Masters have given us in the phenomenon we call music....all of these works are part of one organic sound world state.” In the Catalog, Braxton outlines four “fundamental postulates” regarding his work, the first of which expresses his conception of his music as a deeply integrated whole: “All compositions in my music system connect together.”

Within this system, there are sub-systems—different categories of pieces that serve different functions. His “multi-logic sound universe” includes music that operates on “three primary planes of perception dynamics—abstract realization, concrete realization, and intuitive realization.” The website of the Tri-Centric Foundation, the not-for-profit organization “that supports the ongoing work and legacy of Anthony Braxton,” outlines four such types of pieces: Diamond Curtain Wall Music, Echo Echo Mirror House Music, Falling River Music, and Ghost Trance Music.

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7 Braxton, Composition Notes: Book A-E, 201.
8 Tri-Centric Foundation, “Braxton Musical Systems.” In the 2016 unpublished version of his System Notes, Braxton has developed or plans to develop eight more musics, for a total of
Ghost Trance Music offers a good example of how each of these musics serve a specific function within the overall system:

In 1993 Braxton told Graham Lock he was looking for “a system of tracks, like a giant choo-choo train system that will show the connections, so where a soloist is moving along a track, that will connect to duo logics, trio logics, quartet logics. So, for instance, if you’re traveling from ‘Composition 47,’ which is a small town, to a city like ‘Composition 96,’ the model will demonstrate the nature of combinations and connections in between systems.”

Within his system, Ghost Trance pieces serve as connectors, creating links and allowing for performer-activated movement between pieces. As the above description suggests, within the system there are musics—or “logics”—for soloists, duos, trios, all the way up to very large number of musicians. Beyond instrumentation, these logics address the needs and realities of creating structures and performance opportunities for different groups of people. This applies within Braxton’s system and in a broader social context. Different performance contexts demand different music, and different music serves different social functions. Each type of music within his system addresses a specific demand that Braxton perceives music to fulfill for the individual and society.

*Trillium*’s function relates to spiritual needs. Braxton describes these music-theater works as ritual and ceremonial musics. He has been exploring ritual and ceremonial potential in his works for decades, and he retrospectively identifies some of his earliest experiments in ritualization as happening in 1977 while recording *Composition 76*:

> My move towards the world of ritual and drama would begin somewhere around *Composition 76*…[with] a looking for something greater….I’ve always been searching,

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trying to understand my relationship to this experience, but I think it would be sometime around 76 that this would become very important for me, as far as expressing it in my work. There’s a difference between what you’re thinking about when you’re twenty and when you’re forty….\textsuperscript{10}

The piece that Braxton explicitly labels as the first ritual work within his system, however, is Composition 95 for two pianos from 1980. In the portion of the Composition Notes describing 95, Braxton explains that the function of the ritual music within his system is to address “the challenge of transformational creativity in this time cycle…. there is danger in the air for all people and forces concerned about Humanity and positive participation. Composition No. 95 is composed as a vehicle to alert the spirit about serious change.”\textsuperscript{11} As Graham Lock notes—in the final chapter of this 1999 book Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton, the only published scholarly analysis of Trillium—Braxton identifies profound shifts unfolding in Western culture and attempts to create works that offer tools for negotiating these changes.\textsuperscript{12}

Lock quotes Braxton to explain what structurally sets 95 apart from earlier pieces: “This work would attempt to establish an environment context, costumes, choreography; and begin to reflect my concern about the spiritual relationships between various world disciplines.”\textsuperscript{13} Thus, the creation of sets, or “constructed environments” as he calls them at other points, and other intermedia attributes such as lighting design, projections, costumes, and choreographed movements drawn from theater and dance are fundamental to the DNA of his ritual

\textsuperscript{10} Lock, Forces in Motion 170. Braxton was born in 1945.
\textsuperscript{11} Lock, Forces in Motion 186.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 185, citing the final chapter of the third volume of Braxton’s Tri-Axium Writings.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 170.
compositions. For Braxton the ritual potential for these works lies in the creation of a fantasy space in which the music is performed. Such a fantasy space opens up the possibility of “alert[ing] the spirit about serious change.”

In terms of constructing environments using intermedia attributes, *Composition 9* for four amplified shovels, written in 1969, offers precedent. According to the *Composition Notes*, Braxton conceives *9* “as a visual and sound environment platform.” His performance notes include a diagram of the stage layout, the costumes, and the projections required to create No. 9’s environment.

Lock notes the long-standing use of “spatialization and narrative…as metaphor in Braxton’s music” citing *Compositions 3, 23N, 40L, and 69 (O)*, and he rightly points out a shift from these earlier works in the “degree to which metaphor has been actualized and integrated into the music.” Indeed, the actualization of metaphor into physical environments and negotiated scenarios is fundamental to the ritual and ceremonial potential that Braxton wants to confer to *Trillium J* and his other operas.

Lock also links this to a broader trend he identifies in Braxton’s work, particularly evident beginning in the mid-1980s when Braxton starts to move “from the abstract to the concrete.” One manifestation of this move is Braxton’s expressed goal to compose works that function simultaneously as the “territory” one navigates in performance and the “vehicles” that move one through that space. *Composition 175*, which is set in the same fantasy world as *Trillium*, provides an example. The structure of the piece “‘maps’ the interior of a castle,” as two

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14 Braxton, conversation with author.
16 Lock, *Blutopia*, 188.
characters, Kim and Helena, familiar to those who know Trillium, stumble upon a castle and explore its rooms:

During the course of the composition, they are beset by “images of ghosts and dragons,” the “sounds of chains rattling,”...and voices that shout “BOO! BOO! BOO! BOO! BOO! BOO!” Other voices guide them through the music system/castle, while the two women discuss (in song) the likely whereabouts of the canteen, the possibility of buying souvenirs, and the similarities between certain of the rooms and scenes from old horror films.\(^\text{17}\)

Thus, 175 becomes the space—in this case Garthstone Castle—through which the performers move, and the music becomes the means of locomotion through that space. In this mutual reinscription of the where and the how that might at first seem paradoxical, Lock hears echoes of “Sydney Bechet’s notion that the music creates a ‘place’ that exists as long as the music is being played.”\(^\text{18}\) Before digging into the details of the places that Braxton creates in Trillium J and his other operas, this document outlines the structural and conceptual frameworks (the where and the how) that support Braxton’s fantasy scenarios.

**“So-called freedom”**

A focus on compositional structure—and its relationship to improvisation and associated notions of freedom—has been critical to the development of Braxton’s body of work. His works span the entire spectrum, from fully notated music that allows for very little improvisation to

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 187-188.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 188. Lock is referring to a quotation from Bechet’s autobiography *Treat It Gentle* (1960; New York: Da Capo 1978, 202-03) with which he opens his book *Blutopia*: “It’s the remembering song. There’s too much to remember. There’s so much wanting, and there’s so much sorrow, and there’s so much waiting for the sorrow to end. My people, all they want is a place where they can be people, a place where they can stand up and be part of that place….There’s pride in it, too. The man singing it, the man playing it, he makes a place. For as long as the song is played, that’s the places he’s been looking for.” (Lock, *Blutopia* 1)
music performed from minimal notation or fully graphic scores. Regardless of the level of notational fixity, Braxton has long held an appreciation for structure as a balance to freedom—and vice versa:

It’s like everybody wanted to use freedom as a context to freak out…So-called freedom has not helped us as a family, as a collective, to understand responsibility better…I’m not opposed to the state of freedom…But fixed and open variables, with the fixed variables functioning from fundamental value systems—that’s what freedom means to me.¹⁹

Thus freedom functions best within a consensual system. Characteristically, Braxton’s statements evoke both a political-social level of thinking and a personal-musical one; and he has carefully designed his system of music to balance “fixed and open variables,” to allow for maximal creative potential and, from his perspective, the most creative freedom. In much compositional thinking musical structure relates directly to the scale of the work—its duration, number of performers, sonic density, and conceptual complexity. This is certainly the case for Braxton, for whom the notion of scale moves beyond the purely logistical or abstractly musical. Braxton’s music asserts a politics of scale.

“From an orchestra consisting of ten billion…to…twelve bricks and a bucket”: 
Politics of Scale

The Trillium operatic project offers one example of Braxton’s many challenges to the limits of scale throughout his more than five-decade long career of Braxton’s challenge to the limits of scale. Composition 19, his piece for one hundred tubas, and Composition 82 for four orchestras are oft-cited examples of his music for large performance forces. For Braxton,

however, scale can also manifest in terms of the virtuosic stamina demanded of the performer and listener. His 1968 release *For Alto*—“the first-ever release devoted entirely to solo saxophone music, the first recorded example of an extensive musical language developed specifically for and on the solo saxophone”20—is an example of such an understanding of scale. As this suggests, even when making music for just one performer, Braxton thinks big.

*Trillium* is certainly large-scale in its performance forces, and Braxton states explicitly that “scale and intensity” matter, citing Wagner as an inspiration for this large-scale design. Braxton’s “original idea was to create an opera complex model that demonstrates Wagnerian dimensions.”21 This invocation of Wagner makes sense. Wagner’s ambitions to work on a grand scale—his exploitation of large orchestral forces, his grandiose conception of the Gesamtkunstwerk and of the composer as the ultimate auteur—has been remarked on by many: “Wagnerians, of course, tend to make Wagner the first, or the worst (or best).”22 Yet as Carolyn Abbate points out, there are many precedents for Wagner’s techniques. She reads the frontispiece to Enlightenment scholar Athanasius Kircher’s treatise on acoustics as evidencing the connection between musical force (acoustic volume) and musical affect, as it “illustrates the long spiral that connects music to wind and screams, anticipating the vastness of a Wagnerian orchestra.” Instruments and “the sheer horatory impact of volume” conspire “to create a realm in which music has immediate power and an instant effect. Content versus volume: the symbiosis between meaning communicated by musical content, and physical power consequent upon mechanics and

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20 Lock, *Blutopia*, 146.
21 Braxton, Liner notes, *Trillium J*.
acoustics, is a recurring theme in both the treatise and its symbolic frontispiece.”

Thus, some Enlightenment philosophers understood volume, or the quantity of noise produced, to create its own meaning, rather than being an aspect of other musical signifiers.

Wagner was not the first to emphasize the significance of scale, and Braxton, following Wagner’s lead, is part of this intellectual lineage. It is important that Trillium be performed by a lot of people, since more people have the potential to make far more noise. In fact, understanding one goal of a large-scale production as the ability to produce not just a lot of volume, but a lot of noise, allows for a better understanding of Braxton’s politics of scale. A large ensemble led by Braxton not only has the potential to make a lot of sound, but that sound can be more complex—with more noise, more unpredictability, in its system—due to individual decisions and collective interactions than sound produced by a single performer.

Exactly what meaning(s) a particular noise, or “horatory impact of volume,” instigates

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23 Ibid., 38.
24 I am invoking here an understanding of noise as a necessary multiplicity. In the introduction to their 2013 volume Noise in and as Music, editors Aaron Cassidy and Aaron Einbond write: “The problem with noise is that it is everything. It is real, experiential, objective, measurable; it is also abstract, subjective, ambiguous, and contextual. It is both a thing and a relationship between things. It can be a state of communicative surplus, a chasm of ruptured communicative space, and also the material being communicated. It is potentially both overwhelming and reductive, both multiplicity and singularity. Every attempt at defining and discussing noise ends up somewhere in between these poles, bogged down between excess and incompleteness, avoidance and desire” (xiii). Thus, even though they describe noise as “both multiplicity and singularity,” in this construction it is necessarily always already a multiplicity. Later they describe the understandings of noise that emerge from the interviews collected in the book: “In all, the contributors’ compelling answers suggest self-definition as a key characteristic common to recent noise work. As expected, many contributors distanced themselves from genres, scenes, and common practices, just as they may distance their own musical identities from clear-cut labels like composer, performer, improviser, or programmer. The fluidity of noise- making is revealed as one of noise’s most appealing features, and it is perhaps this malleable, shape-shifting erasure of boundaries and roles that is most relevant to our current climate” (xix).
depends on numerous factors. Setting aside the fact that in instrumental or otherwise abstract music specific musical meaning is quite elusive and difficult, if not impossible, to translate, the historical-social context in which the music—the physical sonic power, the noise—is produced does matter. Or, more specific to Braxton’s *Trillium* opera complex, the volume of sound produced by a Black American opera composer matters. Certainly, the radical, disruptive force that the noise (“screaming, wailing, honking, repetition, and so forth”) of 1960s free jazz imparted to Black radical politics mattered. As Jason Robinson notes, “[t]he emergent experimentalism in the music centered on transgressive and innovative uses of improvisation that led to new approaches, sounds and interpretive meanings.”\(^\text{25}\) Thus, Braxton’s politics of scale, his politics of volume and noise, emerges in relation to the music of Black American radicals, who are part of “a diverse range of noisy people from around the world—the Great Chain of Noisy Beings.”\(^\text{26}\) As Braxton’s longtime collaborator and fellow AACM member George Lewis explains, “we want an experimental music that can own up to the consequences of its noise, that can face up, when needed, to the possibility that there really is something to be angry about.”\(^\text{27}\) As this research attempts to unpack, Braxton creates *Trillium* as both a space and means for exploring what there is to be angry about, to be troubled by, and to celebrate in the world in which he lives.

Concluding his discussion of Braxton’s music in his *Blutopia*, Lock links Braxton’s operatic work to the music of Sun Ra and Duke Ellington in terms of scale and in an attraction to the seemingly impossible:

\(^{26}\) Lewis, Interview in Cassidy and Einbond, *Noise in and as Music*, 121.  
\(^{27}\) *Ibid.*, 123.
Braxton’s opera projects may seem impossibly optimistic, but as Sun Ra noted, “The impossible attracts me because everything possible has been done and the world didn’t change.”…Braxton, too, has said much the same: “The challenge of creativity…is to move towards the greatest thought that you can think of.”…For Braxton, the creative urge is the defining quality of humanity.  

This drive toward the impossible relates Braxton’s work, again, to Wagner. The following description by Abbate of Wagner could easily apply to Braxton: “Wagner’s desire to usher in the impossible grew immense….” A project as large as the creation of thirty-six operas unquestionably offers a prime example of Braxton’s attraction to the seemingly impossible. As Lock points out, the father in the second act of Trillium R, expresses the very real significance such impossible optimism holds, when the character states, “The thrust of our species involves transcending what is possible, and raising [to] the challenge of the moment.”

There is a politics of scale at work in Braxton’s oeuvre that relates not only to transcendence, but on the more modest end of the spectrum, to economics. He explains that “as a person who has no money I would …program ‘having no money’ (as a proposition) into the system model qualities as an axiom for composite application.” He emphasizes in the notes that accompany the box set release of Trillium J that the operas may be performed “with the largest instrumentation that is possible, or the smallest instrumentation that’s available (or any instrumentation that strikes one’s fancy—from an orchestra consisting of ten billion musicians

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28 Lock, Blutopia, 209.
29 Abbate, In Search of Opera, 31.
30 Lock, Blutopia, 209.
31 Braxton, Liner Notes, Trillium J. As Braxton explained to Lock, “[P]overty is not only inhibiting, poverty is boring—and there’s nothing worse than that. That is not to mention, of course, the profound levels of poverty that are taking place on this planet…So the poverty I’m dealing with, it’s like part of the context for people who decide to go on this particular route. And it’s a luxury because I’m involved in something that I love, and I love it so much I’ll do it whether anybody listens or not.” (Lock, Forces In Motion, 139)
Braxton conceives these works to be performable by a sliding scale of forces, in part because he understands that given his economic realities— informs, as they are, by the intersection of racial politics with art funding in the United States—bricks and a bucket might be the only way he can get his operas performed.

Nevertheless, despite his fiscally pragmatic axiomatic proposition, Braxton focuses on potential rather than limits, carefully composing for his desired orchestra and, taking Wagner to task in terms of scale, writing music for impressive numbers. Trillium J, for instance, is composed for twelve singers, twelve solo instrumentalists, up to twelve dancers, Centurion guards, choir, computer music, light/image projection crew, virtual technical crew, constructed fantasy environments, and orchestra. A 37-piece orchestra premiered the work, realizing a score that calls for flutes; oboes and English horn; B-flat, E-flat, alto, bass and contrabass clarinets; alto and soprano saxophones; bassoons; contrabassoon; percussion; and orchestral strings. Braxton composes all thirty-six of the operas for such an ensemble, with the large forces broken down into constituent layers, i.e., the singers, the instrumental soloists, and the orchestra. The major ensemble sections work together within Braxton’s operatic form, but each layer also has a potential for independence and its own function within the whole. Such layering contributes to Braxton’s ability to scale up to the largest imaginable forces or down to the most modest, depending on the resources available.
Layering and Modularity

A layering and modularity inform not only Braxton’s structural approach to instrumentation, but also his way of approaching his musical system as a whole. Clarifying the relationships within his system, Braxton elaborates four ways in which his compositions can work together: (1) they “can be executed at the same time/moment”; (2) shorter pieces can be embedded within a larger “host” composition; (3) “[i]solated parts from a given structure can be positioned into other structures—or one structure—as many times as desired”; (4) “[a]ny section (part) of any structure can be taken and used repeatedly by itself or with another structure—or structures.” In this layered (modular or collaged) approach, the operas of Trillium relate not only to the other operas, but to any other work within Braxton’s catalog.

Braxton’s layering conception further manifests itself in terms of performance options. Just as these operas are composed with large forces in mind but are possible on smaller scales, he composes the operas with many options for overlap, recombination, and simultaneity in performance. Braxton states in the liner notes to Trillium E that “[t]he aesthetic/fulfillment potential of the Trillium opera complex is to have all twelve operas performed at the same time.” At another point, he described the definitive performance, the ultimate layering, as involving the performance of not just all of Trillium, but all of his music at the same time, in an event like the “Big Bang.”

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33 Braxton, “Introduction to Catalog of Works,” in Audio Culture, 202-203.
34 Cox and Warner, Audio Culture, 201.
35 Braxton, Liner notes, Trillium E.
36 Braxton, conversation with author.
Even with this superlative performance in mind, Braxton imagines additional ways the music could be put to work for a given context. For instance, in a performance of a single opera the three layers of the ensemble—orchestra, singers and solo instrumentalists—could be located in different locations, “i.e., different parts of a city, different parts of a continent and/or different parts of a planet/galaxy) and performed simultaneously as one holistic unit (presentation/representation).”37 Here his layered thinking extends the physical space the operas take up and thus create.

Not just aggregating, the works can also be fragmented, like interchangeable puzzle pieces,38 with bits of the operas embedded into other operas or any other piece in his system. For example, a single part from the opera could be used as material within a large-ensemble improvisation. Kyoko Kitamura describes using the musical materials of Ntzokie from Trillium when she performs Syntactic Ghost Trance music.39 Braxton also realizes this musical approach with large and small performing ensembles. For instance, in the ensemble class he taught at Wesleyan University for many years, the class would work on a collection of five to ten pieces during a semester. Some would be fully notated large ensemble works, some would be minimally notated charts used originally by one of his touring quartets, some would be graphic scores, and some of the music would be made through conducted Language Music improvisations. During the final concert, any and all of these modes of music making could be utilized. Braxton would serve as the main conductor and usually begin the concert with a portion of fully notated music. Soon, however, things would open up: A member of the ensemble would conduct a small subset

37 Braxton, Liner notes, Trillium E.
38 Ibid.
39 Kitamura, conversation with author.
of the group in performing another piece while the original piece continued. Or, a single performer might decide to improvise within the Language Music system for a while. Eventually everyone would leave the original composition, although it could be returned to at any point, if desired. Fragmenting, embedding, collaging, and recontextualizing processes would all be in play.

In Braxton’s conception such layering processes and scale prove to be deeply connected. Working in this way he is able to compose big, to imagine as far and wide as possible regardless of limited resources or unequal treatment—while also not impeding the realization of the work on a scale that is possible. He is thrilled to hear all of a work and happy to hear a fragment, as long as the materials are being put to good use: “Have some fun with the material—that’s what I’m trying to say.”

“My version of the Dream Space”

A layering principle informs Braxton’s compositional process, as well. As he explains, “[t]he understanding being that the combined action space of Trillium E, in terms of orchestrating sonic events, is a layering principle that I refer to as my version of the Dream Space—which is very different from Wagner’s Dream Space; certainly different from Stockhausen’s Dream Space or Mr. Ellington’s Dream Space in the sacred musics.” As is possible in dreams, but (supposedly) not when we are awake, parts of a whole can be disconnected, rearranged, and recombined. In this process, new details and possibilities might be

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40 Braxton, Liner notes, Trillium E.
41 Braxton, “Anthony Braxton – Trillium E workshop.”
perceived that get overlooked when awake. Braxton’s version of a Dream Space allows him to imagine his music in such a way.

In a 2011 lecture he explains more specifically how this layered compositional approach works. Discussing Trillium E, he describes first writing the libretto and then composing for the singers. The fact that the libretto comes first is audible, as the vocal music closely follows the rhythmic contours of the text. Braxton’s vocal writing also presents another connection with Wagner, whose “later music dramas can be thought of as continuous recitative, with enhanced melody, harmony, and orchestration; or as continuous aria, without fixed forms and with the freedom and speech-rhythm of recitative.” In Braxton’s operas, traditional delineations between aria and recitative are also difficult to parse, since the music seems to be in a continuous recitative. This is due to Braxton’s musical priorities. Anne Rhodes—who has worked with Braxton in numerous capacities and performed the role of Sundance in Trillium E—explains that the top priority for the Trillium singers is to convey the text. The second priority is rhythmic information, followed by melodic contour, intervals, and lastly specific pitches. Braxton conveys this hierarchy through verbal instructions and in his score using notation similar to Sprechgesang: he notates the actual pitches he would like to hear, but adds an x onto the stem [Fig. 1].

Lucy Dhegrae, who performed the role of Helena in Trillium J, suggests that this notation underscores what is actually Braxton’s number one priority—that the music be imbued with personal, spontaneous energy. He never wants the music to feel too “studied,” and if every note

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43 Rhodes, conversation with author.
is hit exactly, there is no way it could have been a good performance.\textsuperscript{44} Thus, he provides a range of musical information that each player can contend with in the way that is most idiomatic to their musical approach, personality, and vocal style. Braxton does not intend the \textit{Trillium} music to be performable only by operatic singers. The cast of \textit{Trillium J} featured vocalists coming from the jazz tradition, as well as those invested in Western classical music.

After composing for the singers, Braxton then writes for the solo instrumentalists. This layer is one not often found in contemporary opera, and in the \textit{Trillium} operas, it is a particularly important component. \textit{Trillium J} features bass clarinet, trombone, soprano saxophone, French horn, English horn, flute, alto saxophone, oboe, baritone, clarinet, trumpet, and tuba as soloists. Sometimes the instrumental soloists play fully notated counter melodies that bind the syllabic text-centric vocal writing to the thick orchestral textures. At other times, the solo instrumentalists are instructed to improvise, attending to the sounds and words of the vocal music. In such moments, perhaps the solo instrumentalists perform the “missing” arias, which Braxton has composed in a layered, rather than sequential, structure. Rather than being temporally separated from the recitative, such aria moments—when the solo instrumentalists are given the most expressive latitude—integrate and complexly intertwine with the recitative.\textsuperscript{45} In Figure 2, four soloists provide overlapping solo interactions with Ntzockie’s vocal line. The score dictates entrance points and the durations of solos, but the specifics are left up to the performer in the musical moment.

\textsuperscript{44} Dhegrae, conversation with author.
\textsuperscript{45} In the Roulette production of \textit{Trillium J}, the solo instrumentalists were also given explicit instructions in relation to the dancers, particularly in Act Two.
With these layers in place, Braxton then composes for the orchestra, crafting music that oscillates between dissonant sustained chords [Fig. 4] (think: Language Music\textsuperscript{46} types 1 and 2, long sounds and accented long sounds), percussive articulations that initiate, intercut or punctuate long sounds [Fig. 5] (think: Language Music 7, short attacks), and playful, melodically suggestive motives [Fig. 6] (think: Language Music 4+5, staccato line formings plus intervallic formings).

Braxton’s layering informs his approach to orchestration for the large \textit{Trillium} instrumental ensemble. As he explains in a 2010 lecture about \textit{Trillium E}, he thinks in terms of “sectional logics,” first writing for the strings: “I look for violin emphasis; medium cello, viola emphasis with string bass. I’m always looking for a good rotation….And then I fill in the works.”\textsuperscript{47} In \textit{Trillium J}, a similar orchestrational process seems to be at work. Within the first two minutes and fifteen seconds of the opera we can quite easily trace Braxton’s “sectional logic.” First we hear solo English horn, who initiates the “\textit{Trillium J} melody,” processing into the performance space as the Centurion. This instrumentation is not specified in the score, but this was the performance decision made for the Roulette premiere. That individualized sonority confidently shifts to a collective one—a full orchestral unison—as the rest of the ensemble joins in the undulating melody, repeating it several times [Fig. 7].

\textsuperscript{46} For an introduction to Braxton’s Language Music System see Wooley “Language Music.” Figure 3 is the Language Music chart with the fundamental sound types.

\textsuperscript{47} Braxton, “Anthony Braxton – Trillium E workshop.”
“A transharmonic continuum”

Such instrumental areas of emphasis emerge and recede as the music’s harmony evolves in “the dream space of Trillium…[which] is a layered continuum of evolving pitch sets…”\textsuperscript{48} Braxton has described his harmonic conception for \textit{Trillium} as transharmonic: “I’m trying to build a harmonic palette that’s—strangely enough—transharmonic. What am I saying? I’m saying \textit{Trillium E} and the works from the \textit{Trillium} system are tonal-ish but not tonal.”\textsuperscript{49} The operas include explicitly idiomatic moments that take on a tonal profile, such as “the college song for Dr. Wallingford” in the fourth act of \textit{Trillium E} or the square dance that interjects in the middle of Act One of \textit{Trillium J}.

I hear such “transharmonic” implications working on a smaller scale, as well. For example, the \textit{Trillium J} melody begins on D and ends a perfect fifth higher on A. As it gets repeated, the leap from A down to D asserts prominence, but the line’s jagged contour highlights other pitches as well. Braxton utilizes all twelve chromatic pitches, repeating only D, E-flat, and G-flat. These emphasized pitches outline a stepwise ascent that spans a major third, which, in conjunction with the framing perfect fifth, subtly contour the melody’s chromaticism around a triadic sonority. Yet, after several repetitions, the line’s teleology breaks down as the ear loses track of the “beginning” and the “end,” and the melody’s chromatic peaks and valleys seem to trump any tonal implications of this framing fifth [Fig. 7].

The score does not dictate the number of repetitions for the melody, but after the final repeat the first violins hold over their A as the other strings step, skip, or leap into a dense

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Ibid.}
pentachord, the opera’s first vertical sonority. The basses land on B-flat, the cellos slip to G-flat, the violas nudge themselves up to B-natural, and second violins shift to a G-natural. Like in the Trillium J melody, seconds and thirds collide to create a sonority both triadically and chromatically suggestive. Given the orchestration and registration, the first violins’ A can be heard as the (major or minor) ninth of superimposed first-inversion G-flat and G major sonorities. Indeed, a few measures later with the first vocal entrance, the cellos and violas shift down to Db and D-natural respectively to instantiate the implied triads. The harp further underscores this entrance and this harmony by striking the G, B, A trichord to prepare the singer’s entrance on a G-natural. The strings sustain throughout the first two vocal phrases, before a playfully contrasting staccato line from the winds and xylophone interrupts and spins the music into a different area of the dream space.

“Nothing is as it appears”

In an effort to convey the “origin psychology as it related to composing Trillium,” Braxton does not mince words, reminding the singers and production staff of Trillium J that “Nothing is as it appears.”\(^\text{50}\) Trillium exists in an “‘in-between’ fantasy poetic space….”\(^\text{51}\) These descriptions recall Braxton’s invocation of the Dream Space, in Trillium—with its many layers, its modular potential, its scalability. It cannot be pinned down and resists a definitive performance. As Fred Moten succinctly puts it, “Braxton imagines, composes, improvises

\(^{50}\) Braxton, Trillium J, “Anthony Braxton on Trillium J” (Bonus Feature).

\(^{51}\) Braxton, Liner notes, Trillium E.
multiplicity…” Radically disinterested in circumscribing his music’s potential use or meaning, Braxton will state with certainty only that “Nothing is as it appears.”

In *Trillium*, nothing is as it appears in terms of orchestration and structure, since synchronous decisions that compositionally connect the orchestra to the singers—and thus might seem essential to the music’s structure—can be stripped apart, with each layer asserting its independence.

Nothing is as it appears in terms of Braxton’s pitch organization, as triadic and chromatic, tonal and atonal sonorities get layered and embedded within one another to de-hierarchize any single harmonic conception.

Nothing is as it appears in terms of characterization, because every character contains many. There are overarching characters that persist across all of the operas, as well as distinct characters germane to a particular scene.

Nothing is as it appears in *Trillium*, because the opera’s “apparent universe,” the narrative of a given scene, is only the first layer. Below this lie multidimensional philosophical and metaphysical layers awaiting exploration by the performers and the friendly experiencers in the “secondary invisible universe; and…the esoteric universe.”

And nothing is as it appears because *Trillium* is simultaneously operatic entertainment and a ritualistic fantasy realm designed for self-realization that prioritizes the affirmation of collectivity.

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52 Moten, “Jurisgenerative Grammar (For Alto),” 9.
Trillium contains many shifting layers. Amidst these, Braxton consistently asserts that fundamentally there are “three primary levels of Trillium,” relating to the construction of the libretto: first, the “apparent story” manifested in the narrative scenario of each act; second, “the philosophical associations,” lines of inquiry drawn from Braxton’s Tri-Axium Writings that guide each act; third, “the mystical or spiritual fundamental” that underpins each scenario and the entire 36-act project.54 The subsequent chapters will examine each of these layers in greater depth.

Chapter Two outlines the basic scenarios of each of Trillium J’s four acts, offering readings of Braxton’s approach to narrative time and place and to characterization. Providing an introduction to the Tri-Axium Writings as they relate to the Trillium operas, Chapter Three investigates the relationship between the operas’ libretti and the philosophical tenets of the treatise. Finally, Chapter Four contextualizes Trillium through a discussion of relevant theories of ritualization and ritual practices in theater. Evaluating the strategies that Trillium deploys to demarcate its status as ritual music, the document considers the significance of self-realization as a spiritual practice and collective decision-making as a ritual practice.

Throughout I assert that Braxton’s operatic works must be seriously evaluated in relationship to other works in Braxton’s expansive oeuvre, as well as to music from the Western operatic tradition, the American experimental tradition, and improvised musical traditions such as jazz. Thinkers from the European-American philosophical and the Black radical tradition provide complexifying perspectives on Braxton’s music, writing, mentorship, and performance.

54 Braxton, Liner notes, Trillium E.
This research contributes and provides broader access to the body of scholarship around Braxton’s *Tri-Axium Writings*, one of the most significant major pieces of writing from a 20th/21st-century artist. Furthermore, although he has already completed at least eighteen hours of opera music, Braxton’s music-theater works are often excluded from the conversation about contemporary opera. As will be shown, this is a profound oversight. At this moment, experimental operas proliferate. The three 2017 Pulitzer Prize nominees, Du Yun, Kate Soper, and Ashley Fure, were nominated for an operatic project or have recently completed a high-profile one. Three of Braxton’s former students run Experiments in Opera, a dynamic New York-based organization dedicated to commissioning and producing new operas. These are just two examples of a broader trend that brings new energy to operatic forms. I believe Braxton’s contributions must be considered as significant precedents to and participants in this zeitgeist.

I am fortunate enough to have performed in both of the most recent *Trillium* productions. I played the orchestral second bassoon part for the premiere and recording of *Trillium J* [Fig. 8] and the contrabassoon part for the recording of *Trillium E*. My relationship with Braxton, who was my mentor during my Master’s studies at Wesleyan University and with whom I have toured professionally, as well as my professional relationships with members of the *Trillium* creative team, infuse this research with personal details. Since, as I will assert, one of the primary goals of *Trillium* is to provide a space for individual self-realization, I see these first-hand accounts to be valuable sources. Furthermore, because specifics about the collaborative and inter-media aspects of *Trillium J*’s development and production are not documented in the score, libretto, or Braxton’s writings, I believe this research will prove useful for those interested in producing a *Trillium* opera—or all 36 *Trillium* operas—in the future.
CHAPTER TWO

THE APPARENT STORY

For those interested in learning about *Trillium J*, a first question might be: “What is the opera about?” This is a reasonable thing to wonder, given that traditionally operas engage with dramatic storytelling: “Opera is a drama set to music to be sung with instrumental accompaniment by singers usually in costume.”

Because conveying the narrative or content of the sung text has been of central concern, many of the earliest innovations in the genre involved new styles of singing, such as *stile rappresentativo* or *stile recitativo*, that intended to more closely follow the contours and inflections of speech.

In reaction or at least in contrast to this tradition of text-driven teleological storytelling, numerous operas from the second half of the 20th and first part of the 21st century eschew such narrative. Operas such as Phillip Glass’s *Einstein on the Beach* (1975), Morton Feldman’s *Neither* (1977), Luigi Nono’s *Prometeo* (1985), or Chaya Czernowin’s *Pnima…ins Innere* (2000) utilize minimal text and multiple sources in place of a more traditional libretto or that incorporate phonemes, solfege syllables, and silence rather than words.

In *Trillium*, on the other hand, Braxton embraces opera’s dramatic, narrative tradition when writing his own libretti, stating, “The singers…are given a general story-line that is to be realized in the traditional sense of opera or music theater…Each scene attempts to tell a given story about a particular event and the course of a given drama seeks to provide particulars to

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56 Brown, “A Narratological Analysis of *Pnima*….”
fulfill what the event could mean…”

In Braxton’s conception, the story is _Trillium’s_ upper stratum, lying atop layers of philosophical and spiritual potential. Nevertheless, “the apparent story” is important on its own. “Trillium should satisfy the general requirements of music drama presentations (from the point of view of the audience),” Braxton writes. This “surface setting,” however, is not singular or linear, rather it leaps and spirals, doubling back and bounding ahead, asserting a playful and flexible conception of narrative. These “dramas set to music,” after all, are intended to be _used_ by the performers and “friendly experiencers.”

Braxton’s imaginative approach to narrative time can be read as an example of how he would like performers and experiencers to approach the operas more generally, recalling his declaration, “Have some fun with the material.” Lively, good-natured, and creative engagement is the first step, opening the door for rigorous intellectual consideration, personal reflection and self-discovery, and collective transformation. Before discussing these levels of consideration, this chapter provides an interpretation of Braxton’s approach to narrative time and place in his operas, outlines the scenarios of _Trillium J_, and begins to analyze Braxton’s particular approach to characterization.

_“Trillium is not set in any one time…”: Time & Place_

Each of _Trillium J’s_ four one-act operas exists as an independent unit, with its own setting, characters, and story. This is true throughout the _Trillium_ opera complex; each opera takes place in a unique time and location. “Trillium is actually not set in any one time era but

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57 Braxton, Liner notes, _Trillium E_.
58 _Ibid_.
59 This is Braxton’s term for audience that reflects a more engaged and reciprocal relationship.
rather a given story is a starting point for human poetics and vibrational adventure.” Indeed, the fantasy worlds of *Trillium J* jump wildly between times and locations, across acts and within a single act.

Much of Act One takes place in a slippery post-bellum era with several scenes set in a town somewhere in the American West [Fig. 9]. The opening “scene is celebratory” as townspeople, members of the town council, and railroad barons gather to inaugurate the completion of the intercontinental railroad. The tone of the dialog is optimistic: “This completion will help redefine our national cultural agenda. We’re at a new point in time for our nation.” The scene ends, however, on a more sinister note: “Don’t look to me people when the going gets rough…In other words, ‘increase coffin production by four hundred percent.’” This oscillation between optimistic and pessimistic projections for the collective benefits of the railroad persists throughout the act, while the action shifts away from the townspeople and the railroad and back to them.

Scene Five actualizes in music the pendulum-like swings of collective opinion introduced in Scene One. The secondary conductor, positioned at the back of the auditorium conducts a group of singers in response to the movement of a railroad car (either projected or a piece of set construction) [Fig. 10]. As the car moves back and forth, the performers in each group sing a neutral “ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo” and increase their volume as the train swings closer to them. In the Roulette performance Braxton simultaneously conducted the instrumentalists in a Language Music improvisation using correlating ebs and flows. This “YO-

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60 Braxton, Liner notes, *Trillium J.*
YO like structural logic’’ continues for about a minute and a half before the attention returns to the principal singers.

The action of Scenes Three, Six, and Seven also occurs in this time and place, but Scene Two shifts to a futuristic location. Electronic static and conducted orchestral improvisation facilitates the scene change. An anxious string tremolo creates a bed for the initial sung dialog between three scientists, who nervously examine their test subjects. The scientists express hope that their experiments on the three “ring people” trapped within a circle of light will be successful: “It’ll be ok…All systems are go and smoothly operating. Let’s be patient and let the process work.” The libretto also describes the test subjects as “so-called freed slaves,” who answer the questions of the scientists in flat monotone: “I’m just fine sir….Yessir! Today is a great day, that’s for sure.”

Scene Four returns to the post-American Civil War feel of the first scene, although the location seems to be more to the east, in the deep South, as former plantation owners make plans for “the next time cycle.” Scarlet, the daughter of a plantation owner who now manages the estate, entertains Colonel Boregard Stafford III, who has come “to ask for your hand in sacred matrimony so that we can respond to the rebuilding effort of our troubled region.”62 As in the other scenes, their negotiations take on an optimistic and lighthearted tint at times:

- Sundance / Scarlet: What about the horses?
- Ashmenton / Colonel: No problem.
- Sundance / Scarlet: What about the harvest?
- Ashmenton / Colonel: No problem.
- Sundance / Scarlet: What about the fence mending?
- Ashmenton / Colonel: No problem.
- Sundance / Scarlet: Why Colonel, you are a gentleman and a scholar.

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62 Braxton, Liner notes, *Trillium J.*
At other instances their plans seem more threatening: “Already I can smell the magnolias in bloom on a summer’s day. Not to mention the slaughter I will personally initiate…” he says. “Happy days will be here again but happy nights will not be here again.”

Act Two moves to a completely different, more contemporary moment. The libretto describes the scene: “In a depressed Midwestern town, the residents mount a pageant in an effort to build community.”\(^{63}\) Most of the drama in the act, however, takes place within the fictional world of the pageant, the play-within-the-opera. Time within this embedded story also skips around, as a community of animals (a panda, beaver, wolf, rabbit, butterfly, and turtle) and “Mr. Steve Elmore (a man in a tuxedo)” attempts to form and reform amidst growing McCarthyist accusations of corruption that threaten its coherence. Time seems to slow down dramatically during three Princess of Curiosity interludes interjected between the four scenes of this act. With no text or notated music, a trio—dancers Melanie Maar and Rachel Bernsen, who was also the choreographer, and soprano Jen Shyu—performed these abstract pieces in the premiere.

*Trillium*’s video designer, Chris Jonas, created large, beautiful video projections of blooming flowers using color, public domain footage from horticulture films. Extensive filtering and layering dramatically slow down the blossoming process. The lush, immersive video creates the “sparkling, strange, imaginative place” for the Princess of Curiosity contrasts dramatically with the still projections used in the rest of the act to convey the community theater setting [Figs. 11 and 12].

In *Trillium*’s third act, friends, colleagues, and relatives of the recently deceased and very wealthy Dr. Zornheim gather at his spooky Huntingford Manor on a rainy night for the

\(^{63}\) *Ibid.*
reading of his will “to see who gets the coins.” In the Roulette staging, this act—which includes vampires and murders by gunshot—reminded me of a cross between Dracula (Braxton thanks Vincent Price in the Trillium J liner notes\(^\text{64}\)) and the 1985 movie Clue starring Tim Curry. The scenes in this act all take place within a consistent time and place. Two moments break the forward flow of the dialog, exploring the psychological states of the characters. In the first, multiple projections of symbols from Braxton’s notational iconography drift over the singers, each of whom is singing their own text simultaneously [Fig. 13]. The orchestra’s music is fully notated and metered,\(^\text{65}\) but the singers seem to have been given some improvisational license to explore heterophonal foreground and background as certain text floats to the top of the texture: “Let the dead be the dead…Don’t blame the victims…I hated you when you were alive….I hate you now and I will hate you later…Just because you’re dead doesn’t make you any better than we are…”\(^\text{66}\)

The second moment, a more extended interlude entitled “A Chamber Piece” in the libretto, emerges from darkness as the guests retire to their quarters after dinner. A conducted Language Music improvisation from the orchestra creates the transition before the notated music returns—in this instance, rapid pizzicato string writing featuring lots of chromatically related and rhythmically overlapping major, minor, and diminished triads and seventh chords. Behind this, projections of a hand holding a candle that illuminates a cobweb-filled corridor propels the story

\(^{64}\) Ibid.
\(^{65}\) Meters are specified but “[a]ll tempos in my music system are relative. That is—the initial ‘indicated tempo’ of a given composition is only a point of definition for the unified imprint state of that work and is not intended as the only option. What this means is that the ‘life’ of a given structure in the system has limitless possibilities—‘settings’ or ‘colors.’” (Braxton, “Introduction to Catalog of Works,” 203)

\(^{66}\) Braxton, Trillium J.
forward. [Fig. 14] A sampled gunshot “BOOM!” suddenly cuts off the strings. The first victim of the act has been shot. The (supposedly) shocked guests discuss the murder before returning to their rooms, and the hallway scene resumes. Again darkness blankets an orchestral Language Music improvisation that leads into pizzicato string music. This time the projections are of isolated eyes glancing nervously left and right, left and right, and like before, a gunshot punctuates the plucked phrases. Another guest has been shot.

Act Four has two lengthy scenes. In the first, two gangsters and two “Firm” representatives interrogate a suspect. Set in an alley, the underworld operatives aggressively question “the guy in the ‘hot’ spot,” another “one of their own who has crossed the line.” They enumerate his alleged underhanded operations, which include a mine explosion, a “campaign of slime,” “the forty-six point eight unfortunate crater explosions that wrecked the coast region territories in the northeast quadrants,” and “the time [he] pushed eighty-four ladders (on four separate occasions) over on twenty-seven different skyscraper crews in that crazy winter.” Absurdity mixes with horror in these acts of violence, as the suspect proclaims his innocence: “How could I have possibly known that bringing in six thousand leprosy infected ski caps to two hundred forty-eight different National Township and playground areas—would create a problem?” In the Roulette staging, this scene was stark and minimal in comparison to the theatrics of Act Three. There is no development in the plot in Act Four, and the staging reflected this by limiting the amount of movement. Tethered to stage right and illuminated by a circle of light, the interrogators, dressed in black suits and fedoras, circled around the white-

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67 Since each act is roughly one hour long, the premiere performances paired two acts each evening. Acts One and Two were performed on the first and third nights of the run; Acts Three and Four on the second and fourth.
shirted, seated suspect. Meanwhile a solo dancer came on and off stage left, moving in her own stark circle of light [Fig. 15]. Projections of brick walls, shadows and close-ups of hands on the walls [Fig. 16] do the work of creating the set. Tenor Vince Vincent delivered the extended monologues with subtle virtuosity. The quantity of text in this scene creates a weightiness that distinguishes Act Four from the others.

Similarly, the music feels less buoyant than in earlier acts. Comparing the pitch collections of the opening chords for each act, Act Four’s is by far the thickest and most dissonant. Act Two begins with unison and octave E’s throughout the full ensemble, a rare moment of harmonic consistency. Acts One and Three each begin with a pentachord from the strings. Act One’s collection includes pitches A, G, B, Gb and Bb in descending score order, or a (01245) collection. Act Three’s chord is a built entirely of half steps: B, A, Db, C, Bb, or (01234). Act Four, in contrast, begins with the full orchestra performing a crunchy chromatic cluster (all twelve chromatic pitches are present except for G-natural). Furthermore, the orchestration is dense, with all sustaining instruments concentrated within less than a two octave span [Fig. 17].

Braxton breaks up the two heavy Act Four scenes with one of the most joyful and unexpected moments of *Trillium J*, an interlude for “Double Dutch Jumpers & Syntactical Ghost Trance Music Choir.” For the premiere, members of the Brooklyn Double Dutch team the Jazzy Jumpers performed on either side of the stage as the singers hovered above in the rafters [Fig. 18]. The singers to stage left were paired with the jumpers on stage right and vice versa. The percussive smacks of the ropes hitting the floor created a composite rhythmic texture in combination with the double choir of voices.
During this interlude, the singers performed Syntactical Ghost Trance music, a vocal variation of the traditionally instrumental Ghost Trance music in which the voice works with “syllables that only a voice can make…”\textsuperscript{68} In Syntactical Ghost Trance scores, Braxton provides consonant and vowel combinations for singers above the notated pitches and rhythms.\textsuperscript{69} In the \textit{Trillium J} performance, the singers began with an “ooh” vowel sound but switched to a bouncier “beep beep beep” when the jump ropers came on stage. One of Ghost Trance Music’s most distinguishing features is its use of a constant pulse. Here, in Act Four, the tempo of the pulse sped up and slowed down with the speed of the jump ropes. The vocalists followed the Double Dutch phrase structure: when a new jumper entered the ropes the players turning the ropes set a slow pace while the jumper warmed up. The longer the jumper was in the ropes, the faster the ropes turned until the jumper, who incorporated acrobatics and increasingly impressive footwork, missed a beat and caught a rope. The vocalists, who built in intensity with this arc and attempted to stay unified with the jumpers, disintegrated when the ropes stopped swinging. As the ropes regained a pulse, one by one the singers rejoined the music-dance ensemble, and the process began again.

Scene Two of Act Four shifts to a completely different storyline, a courtroom drama in which a widow gets “grilled” by the prosecutor on her husband’s suspicious death.\textsuperscript{70} Now Mrs. Sally Walton is in the hot seat, defending her alibi in cross-examination by the prosecutor.

\textsuperscript{68} Kitamura and Rhodes, “Syntactical Ghost Trance Music: A Conversation.” \textit{Sound American}. \textsuperscript{69} Ibid. When working with other Ghost Trance Music, singers choose their own syllables. The vocal syllables in the Syntactical Ghost Trance Music have this extra layer of information. These pieces may be performed by instrumentalists, as well, who would Instrumentalists disregard the syllables. \textsuperscript{70} Braxton, Liner notes, \textit{Trillium J}. 
Inconsistencies in her testimony and allegations of suspicious activities mount, while her lawyer rigorously objects. The video projections in this act shift between thin bands or full-screen images that resemble TV static and fragments pulled from 1960s television courtroom dramas. Jonas explained that he intended the projections to manifest the “underlying metaphysical energy” of the scene, while also conveying the points of reference for the story. At different moments, a solo dancer moves on a horizontal plane across the stage [Fig. 19]. The act comes to completion when the prosecution rests its case, although the listener is not left with a clear sense of Mrs. Walton’s guilt or innocence.

Anachronistic, or otherwise seemingly inconsistent, details embellish the temporal disjunctions of the settings across and within the Trillium acts in order to further push the story beyond a single time and place:

In the Trillium fantasy system every act is written inside of a given iconic time frame that provides the backdrop for a given fantasy experience, but is not limited to that time frame. For instance, in Act I [of Trillium J], whose principle fantasy landscape takes place right after the Civil War, one of the singers…refers to President Eisenhower—who is really from a different time period—but that’s OK….

Act Two’s mise-en-abîme implants a timeless fairy tale temporality into a non-specific 20th- or 21st-century American location. The small-town pageant frame is created entirely by the projections and the costumes. Still projections of an American flag, a fire extinguisher, hand-painted banners, and a ladder suggest the community theater atmosphere, and the animal costumes intentionally look hand-made [Fig. 20]. Nothing about this setting grounds it in one

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71 Jonas, Conversation with author.
72 Braxton, Liner notes, Trillium J.
specific location; this is Anywhere, U.S.A. The fairy tale world is also unmoored. Each of the first two scenes open with a slightly different explanation of the setting by the narrator. In scene One he says: “Once upon a time in the royal garden of Queen Meda there lived six well-bred animals who were the best workers in all the queen’s kingdom.” In Scene Two: “Once upon a time there was a sleepy little village at the foot of [a] magic mountain. This is the cheery town of Meda land—home of the old royal dynasty.”

Act Three’s collage of vampire and whodunit genres offers another example. Telling the story using the conventions from both genres, Braxton amplifies the tropes of secrecy, falsehood, and deception endemic to each. Act Four’s friction of inconsistency is created between the realism of the setting and characters—at least in comparison to Acts Two and Three—in contrast with the outsized acts of violence and terrorism of which the central figures are accused. No normal human gangster could carry “eight bags of molten lava” or carry out “ninety-seven point six bank robberies that netted something like eight million, four hundred, twenty-two thousand, nine hundred and thirty-three dollars” on his own! Similarly, what kind of suburban housewife, as Mrs. Walton appears to be, would dump an “eight hundred ton concrete slab…over the bed of [her husband]” or purchase “two hundred sticks of dynamite” and hire “special installers on the night of the explosion.” She went to great lengths if all she wanted to do was kill her husband:

David [prosecutor]: What about the four thousand hand grenades?
Zakko [defense attorney]: Objection—that is a separate issue.
David: What about the oven incident?
Zakko: Objection.
Ashmenton [judge]: Objection overruled.
David: What about the stash of Bazookas?
Zakko: Objection.

73 Ibid.
David: What about the thirty-eight positioned land mine installations with fifty of your finger prints on each mine?
Zakko: Objection.
Ashmenton: Objection sustained.
David: Mrs. Walton. What about the five hundred pit bulls found in your garage whose [bite] marks correspond to the marks on your husband’s body.  

Braxton’s suggestive yet intentionally unstable temporalities create a sense of place and time that could be understood as transtemporal, translocational, or transhistorical—following his description of his approach to pitch as transharmonic and his interests as transidiomatic. The locational flexibility of Trillium J’s apparent story builds connections across historical, fictional, and historical-fictional timeframes. A translocational approach does not collapse difference into a bland—and dangerously inaccurate—singularity or even to a facile binary. Rather, it encourages awareness of disjunctions, while the stories’ ambiguities of time and place call into question teleological notions of progress. In a recent lecture, Braxton spoke about history as a spiral: humanity moves through the spiral of time, returning to scenarios that, although the details change, seem beautifully and frighteningly familiar. Braxton’s transhistorical sense of narrative time suggests that the same problems occur and reoccur in nearly every imaginable location, in the real and imagined past, present, and future. Again and again, humanity faces similar challenges.

Jean-Luc Nancy identifies the desire for community itself as one such recurring human theme: “Until this day history has been thought on the basis of a lost community—one to be regained or reconstituted.” On the one hand, “[i]n the motto of the Republic, fraterni

74 Ibid.
75 Braxton, Lecture, July 17, 2016.
designates community: the model of the family and of love.” At the same time, however,

we should become suspicious of the retrospective consciousness of the lost community
and its identity (whether this consciousness conceives of itself as effectively retrospective
or whether, disregarding the realities of the past, it constructs images of this past for the
sake of an ideal or a prospective vision). We should be suspicious of this consciousness
first of all because it seems to have accompanied the Western world from its very
beginnings: at every moment in its history, the Occident has given itself over to the
nostalgia for a more archaic community that has disappeared, and to deploring a loss of
familiarity, fraternity and conviviality.  

As the scenarios of Trillium J make clear, neither Braxton’s understanding of community nor his
spiraling sense of history are nostalgic. Again and again in Trillium J community emerges, its
potential is felt, but this emergence proves fleeting. Whether we are talking about the community
of a frontier town, the members of the Kingdom of Meda, the network of mutual friendship that
connect those gathered at Dr. Zornheim’s mansion, the bonds of trust within the mafia, or the
society implied by a supposed shared set of laws—community asserts itself only to be
undermined by greed, corruption, and distrust. Yet, this struggle and almost guaranteed failure
does not prevent another attempt at community building.

This elusive, perhaps inoperative, yet persistent striving for community provides one
example of Trillium’s particularly poignant blend of optimism and pessimism, or as Chris Jonas
calls it, Braxton’s “warm irony.” Braxton perceives political and systemic, as well as spiritual
and personal, problems in contemporary society. Yet, based on his own statements, because
music has had such a powerfully positive impact on his life, he believes in its transformative
potential.  

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76 Nancy, Inoperative Community, 9.
77 Jonas, Conversation with author.
78 This is my interpretation based on many statements Braxton has made, including in “2014
[National Endowment for the Arts] Jazz Masters Award Ceremony & Concert, Part 2.”
thinkers and practitioners from the Black Radical tradition, an intellectual, creative, and political tradition intrinsically bound to very real, often life-and-death struggles for freedom, recognition, human rights, and political and existential self-determination. Citing the first organized revolts of African slaves in slave castles in Africa and on ships crossing the Atlantic, Cedric Robinson, in the introduction to his expansive exegesis *Black Marxism*, states, “The Black Radical Tradition was an accretion, over generations, of collective intelligence gathered from struggle.”

The depth of this tradition is profound, and music—often exalted as the most abstract of art forms in European-American philosophical and aesthetic discourses—has figured prominently in the 19th-, 20th-, and 21st-century writings of Black Radical thinkers. In fact, music’s abstraction—as well as its material, embodied production and its engagement with technologies—becomes part of a complex matrix that understands music, specifically music produced by Black bodies in a historically and structurally persistent anti-Black racist society, as a metaphor and physical site for political theorization and subversive tactics.

One potent strand of thinking within this tradition is a refusal to ignore history. George Lewis asserts that this insistence on retaining memory and history distinguishes an Afrological approach to improvising from a Eurological one:

> The elimination of memory and history from music, emblematic of the Cageian project, may be seen as a response to postwar conditions…[as well as] with respect to the quintessentially American myth of the frontier, where that which lies before us must take precedence over ‘the past.’ On the other hand, the African-American improviser, coming from a legacy of slavery and oppression, cannot countenance the erasure of history. The destruction of family and lineage, the rewriting of history and memory in the image of whiteness, is one of the facts with which all people of color must live. It is unsurprising,

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80 I invoke this idea, which goes back at least to Plato, as a popular truism. Many, many musicians, thinkers, and writers have contested this on various grounds.
therefore, that from an ex-slave’s point of view an insistence on being free from memory might be regarded with some suspicion—as either a form of denial or of disinformation.81

Through his spiraling, transhistorical approach to setting in *Trillium*, Braxton manages to not only retain history but also complexify our present’s relationship to the past.

*Trillium*’s layered, translocational approach to narrative time and place shares “principles of citation, displacement, and reinvention” with Black Modernist works within the Black Radical tradition. In *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism*, Kimberly Bentson discusses John Coltrane’s recordings and performances of “My Favorite Things,” as an example of this “mode of modernist intervention.” In these iconic interpretations, Coltrane takes a modal approach to Richard Rodger’s show tune, alternating between E-minor and E-major instantiations of the melody, playing “off the tones at will by shifting pitch at the scale’s end, in effect denying the mode’s ‘natural’ closures, freeing the soloist to pursue phrasing in a variety of patterns.” In addition, rather than building his solo around a traditional development of increasing complexity and energy, Coltrane would “assert, withdraw, or modify intensity at the drop of a chord.” Ultimately,

[b]y subtly unfolding its motifs as a series of nonlinear and multidirectional self-translations, thus suggesting a temporality no longer governed by causal and hierarchical imperatives, Coltrane’s version of the tune explicitly compels us to ask how we should measure the authority of ‘rendition’ as against ‘original,’ and by that questions, how to construe the relation of interpretation to invention.

Furthermore, through such highly inventive interpretations, Coltrane reassembled “original” material, often, or at least most recognizably to many listeners, melodic material. In such redeployments melodic material “is not destroyed or abandoned but disseminated into open,

echoic networks of ref胃肠炎.” 惊险，“ mainstream material” 会, thus, be “remotivated’ within a Coltrane composition such as ‘My Favorite Things.”

Braxton, too, redeployed “mainstream material” in his Trillium scenarios. Not only do the opera settings strike historical chords of familiarity, Braxton also riffs on well-known TV shows and movies. Scenes in Trillium E and Trillium J alone recall Dracula, Star Trek, Gone With the Wind, Waiting for Guffman, and Indiana Jones; other scenarios reflect the genre conventions of courtroom dramas, gangster films, genie stories, and Westerns. In creating the video projections for Trillium J, Jonas used actual footage from films Braxton cited as exemplary influences. Act Three incorporated image snippets from The House of Usher (1960), Murder by Death (1976) and other vintage horror and mystery classics.

Braxton’s use of fictional scenarios drawn from film and television is as analogous to how many, perhaps even most, opera composers from the preceding centuries have drawn on ancient mythological stories for their libretti. Wagner turned to Norse mythology for The Ring Cycle; Peri, Strauss, and others referenced Ovid’s Metaphorphosis; Monteverdi, Haydn, Gluck, and Birtwistle, among many others, have reworked the myth of Orpheus. Carolyn Abbate reads deep significance in “Orpheus’s life in opera” and with composers’ long fixation with this story. “Orpheus’s head serves as a master symbol” for her research on opera and for “thinking about music in general.” The imprinting of this myth by Virgil and Ovid, after its already long history of oral dispersion, and its subsequent repurposing by scores of composers, librettists,

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82 Bentson, Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism, 133.
83 Wikipedia offers an initial list: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Orphean_operas
84 Abbate, In Search of Opera, 2.
85 Ibid., 5.
playwrights, choreographers, and scholars over centuries is due not only to the specific content of Orpheus and Eurydice’s story, but also recursively to its widespread influence and circulation. The fact that so many have worked with this narrative gives it alluring layers of richness and significance. Similarly, the tropes of whodunits, horror films, Westerns, courtroom dramas, and gangster movies have allowed innumerable writers and filmmakers to explore themes of trust, deception, greed, technological expansion, collective formation, progress, and truth. A voracious consumer of movies, Braxton uses such genre conventions like mythological frameworks to explore similar themes.

As an African-American musician born in 1945 whose work has often been labeled and circumscribed as jazz (or as not-jazz-enough), Braxton has long insisted on the significance and influence of both the European and African musical traditions to his work: “If you look at Bach, Mozart, Harry Partch, Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington—all of those people, though on the surface they seem very different, there’s an awful lot in common there. I see similarities on every level.”86 This ability to digest a vast array of music and find shared processes and approaches deeper than style evidences itself in the *Trillium* libretti and is one of Braxton’s most fundamental attributes as a musician and teacher. It also can be understood as a skill and strategy of the Black Radical tradition. As Fred Moten expresses it,

Part of what I’d like to get to is whatever generative forces there are in the asymptotic, syncopated nonconvergence of event, text, and tradition. That convergence emerges in and as a certain glancing confrontation—of Africa, Europe, and America, of outness, labor, and sentiment—that is both before and a part of the material preface to the theoretical and practical formulation of a black public sphere.87

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86 Lock, *Forces in Motion*, 233.
87 Moten, *In the Break*, 87-88.
Furthermore, Braxton has fought to have his notated music taken as seriously as his work as a virtuosic multi-instrumentalist and improviser. Describing his experience in Paris in the 1960s he explains, “One of the reasons I got disillusioned in Paris, it became clear to me that I could maybe become a successful saxophonist there, but I could not have my notated works respected…My work would only be considered with respect to the value systems and terminologies developed for what they called ‘jazz’, that is ‘black exotica’. This wasn’t acceptable to me.”

His relationship to cultural traditions—whether musical or filmic—is a decidedly American one. Braxton is aware of his position as an American and African-American, and he writes, composes, teaches, and thinks with self-awareness from this position. So, it makes sense that for his operas he would draw on American mythology—20th-century American popular cultural stories common to his time and place.

Like ancient myths—which prove to be persistent yet flexible narrative vehicles for conveying recurring human desires, passions, and conflicts—Braxton’s *Trillium* stories utilize an expanding narrative voice that projects outward to as many listeners and experiences as possible. He writes that his goal is “to establish the broadest set of circumstances and focuses in *Trillium*—from ordinary to transcendent experiences.” Another American creator of ritualistic musical-theater works, Harry Partch, expressed something similar: “‘There is at least one factor which my various theater concepts have in common; they tend to *include* not exclude, and therefore to encompass a fairly wide latitude of human experience.’” For Partch this meant

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88 Lock, *Forces in Motion*, 85.
89 Braxton, Liner notes, *Trillium E.*
including “juggling, hobo characters, commonplace tunes, tonal harmonies, and slang text,” as well as to “exotic traditions of music theater for models…”\textsuperscript{90}

While Braxton asserts influences from musical traditions across the globe, the influences do not emerge in superficial ways. Discussing his 1970s recordings for Arista, he puts it this way, “I was able to do projects that were not considered quote-unquote jazz. This was very important for me because by 1974 I had a real understanding of what my interests were. And my interests were never idiomatic. My interests were transidiomatic.”\textsuperscript{91} The surface of \textit{Trillium}’s action points to American culture, although the issues at stake in the scenes speak even more broadly: survival in the face of economic and technological developments, individualism vs. community growth, social inclusion and exclusion,\textsuperscript{92} greed, trust, and encounters with the unknown.

\textit{“Be who you are”: Characterization}

Braxton relates the theatrical narrative of \textit{Trillium}—with its expansive, translocational attributes—to the project of grappling with our “composite reality” and our spiraling human condition saying, “the discipline of theater can clarify the living experience so that we can better understand ourselves and our potential.”\textsuperscript{93} In fact, the goal of creating the opportunity for individual self-discovery undergirds the entire \textit{Trillium} undertaking, and Braxton intends this opportunity to be available to everyone involved. This self-determination is key for

\textsuperscript{90} Sheppard, \textit{Revealing Masks: Exotic Influences and Ritualized Performance in Modernist Music Theater}, 183.
\textsuperscript{91} Braxton, “2014 NEA Jazz Masters Award Ceremony & Concert, Part 2.”
\textsuperscript{92} Lock, \textit{Blutopia}, 198. Lock identifies the theme of exclusion in \textit{Trillium M}.
\textsuperscript{93} Braxton, Liner notes, \textit{Trillium E}. 
understanding Braxton’s conception of *Trillium* as ritual and ceremonial music within his system, as Chapter Three elaborates. With self-determination as a primary concern, certainly performers enjoy incredible agency within the works.

Braxton’s understanding of the performer’s role departs dramatically from the Western classical tradition. As Carolyn Abbate powerfully summarizes, 19th- and 20th-century composers “dream[t] of erasing performers entirely.”94 The larger and more complex the music, the more narrowly circumscribed the role of the performer tends to become. Thus, in opera, a multimedia art form usually involving a full orchestra, many singers, possibly a choir, and elaborate sets, the role of the performer might be the most narrowly defined. Although some scholars95 interpret *opera seria* “as a spectacle whose ritual aspects include interplay between the audience and stage and the genre’s allegorical relation to broader forms of social ritual,” for composers such as Britten and Partch, these performance aesthetics “were altogether too arbitrary, too diva-determined, to function as ritual performance.”96

Wagner, too, was bothered by the problematic diva. He believed the performer had gained too much centrality, supplanting others involved in the creation of opera such as the poet (librettist). In Wagner’s analysis of the history of opera, the poet had become subordinated to the needs of the musicians: The poet was “the preparer of text-support for the composer’s absolutely independent experiments…the poet was simply borne along by the musicians…”97 Wagner

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94 Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, 42.
95 See Feldman, “Magic Mirrors and the Seria Satge.”
97 Wagner and Evans, *Opera and Drama*, 46-47.
identifies aria as the culprit for this imbalance, reacting to what he saw as the outsized role of the vocal performer in earlier operatic music:

The musical foundation of the opera was, as we know, nothing but the aria....The evolution of the aria from the old melody was due to the singer in the first place; who, ceasing to care about its correct rendering, regarded it only as the medium for displaying his vocal attainments. Upon his decision depended where pauses were to be made; where changes from lively to restful expression were to take place; and where, free from all rhythmic and melodic restraint, he might bring to the hearer’s notice, and to any extent he chose, his feats of vocal skill.\textsuperscript{98}

Wagner’s narrow conception of the role of the performer is in inverse proportion to the expanding role he imagines for the composer in the creation of interdisciplinary opera. As part of his conception of “integrated drama” and the \textit{Gesamtkunstwerk}, he wants to overthrow the reign of the performer and redistribute the attention and power. But like many reactionary coups, those who saw themselves as victims under the old order often become the oppressors. Thus, as Abbate asserts, “Wagner argues that performers must erase themselves....This regime was written into the very fabric of his music, as into the architectural innovation of the hidden orchestra.” For Abbate, Wagner epitomizes a long line of thinking, which includes Hegel’s conception of the performer as no more than “matter given life by works.”\textsuperscript{99}

Braxton, on the other hand, extends great agency to the performers of his works. Because of the structures he composes, performers must make large- and small-scale decisions in real time. As mentioned earlier, Braxton designs different compositions and types of compositions to all work together. He composes to create “‘event-spaces,’ where all performers and friendly

\textsuperscript{98} \textit{Ibid.}, 37.

\textsuperscript{99} Abbate, \textit{In Search of Opera}, 43.
experiencers” can take part and engage with one another. He achieves this by designing interactive performance strategies “that can be used for three-dimensional investigation or experience.” Improvisation, then, is fundamental to his musical system—the active engagement of performers brings the music to life and the music, in return, offers the performer opportunities for self-discovery. Braxton explains it this way: “the significance of improvisation is for each person to find his or her own relationship with ‘doing’; to be as true as you can be to yourself, the concept of self-realization.”

The Trillium operas, as music theater, offer particularly rich opportunities for such self-realization. Braxton often discusses Trillium as a “kind of post-Walt Disney idea”102: “I’d like to have a kind of park community, like Disneyland, for the family, for the individual experiencer…who wants to get away from work for a couple of days…and have some fun in a three-dimensional domain where there will be different kinds of experience….”103 He attempts to create, via the fantasy arena of Trillium, a space through which individuals can explore, “kick it about,” try out different experiences or be a different version of themselves. He explains to the performers involved in the Trillium J premiere: “the character is like a mask that is symbolic, but it is really you. And so all of the experiences in the fantasy space and the next level of instruction from the psychological space is really information going to you the person.”104

100 Dicker, “Ghost Trance Music,” Sound American.
101 Lock, Forces in Motion, 231.
102 Braxton “Anthony Braxton explaining the Trillium opera complex during rehearsal 01.31.2014.”
103 Lock, Forces in Motion, 187.
104 Braxton, Trillium J. “Anthony Braxton on Trillium J” (Bonus Feature).
In addition to the invitation (injunction) for self-discovery, the singers also remain responsible for conveying the action of the scene. This, too, is not so straightforward. While each scene is unique with unique characters, there are actually twelve principle figures (written consistently from opera to opera for the same vocal range) who reappear with different names, in different roles, and with different motivations related to the different scenarios in all eighteen of the completed operas: soprano characters Helena, Sundance, Shala, and Ntzockie; mezzo soprano parts Alva and Kim; tenor roles David, Ojuqwain, and Joreo; baritone characters Bubba John Jack and Ashmenton; and bass Zakko. From act to act each of these overarching characters takes on different scene-specific personas with scene-specific agendas. “In one scene a given character might have a role of a positive character (of whatever persuasion) and in the next scene that same character may portray something completely different.” For instance, tracing Sundance through the *Trillium J* scenarios, she first appears in Act One, Scene Four, as the plantation-owning southern belle. In Act Two, Sundance is the rabbit Orca in the magical kingdom, who “is considered to be one of the smartest subjects in the kingdom” and, as the town baker, “[h]er cakes have had the kind of success that people have dreamed of.” In Act Three, Sundance becomes “the spiritualist Lashiva,” one of the assembled guests. (Dr. Zornheim, according to his will that gets read at the end of the act, generously bequeaths her “three home movies of my journeys at Brookfield Zoo in Chicago in 1927. Every time I see these movies it

105 In yet another layering, Braxton correlates these twelve overarching characters to aspects of his larger system. In the house of the triangle, each character relates to one of the sonic geometric sound types, which then also relate to a compositional “logic.” Shala corresponds to (1), long sounds or continuous space logics; Ashmenton correlates to (2), accented long sounds or polarity logics; Helena relates to (3) trills or ornamentation logics; etc.

106 Braxton, Liner notes, *Trillium E.*

107 Braxton, Liner notes, *Trillium J.*
really breaks me up! You’ll love the Rhinoceros section.” Unfortunately, Lashiva, who had hoped “only for four or five billion” dollars from Zornheim (seeing “no reason to overreach in this direction”), never gets to claim her video tapes, as she is shot during that fateful evening. Sundance does not have a roll in Act Four.

Considering that the same archetypal characters appear in each of the operas, and taking into account the performer herself as the primary character, the layering process becomes even more complex. For example, soprano Kyoko Kitamura put on the mask of Ntzockie in both the *Trillium E* recording and the *Trillium J* recording and performance. As secondary masks, she then put on the following scene-specific characters in *Trillium E*: the Third Child (daughter), the Second Scientist Assistant, the Second Farmer, the Second Clone Woman, and the Third Crew Member. In *Trillium J* Kitamura, as Ntzockie, layers on the masks of the Town Councilperson in Act One, Princess Whorlzea (the panda) in Act Two, and Doctor Fletcher (a friend of Zornheim) in Act Three.

Supporting an understanding of these overarching characters as idiosyncratic archetypes part of his own mythological system, Braxton states that “[t]he characters of the Trillium system could be thought of as ‘everyman’ or “everywoman” (in the British sense of the word). This is not an ethnic-centric offering, but rather a universal offering. Trillium is not an attempt to create ethnic-centric opera, rather Trillium is an attempt to create a universal opera system that all humanity can relate to.”

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108 Ibid.
109 Braxton, email to author.
As the pitch content is transharmonic and the settings are transhistorical, these characters are intended to speak across ethnic and cultural boundaries. This legibility seems to me to depend on the cast performing the opera, since the performers are meant to convey their own personality while wearing the masks of the archetypal and scene-specific characters. The productions to date have involved largely American casts, but in Braxton’s ultimate realization of all thirty-six operas, “to be performed at the end of a twelve-day festival for world dynamics,” an international cast and crew could bring new dimensions.

110 Braxton, Liner notes, *Trillium E.*
CHAPTER THREE
THE PHILOSOPHICAL ASSOCIATIONS

In 1985 Braxton published the *Tri-Axiuim Writings*, his three-volume treatise “on creative music and its related information continuum.” This vast philosophical work maps the worldview that informs his compositional practice. The writings also form the basis for the “second primary level” of the *Trillium* libretti: “*Trillium* is conceived as an affirmation of my philosophical system—*Tri-Axiuim*.” Before digging into the methods by which Braxton integrates his philosophical writings into his operatic music, this chapter provides an introduction to aspects of the *Tri-Axiuim Writings* most relevant to interpreting the *Trillium* operas.

*The Tri-Axiuim Writings*

In its introduction Braxton describes initiating the *Tri-Axiuim* project in the fall of 1973 while living in Paris, compelled by frustration over his work’s misrepresentation in the media: “I originally began this series of writings in response to the reality of information surrounding creative music in the early seventies—especially the misinformation that characterized creative music writing in monthly periodicals and newspapers.”

In such publications Braxton was often criticized as “cold and cerebral.” The complaints

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111 Braxton, *Tri-Axiuim Writings*, Volume One, i.
112 Braxton, Liner notes, *Trillium E*.
113 As Lock points out at the start of his *Tri-Axiuim* essay: “given their size (three volumes, 1,600+ pages), their complexity and my own limited space, neither a detailed critique nor even a comprehensive survey of their contents has proved feasible.” (Lock, *Forces in Motion*, 308)
were usually connected to his sound, his lack of swing, and his style of dress—his “pipe, wire-rim glasses, cardigan sweater.”\footnote{Nathaniel Mackey, quoted in Lock, \textit{Blutopia}, 152.} For instance, one critic labeled him the “Buckminster Fuller of Jazz” (this was not a complement), and another disparaged his intellectualism, saying “‘At worst he’s an academic…[Braxton] frequently plays jazz as though he was a chemist studying it through a microscope.’”\footnote{Chip Stern and Gary Giddins, quoted in Lock, \textit{Blutopia}, 163.} Lock argues that actually Braxton “was keen to emphasize the science and intellectual content of his music, partly because of genuine interest in those areas, partly in response to what he saw as white culture’s denial of such qualities in black creativity.”

Braxton says, “For me, as a young African-American, growing up and reacting against the notion of ‘primitive’ that the jazz business complex uses—the ‘exotic’ African jazzman—to suddenly be exposed to Gigi Gryce [and the Jazz Lab Quartet] and the dedication and profound intellectual dynamic that the group brought to their music was very important to me.”\footnote{Lock, \textit{Blutopia}, 162.} Attempting to combat one racialized stereotype, Braxton found himself confronted by another. He describes this predicament as “the grand trade-off,”\footnote{Braxton, \textit{Tri-Axium Writings}, Volume One, 301-303.} the “belief prevalent in post-slavery Western society that black people are, for instance, ‘great tap dancers’ while white people are ‘great thinkers’—that is black people are allowed to be creative only within specific ‘low culture’ zones in order that Western society can avoid facing the full implications of slavery and the pillage of Africa.”\footnote{Lock, \textit{Forces in Motion}, 313.}

In addition to homing in on his sense of rhythm and fashion, writers often criticized the rhetoric Braxton used to discuss his music. As the quotes above evidence, Braxton has a
particular way of using language. Indeed, Braxton has his own vocabulary, which he has been using since at least 1985, when *Tri-Axium* was published with its 37-page “Glossary of Terms.” Such language, to the unprepared jazz critic, might seem unnecessarily “academic.”

For Braxton, however, this language is decidedly necessary. Lock describes Braxton’s creation of “neologisms and compound phraseology” as “a bid to rise above what he has termed the ‘mono-dimensional’ language of jazz criticism.” Or, as Braxton states, “It is important to understand that the reality of a given interpretation cannot be outside of the affinity nature it purports to comment on. As such one cannot comment on the reality specifics of non-western focuses without making serious adjustments in the vibrational nature of one’s use of language, as well as the particulars underlying how a given conceptual focus is viewed.”

Modifying, repurposing, and inventing language is a well-established, powerful tool for self-definition in the African-American tradition. In his writing about “signifyin(g),” Henry Louis Gates points to Zora Neal Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Richard Pryor, Stevie Wonder, Charlie Parker, Richard Wright, and John Coltrane as examples of artists who have worked with one of the modes of signifyin(g) that include critical parody, repetition and inversion, formal signifying, and other methods. Reviewing a wide range of texts and practitioners “within the black cultural matrix,” Gates arrives at a “theory of formal revision” that is “tropological…often characterized by pastiche; and, most crucially, it turns on repetition of formal structures, and their difference. Signification is a theory of reading that arises from Afro-American culture….”

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121 Braxton, *Tri-Axium Writings*, Volume One, ii.
Others have commented on how such a practice informs jazz music’s approach to structure and development and how this impacted contemporary black writers and poets:

“Coltrane’s achievement of destructing and reformulating jazz’s very form became a model for the poets’ effort to reinvent creative language where the pernicious and deadening grammar of received idioms reigned.”¹²³ Fred Moten articulates the political significance of such linguistic reinvention in his book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*:

[The] disruption of the Enlightenment linguistic project is of fundamental importance since it allows a rearrangement of the relationship between notions of human freedom and notions of human essence. More specifically, the emergence from political, economic, and sexual objection of the radical materiality and syntax that animates black performances indicates a freedom drive that is expressed always and everywhere….¹²⁴

Braxton—in his music and in his prose—evidences this drive, this lineage of reinvention and repurposing. Moten elucidates Braxton’s syntactical and lexical moves this way: “Braxton performs (by way of the difference he takes in and bridges), the gnomic, paranomic writing of the non-citizen who refuses the citizenship that has been refused him. His musicked speech, as it were, encrypted.”¹²⁵ Discussing *For Alto*, Moten draws connections between Braxton’s verbal, compositional, and improvisational techniques, writing that Braxton’s “long, cryptographic fascination with various modes of the switchable track, his practice and study of hiding information in plain site…instantiates in *For Alto*…the methodological assertion of flight in and from a given order.”¹²⁶ Braxton’s idiosyncratic and multi-layered use of language—musical and

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¹²³ Bentson, *Performing Blackness*, 144.
¹²⁴ Moten, *In the Break*, 7.
¹²⁵ Moten, “Jurisgenerative Grammar (For Alto),” 15.
¹²⁶ Ibid., 14-15. Recall the way Braxton describes the function of Ghost Trance Music in his system, as discussed in Chapter One.
verbal—takes some work to understand. Once the nuances of his way of conveying his ideas settle in with a reader or listener, however, consistencies are apparent. His way of expressing himself is carefully chosen to not rest on a singular interpretation; rather he “hides” a spectrum of meanings “in plain site” for those willing to do the work to uncover their own interpretation. In this way, Braxton suggests and demonstrates the significance of language to the creation of meaning. A given language—with its inherited “vibrational nature,” its conceptual “particulars,” and its “given order”—cannot be used to “comment on” a truly alternative “affinity nature.” To do so, one must devise one’s own communicative system, with its own “neologisms,” logics, and grammar.

Explaining impetus for the *Tri-Axium Writings*, Braxton states, “many of the distortions that have come to permeate black music journalism are directly related to the use of western inquiry terms that have…no relevance to the reality nature of black creativity….”

Thus, the *Tri-Axium* project came to involve not just clarifying aspects of his music using “western inquiry terms,” but rather reframing the arguments entirely, revising and redefining through both content and form:

by the end of 1974 the act of writing and researching had totally changed my own perspective of the music as well as the reality of information that supported my understanding of the music…the whole of my first draft had nothing to do with the real reality of western commentary, because the actualness of this phenomenon is much greater than the focus of a given argument – or opinion.

His focus widened as he came to more fully grasp that the problems he perceived in journalistic commentary were symptoms of much broader cultural trends: “the dynamic misinformation that

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128 Ibid., ii.
has been generated by music commentary is not separate from what has transpired in the composite guilt of our society….” The intent of the *Tri-Axium Writings*, then, expanded beyond addressing inequities in jazz journalism, “[b]ecause the reality of creativity is not limited to only how a given phenomenon works but also involves the meta-reality context from which that phenomenon takes it laws.”  

This partially accounts for the density, length, and complexity of the *Tri-Axium Writings*, and in turn points to the seriousness of the *Trillium* project. The goals of his exposition are vast: to “redefine every area of information and information dynamics” in relation to creative music, and thus “the whole of earth creativity.” The *Trillium* operas represent Braxton’s effort to manifest the philosophical tenants expounded in the *Tri-Axium Writings*. Each opera, in fact, addresses a specific concept drawn from the *Tri-Axium Writings*. *Trillium A*’s central concern is the concept of “transformation.” *M* contends with “value systems”; *R* explores the notion of “attraction”; and *E* investigates “principle information.”  

“*Trillium is not a platform for conventional story telling*:  
*Schematics into Situation Particulars*

In the *Tri-Axium Writings*, Braxton makes every effort to realize his guiding principle that every idea must be examined from as many perspectives as possible. In order to understand a problem or situation, its meta-reality must be examined. Thus, as he explains in the

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132 *Lock, Blutopia*, 197.
introduction, “the thrust of these writings are not about any one concept but instead involves the reality of cross-information, as a means to solidify the broadest possible inquiry terms.” Thus, “the basic construction of these books contains several approaches for both reading and interconnecting concepts….In other words, the reader will be able to view a given concept from as many different standpoints as possible.” Indeed, Braxton prescribes six modes of reading the text, the last of which involves translating his terminology into one’s own vocabulary: “in other words, I am saying ‘this is my viewpoint in this context, and these are my terms, but what do you think?’...” 133

In order to aid the reading process, and provide yet another avenue into and through the information, Braxton also supplies “integration schematics” 134 throughout the text. Part of an “extended information platform,” they provide an “extra dimension to the arguments of the text.” 135 These diagrams utilize abbreviations of terms and a series of intersecting lines [Fig. 21], and an arrow designates the starting point, or “subject of the schematic.” In Figure 22 the subject is “(r)vt.dy” → “post,” or “the reality of vibrational dynamics” as it relates to the concept of “postulation.” This subject is then read in relation to the terms designated in the surrounding branches. In this case:

1) SG, source initiation (involving PRI-VT-TD, primary vibrational tendencies) or in the context of 2) RT-ALGN, reality alignment (involving LANG-DY, language dynamics) or in the context of 3) AFTD, affinity tendencies (involving INDIV-DY, individual dynamics as related to AFI, affinity insight – or involving PROG-CONT, a progressional continuance).

133 Braxton, Tri-Axium Writings, Volume One, vii.
134 Ibid., quoted in Lock, Forces in Motion, 309.
135 Lock, Forces in Motion, 309. Lock also writes: “I’m indebted to George Lewis for the observation that whereas most philosophies comprise a static hierarchy of concepts, Braxton’s schematics allow him to develop a dynamic approach and to express, graphically and precisely, the changing levels and degrees of significance his concepts have in relation to each other.”
Thus, the schematics provide a graphic representation of how the concepts relate to one another; they transpose (or translate) into a diagrammatic format the written, verbal philosophical arguments made in the text. “The Tri-Axium Writings, which is the expression of the philosophical system, establishes origin arguments, secondary arguments, and tri-ational arguments,” Braxton states. “And those arguments are then distilled into a schematic. And each friendly experiencer can come to and look at the schematic and retranslate that schematic based on their life experiences.”

In yet another process of translation—and providing yet another context in which to understand the “real reality” of things—Braxton has devised his operatic compositions so that each act contends with a Tri-Axium schematic. As Lock explains, “The schematics…act as philosophical blueprints for the Trillium operas: they lay out the particular sets of abstract ideas that Braxton then attempts to make concrete by dressing each schematic in the clothes of a ‘fantasy’ story.” As Braxton writes, “Events in this sound world attempt to act out a given central concept from many different points of view.”

Based on the schematics printed in the liner notes to the CD, each of Trillium J’s four acts contends with the concept of affinity. Affinity itself is not defined in the glossary, but the glossary does include eleven related terms, from which a few key phrases can be coalesced into a

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136 Lock, *Blutopia*, 197. He continues, “and each [schematic] is divided into four parts (whether regarded as scenes or acts), each part in turn being intended to illustrate a particular schematic from the Tri-Axium Writings that relates to the main topic of the opera. (The schematics, liberally scattered through the Tri-Axium Writings, are graphic diagrams that aim to depict how the concepts discussed in the text relate to each other.)”

137 Braxton, *Trillium J*, “Anthony Braxton on Trillium J” (Bonus Feature).


139 Braxton, Liner notes, *Trillium E.*
definition (or retranslation) of affinity as “one’s vibrational nature or sensibility,” a person’s “vibrational position” or “vibrational make-up,” and “one’s life or life purpose – or desired purpose.”

As a more specific example, “[t]o read (or see) this schematic in words,” the subject of the diagram related to Act One [Fig. 22] would be AFI (2): SOC- RT- DY Affinity Insight Number Two as it relates to Social Reality Dynamics in three different contexts: (1) DYM Dynamic spiritualism; (2) MTA-RT-SIGN Meta-Reality Significance (involving TR-DEF Trans-Definition and T C IMP Time Continuum Implications (itself involving RE ST Restructuralism and POL-P Political Policy (or execution of)); and (3) EXP-CONT(1) Expansion Condition (composite focus (involving S-ST Source Shift (Progressionalism) Manipulation and LK-IMP Linkage Implications (itself involving TRS Transition and RT ALIGN Reality Alignment).

This is the complex layering of contexts and subcontexts, within which the reader / listener / viewer / performer is asked to consider the fundamental concept of Affinity Insight Number Two in relation to Social Reality Dynamics, which are defined in the “Glossary” as:

**Affinity Insight**²: (1) the use of self-realization as a basis to connect to one’s own ‘life realness’; (2) the phenomenon of individual awareness as developed by the individual to better understand how to live; (3) taking one’s spirit and beingness into one’s self as a basis to connect with ‘the IT’ as a means to better understand one’s life or life purpose – or desired purpose.

**Social Reality Dynamics**: (1) the possibilities and particulars related to a given social reality context and/or physical universe context; (2) the particulars related to what and how a given social reality space is – as far as achievement possibilities and/or postulation possibilities.

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The subject of Acts Two, Three, and Four respectively are AFL-DY—MT INFO Affinity Dynamics as it relates to Multi-Information; AFI (2)—STY Affinity Insight Number Two as it relates to Style (or the concept of); and AFI—(R)PART Affinity Insight as it relates to the Reality of Participation.

In keeping with this process of translation, the characters in *Trillium* do not literally quote the *Tri-Axium Writings*, rather they convey an understanding of what a given schematic and its attendant “axium tenets” mean for the fantasy situation at hand: “*Trillium* is not a platform for conventional story telling in the classic sense of Italian and German opera. Rather, the work is constructed as a series of dialogues based on logics…in which the characters act out a series of skits of situation particulars. Each skit serves as a vehicle to elaborate on the variables of given philosophic associations.”

For example, in Act One Scene One the group of townspeople celebrating the completion of the railroad express optimistic interpretations of the relationship between Affinity Insight Number Two and Social Reality Dynamics: “We have sacrificed our individual personal interest for the greater cause of national unity and composite poetics.” At other points, the characters explain how an understanding of Affinity Insight Number Two can provide guidance for positive developments:

> Just between you and me, the concept of Affinity Insight number two can give insight into the extended qualities of profound motivation and target imprint sensibility. Get ready for a set of ‘signals’ that will highlight the unfolding backdrop of ‘spiritual motivation’ and poetic ‘spectral complexity.’ Recognition of this phenomenon will define the backdrop of this time period and give additional insight into the particulars of regional individual experience and target polarity synergy. Oh, the signs will be there all

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145 Braxton, Liner notes, *Trillium E*.
146 Braxton, Liner notes, *Trillium J*. 
right. Take my word for it!\textsuperscript{147}

The orchestral music supports the conveyance of the philosophical meaning of the text in several ways. First of all, the instrumental music does not obscure the libretto. While the singers deliver text-heavy passages loaded with *Tri-Axiun* vocabulary and Braxtonian turns of phrase, the orchestra generally plays long-duration sustains. These change instrumentation, voicing, and register at strategic moments to provide metrical emphasis that facilitates the rhythmic connection between the singers and the orchestra. In Figure 23, the woodwinds enter under Helena, providing a point of coordination for the triplet subdivision of the four-four measure. Then, in the next measure, the brass entrance on beat two aligns with the highpoint of Helena’s phrase, which ends in the middle of the first beat of the second measure only to be punctuated by the strings on the subsequent strong beat.

Additionally, the orchestra at times acts as a sort of Greek chorus, providing a slightly different spin on the information than the singer delivering the primary text. For instance, still in the opening scene of the first act, the characters seem excited and hopeful about their community’s future thanks to the “new technology” of the railroad. In a heterophonic, “multiple voice” moment sentiments such as “This is a great day”; “My hope is for victory!”; and “Onwards to the future, we’ll build a new world” circulate. This rosy outlook is undermined by an emphatic, double forte statement from the orchestra “Out-sell!”\textsuperscript{148} [Fig. 24]. Notated as a descending minor sixth but spoken (or even shouted), the gesture is memorable as a metrically emphasized, clustered descending leap. The dialog on stage continues as though nothing has

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
happened, but this “out sell” motive returns throughout the scene to cast shadows of doubt upon the positive future projections. The scene concludes with darker text from the singers: “Here is an opportunity to better understand the terms of contemporary rapprochement and the sanctity of quadrant symbolism. In other words ‘increase coffin production by four hundred percent.’” An orchestral echo of the “out sell” motive underscores this change in tone [Fig. 25]. Here, Braxton augments the rhythm to fit within a four-four measure, with the higher pitch on the downbeat and the lower one on beat two. In the context of music riddled with ties across barlines, quintuplets, triplets, and nest tuplets, this simple, metrically accented, descending motive catches the ear, reminding the listener that “nothing is as it appears” and that statements should be considered from multiple perspectives.

The libretto moves fluidly from text relating to the action to philosophical exegesis and back again. As an example, in Trillium J Act Two Scene Three, two of the animals, David/Luna and Ashmenton/Vadoo stroll through a garden. The dialog shifts between a discussion about events specific to the fantasy world of the scene and elaborations of the idea of Affinity Dynamics, the principle philosophical concept (“starting point”150) for that act:

David / Luna: This a great sunny kind of day Vadoo.
Ashmenton/Vadoo: Right toe, old boy!
David / Luna: The concept of Affinity Dynamics is sensitive to the path of a given encounter—the challenge of composite reality requires nothing less. Look at the plants over there! This is all about ‘idiomatic certainty.’
Ashmenton/Vadoo: Right toe, chap!
David / Luna: A day of this caliber could have nutritional value—even for resident land sharers!
Ashmenton/Vadoo: This is the kind of day that makes it hard to go back to the old ways of experimentation. More and more of my interests are being directed towards the city.

149 Ibid.
150 Braxton, Tri-Axium Writings, Volume One, xiv.
David / Luna: I’ll take the country every time Vadoo. Just between you and me, the concept of Affinity Dynamics extends to color the whole of a given ‘radiant balance’ and focus mandates—let’s not go for the obvious. I had my doubts about Steve Elmore long before the examinations took place. Never has so much meant so little.

Ashmenton/Vadoo: The concept of Affinity Dynamics in this context seeks to affirm the lane of a given transfer—not whether the exchange actually happened or not. Affinity Insight in this context becomes a form of monitoring input spectra data. We aren’t vegetarians by any means. *(He laughs.)*

The *Tri-Axium* glossary defines Affinity Dynamics as “(1) vibrational diversity or the spectrum of possibilities related to a given vibrational position; (2) the related vibrational spectrum of a given vibrational position; (3) the scope of a person’s life options, as related to vibrational attraction and what this phenomenon means with respect to that person’s vibrational makeup.”151 Lock translates this definition in this way: affinity dynamics is “the way in which particular people and culture groups are aligned, or vibrate, to different ‘information lines’ (loosely translatable as ways of living and the knowledge encoded therein).”152

In this passage, which occurs midway through the act, Luna and Vadoo discuss their “life options” (will they stay in the garden or move to the city?) in the midst of the “examinations” (i.e. the accusations that have systematically kicked out member after member from their community). The examinations intend to limit, or narrowly define individuals based on singular actions or characteristics (accusations of corruption or criminal activity). As Luna and Vadoo are discussing, however, they are “not vegetarians,” who limit their consumption, nor are they represented by primary colors; rather they embrace the “whole of a given ‘radiant balance’” that describes the “vibrational diversity or the spectrum of possibilities related to [their] given vibrational position.” It is possible the characters are considering whether this community, in

152 Lock, *Forces in Motion*, 312-313.
which Affinity Dynamics are being suppressed in the face of paranoia, is one they want to continue to be a part of. Or maybe they are debating whether their conscience will allow them to stand by and watch as these examinations persist and the complexity of others’ Affinity Dynamics are overlooked. Perhaps Luna and Vadoo are wondering if they need to get out of this garden before the finger points at them. Or they could be weighing their options: maybe they will wind up on top after the examinations end.

These are just a few readings of the meaning this scene might contain for a given performer or friendly experiencer. Even with the glossary definition and the fantasy context, signification remains unfixed, in motion, and multiple in this passage, and it will vary from performance to performance. This is the intention: “Events in this sound world attempt to act out a given central concept from many different points of view. There is no single story-line in Trillium because there is no point of focus being generated. Instead the audience is given a multi-level event state.”153 The scene generates more questions than answers. What does Affinity Dynamics mean for Vadoo and Luna? What does it mean for Ashmenton and David? What does it mean for the singers wearing the masks of these roles in a given performance? What does it mean for the friendly experiencer? This scene would likely speak to anyone who has felt profiled, misunderstood, singled out, stereotyped—or had the self-awareness to reflect on their own social paranoia and projections onto others. And as the performers and audience members reflect upon the philosophical associations interwoven and underpinning Trillium’s apparent stories, concepts should reverberate even more widely.

153 Braxton, Liner notes, Trillium E.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE MYSTICAL OR SPIRITUAL FUNDAMENTALS

The preceding chapters have considered the overarching structure, the musical organization, the apparent stories and the philosophical associations Braxton composes into the *Trillium* opera complex in relation to layering strategies; his transharmonic conception; pop cultural mythological references; a transtemporal sense of narrative time; and a multi-faceted conception of characterization. How do these processes intersect and network to infuse *Trillium* with the ritualization that Braxton intends? In this chapter, a discussion of theories of ritualization and their relationship to artistic practices provides context for a nuanced look at what Braxton means when he calls the *Trillium* operas’ ritual music.

“The third partial”: Ritualization

In her seminal 1992 work *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Catherine Bell presents a critical overview of the history of the study of ritual, tracing “some of the connections that can make a discourse on ritual seem so compelling and useful to studies of cultural activity.” She eschews attempts to delineate and describe “the universal qualities” of ritual as “autonomous phenomenon,”


arguing that this way of thinking proves incomplete and inconsistent, and tends to “override and undermine the significance of indigenous distinctions among ways of acting.”

Furthermore, Bell suggests that the term ritual is all too often defined in terms that are either
arbitrarily and uselessly broad\textsuperscript{156} or unnecessarily exclusive. Theater director and ritual theorist Richard Schechner also notes this pitfall: “By itself, the word ‘ritual’ is perplexing. Ritual has been so variously defined as concept, praxis, process, ideology, yearning, religious experience, and function that it means very little for the simple reason that it can mean too much.”\textsuperscript{157}

Uninterested in reinscribing binaries or creating arbitrary classifications, but seeking more specificity in her conception of ritual practices, Bell offers a different path through the thicket, proposing the consideration of the process of ritualization instead of ritual as an object. “Rather than impose categories of what is or is not ritual, it may be more useful to look at how human activities establish and manipulate their own differentiation and purposes—in the very doing of the act within the context of other ways of acting.” In this view, ritualization is a way of acting designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege itself in comparison with other, usually more quotidian, activities. Ritualization utilizes various culturally specific strategies for setting certain activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the sacred and the profane, and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors.\textsuperscript{158}

Bell then outlines a series of questions to ask of a given cultural practice in order to assess its relationship to ritualization. The first consideration is the cultural context in which the ritualization takes place. Contextualizing the ritualization is important because these are not universal processes. Rather, any process of ritualization is a culturally specific one that represents “a particular cultural strategy of differentiation linked to particular social effects and

\textsuperscript{156} \textit{Ibid.}, 73.  
\textsuperscript{157} Schechner, “Victor Turner’s Last Adventure,” 192.  
\textsuperscript{158} Bell, \textit{Ritual Theory}, 74.
rooted in a distinctive interplay of a socialized body and the environment it structures.” Bell asserts the importance of questioning the strategies used to differentiate and privilege ritualized activities from other activities. Thirdly, she asks, how does this particular process of ritualization distinguish what is “sacred” and what is “profane.” Finally, she considers what within the process of ritualization “transcend[s] the powers of human actors.” These are useful questions to ask of *Trillium J* in order to tease out the specific processes of ritualization at play in Braxton’s operas.

**Context of Ritualization**

As discussed earlier, Braxton has been working since the 1960s to build an interconnected, self-referential, and internally heterogeneous system of musical works. This system itself provides the most immediate context for *Trillium*’s ritualization. Considering *Trillium* in relation to other works in his system, it is important to recall that Braxton composes pieces with different, specific functions within his system. *Trillium*’s designation and function as ritual music distinguishes it from other music he makes.

Expanding the spheres of contextualization, Braxton also describes *Trillium* as opera, asserting that “the world of opera” is “especially suited for [particular] challenges….” This genre designation suggests that a more complete understanding of *Trillium*’s ritualization context includes other works in the operatic tradition. Braxton consistently cites Wagner and

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159 *Ibid.*., preface.
160 Braxton, Liner notes, *Trillium E.*
Stockhausen as primary influences; the conceptual ambition and extended timescales alone make these points of reference salient.

*Trillium* clearly connects to other intermedia music-theater works from the American experimental tradition, such as Yoko Ono’s *AOS—to David Tudor* (1961) or Robert Ashley’s *Perfect Lives* (1984), that explicitly engage the capacity of the designation “opera.”\(^{161}\) Ashley’s “opera for television” adventurously contends with new technologies in a spirit akin to Braxton’s use of video in the *Trillium J* production. Braxton’s operatic conceptions go even farther by demanding technology just at the brink of current capabilities. Reading Ono’s “opera without instruments,” a piece that dramatizes “human corporeal vulnerability and linguistic chaos” amidst the “blue chaos of war”—Bridgit Cohen proposes that “If *AOS—to David Tudor* is, in Ono’s words, ‘an opera,’ then it is perhaps best interpreted etymologically as something meant to *operate*—to perform work in a spirit of public engagement that has often characterized the history of opera as a genre.”\(^{162}\) This emphasis on social function and the suggestion that genre be considered as a way to understand the *work* that a piece of music does connects directly to Braxton’s conception of *Trillium* as fulfilling a specific ritual function within his system.

The incorporation of improvisation into the operatic form is one of *Trillium*’s most significant attributes, one that, as I will discuss shortly, accounts for much of its potential for ritualization. Specific works within the American and African-American experimental music and jazz traditions offer compelling points of reference for *Trillium*. Take for instance the extended

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\(^{161}\) These ideas have been discussed in multiple conversations with Amy Cimini. See her “in your head: notes on Maryanne Amacher’s *Intelligent Life*” for more on the work of Maryanne Amacher and the intermedia avant-garde.

\(^{162}\) Cohen, “Limits of National History,” 211-212.
works of Duke Ellington, including his unfinished opera *Queenie Pie*. Ellington wrote works that challenged the expectations of the time that big band music’s sole purpose was to provide entertainment. In addition, Ellington’s compositional practice was decidedly collaborative and involved working closely with and writing for a group of carefully selected musicians.\textsuperscript{163}

Challenging genre limits and a collaborative ethos are both significant to *Trillium*’s ritual potential. Max Roach’s conceptually powerful 1960 album and suite *We Insist! Max Roach*’s *Freedom Now Suite* has been “hailed as an early masterwork of the civil rights movement.” Explicitly confronting themes of struggle and emancipation, the piece featured vocalist Abbey Lincoln “belting Oscar Brown Jr.’s lyrics,” “moaning in sorrow, and then hollering and shrieking in anguish.”\textsuperscript{164} Roach and Lincoln demonstrate the specific expressive power that the voice affords a composition that incorporates improvisation. Furthermore, the seriousness of *We Insist!*’s message and the contention that music can and should attend to real social problems speaks to Braxton’s goals for *Trillium* as discussed in the previous chapter.\textsuperscript{165}

Asserting this multi-pronged context—that includes Euro-American opera, American experimental intermedia works, and American improvised music—is decidedly a politicized move since Braxton has had to fight to have his work taken seriously by the jazz establishment as well as by institutions that support contemporary classical music, particularly opera. Having written eighteen operas, Braxton is certainly one of the most prolific opera composers in

\textsuperscript{163} Ethier, “In Ellington’s Shadow.”
\textsuperscript{164} Chinen, “Abbey Lincoln.”
\textsuperscript{165} These are but two examples of musical practices that bridge the operatic / musical-theatrical and the improvisatory. The music of Sun Ra, Anthony Davis, and others should also be considered.
America, yet there is scant scholarship on his work in this area and very little coverage by the press that writes about contemporary opera. Indeed, Braxton cannot even get his operas listed in the classical music listings: when Trillium J premiered in New York, it was included in the jazz listings in the New York Times but not the classical listings. Additionally, thus far, all of Braxton’s operas have been self-produced with no support from any opera companies. With the help of more general arts foundations and grants, Braxton has supplemented his own resources to realize his operas. For example, Braxton used the “no strings attached” award from the MacArthur Fellowship to fund the production of Trillium R.

Within his own system and in a broader context of contemporary opera, experimental and improvised music, Braxton composes and produces Trillium as an artistic practice. If Trillium J incorporates processes of ritualization, it does so as a work of art: to borrow Schechner’s taxonomy, Trillium is an aesthetic ritual. Schechner divides human ritualization into three distinct branches on his “Ritual Tree”: (1) Social Ritual, which includes Everyday Life, Sports, and Politics; (2) Religious Ritual, which includes Observance and Celebration and Rites of Passage; and (3) Aesthetic Ritual, which includes Codified Genres and Ad Hoc Genres. In this scheme, social rituals are “less organized ritualistic activities of humans in everyday society,” including “the ritualistic behavior of an audience attending an opera or sporting event….”

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166 “Jazz Listings for April 18-24,” New York Times. Related to listings, when Wet Ink Ensemble, a new music ensemble comprised of white Columbia University alumni composer-performers performed some of Braxton’s music, it was included in the classical listings. (“Classical Music Listings for Jan. 15-21,” New York Times.)
167 Schechner, “Victor Turner’s Last Adventure,” 190. Human ritualization is only one branch of Schechner’s Ritual Tree. He also includes “genetically fixed” ritualization of insects and fish, “fixed and free” ritualization of birds and mammals, and “social ritual” of nonhuman primates.
Religious rituals are perhaps the most obvious—those “rites and celebrations traditionally studied by anthropologists that initially inspired the quest for basic structures underlying all ritual activity.” Finally, aesthetic ritual would include performance art practices such as ritualistic theater.

Schechner further breaks down aesthetic ritualized activity into two types of performance, entertainment-theater and efficacy ritual, which he relates to anthropologist Victor Turner’s concepts of liminoid and liminal, respectively. Schechner distinguishes entertainment-theater from efficacy ritual by the fact that the later “involves a transformative intent and experience….”

For Turner, the liminal is a “phase of transition,” what others have called the “‘margin’ or ‘limen’ (meaning ‘threshold’ in Latin): “the ritual subjects pass through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo….” The liminal moment, “however brief” is the moment of potential, when the ritual subject manages to avoid the confines of “either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states.” The liminoid, as Turner outlines it, “resembles without being identical with ‘liminal’.” Liminoid activities are the purview of industrialized societies in which work and play (or leisure, “which includes but exceeds play sui generis”) are separate arenas, “an artifact of the Industrial Revolution.” In contradistinction, “such symbolic expressive genres as ritual and myth…[are] at once work and play or at least [are] cultural activities in which work and play are intricately intercalibrated.”

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168 Sheppard, Revealing Masks, 16.
169 Turner, From Ritual to Theatre, 24.
170 Ibid., 44.
the heart of ritual’s efficacy is, returning to Braxton’s phraseology, the “not what it seems” space of liminality, “a phase peculiarly conducive to…‘ludic’ invention,” or play.\footnote{Ibid., 31-32.}

Braxton often evokes the idea of play, using the phrase “kick it about” to express the “ludic” practices of both performance and rehearsal, the act of playing music with others. Play, in this sense, intersects all of his musical practices. In Trillium, however, such “ludic invention,” in Turner’s sense of liminality or Schechner’s idea of efficacy, takes on a more profound focus because Braxton designs his operas as arenas for self-discovery and experiments in community formation. At the same time, he also intends the operas’ stories to be accessible to anyone who might wander into a performance off the street. He also wants the operas to function as entertainment.\footnote{Braxton, Liner notes, Trillium E.} In this way Trillium exists between and across Schechner and Turner’s categories.

Furthermore, in Braxton’s way of thinking music is necessarily an aesthetic and spiritual practice. A clean division does not hold for him. “As a young guy I was a Baptist, Methodist, Catholic. I got baptized in all three. I went to Zen Buddhism. I was an atheist. I went to Scientology later. Only to discover that the house of music was what I was looking for. And that I was in the center of what I was looking for all along,” he explains.\footnote{Braxton, “2014 NEA Jazz Masters Award Ceremony& Concert, Part 2.”} The “house of music”—the work and play of music as Braxton practices it—encompasses entertainment, transformative, and aesthetic potential.

It is important, nonetheless, to return to the “real reality” in which Trillium J was produced and in which its ritualization has so far taken place. Trillium J is a work of 21st-century
art produced in an art space in Brooklyn, New York, by fellow artist-producers with funding and support from art (if not opera) granting organizations. Anthony Sheppard’s *Revealing Masks: Exotic Influences and Ritualized Performance in Modernist Music Theater* offers examples of how to consider ritualization within 20th-century music theater works. Following Bell, Sheppard writes “I am less interested in determining whether a specific work qualifies as ritual…than I am in investigating how composers, dramatists, choreographers set out to create new forms of ritualized performance….”

Sheppard initiates his discussion of ritual and performance with a long quote from Turner loaded with musical and operatic references:

Ritual, in fact, far from being merely formal, or formulaic, is a symphony in more than music. It can be—and often is—a symphony or synaesthetic ensemble of expressive cultural genres, or, a synergy of varied symbolic operations, an opus which unlike ‘opera’ (also a multiplicity of genres as Wagner repeatedly emphasized) escapes opera’s theatricality, though never life’s inexpungible social drama, by virtue of the seriousness of its ultimate concerns.

While Turner’s “repeated analogies between ritual and theater” provide a neat entrée into a discussion of ritualization in music theater, Sheppard acknowledges that “multiple definitions of ritual have been offered by Turner and others, and the examples of music theater considered here do not fit each proposed set of criteria equally well.” Again, ritual has been defined and studied in a myriad of different ways. Like Bell, Sheppard also notes that “some definitions of ritual performance are so inclusive as to prove meaningless for attempts to describe modernist music theater as a form of performance distinct from opera.”

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175 Ibid., 15.
176 Ibid., 15.
So, for both Turner and Sheppard, ritual and ritualized musical theater can and should be distinguished from opera. Sheppard writes, “From a modernist perspective, the performance aesthetics and conventions of opera were altogether too arbitrary, too diva-determined, to function as ritual.” Rather, “modernist music theater is a genre created at the margins of several performing art forms, a genre often arising between cultures, and one that repeatedly aspires to the liminal state of ritualistic experience.”

Braxton, on the other hand, does not see aligning himself with the operatic tradition as oppositional to working on the “margins,” seeking a liminal state, or enacting a process of ritualization. On the contrary, he sees the genre of opera as particularly fruitful for the ritualized experience he envisions, and he desires to situate his project within the operatic tradition. Indeed, Braxton’s operas have much in common with the works Sheppard analyzes. Unlike the white modernist composers Sheppard references who rejected the categorization of opera, however, Braxton embraces the tradition. For him, tradition is not a set of restraints from which one must break free. Tradition is a deep reservoir of experience from which one can learn and upon which one can build. Braxton has described the jazz tradition as a one of innovation. More broadly, he has said stated:

I love the tradition. Whether it’s the Michigan State marching band. Whether it’s the great work of Johnny Mathis. My work is only possible because of what I’ve learned from the great artists that have come before me. Tradition in my opinion says “this has all been done,” and you need to learn the fundamentals and respect the last 2000, 3000 years of documented music. But don’t let that be an excuse to not find your own work.
This understanding of opera as a genre with an innovative, even experimental, history is not far-fetched. Musicologists such as Emily Dolan have written about Meyerbeer’s use of “marvelous machines” to achieve the effects that made his works popular with the audiences of his moment, but disparaged by later composers (notably Wagner) and critics. Even as she attempts to “rehabilitate” the “once mighty and internationally beloved composer,” Dolan points out that Meyerbeer is just one example of an opera composer invested in innovative technologies. In fact, “[m]arvelous machines have been central to opera since the form’s inception.” Citing Bonnie Gordon’s argument that “the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century saw the emergence of a wide array of things fashioned to distort nature and to alter the human experience of the sensory world,” Dolan explains, “In Monteverdi’s L’Orfeo and many other early modern operas, a wide repertoire of stage devices and spectacular machines was deployed to produce magical sounds and visions.”

Braxton, understanding his work as existing within traditions of innovation, builds upon the narrative and dramaturgical power of operatic storytelling in order to weave together the first two layers of his operas, “the apparent story” and the “philosophical associations,” using the sung text and fictional scenarios. These layers work together to support the third layer, “the mystical or spiritual fundamental[s]” of his operas that allow for and rely on processes of ritualization.

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Strategies of Ritualization

Returning to the questions Bell proposes, the next line of inquiry is to investigate what specific strategies these operas engage “to differentiate and privilege [their] ritualized activities from other activities” within the determined contexts. How, exactly, does Braxton innovate within the operatic tradition? In what ways does he expand upon the improvised and experimental traditions?

By composing operas that incorporate improvisation Braxton makes a fundamental strategic innovation that impacts Trillium’s ritualization. Working in this way, at the intersection of art forms that, until recently, were rarely integrated, Braxton distinguishes Trillium as ritualized performance in contrast to other operas. Similarly, as a composer of instrumental music that to some extend always incorporates improvisation, Braxton’s decision to compose operas creates a body of music that distinguishes itself within improvised music traditions.

Within his system, Braxton exploits fundamental operatic conventions as tools for ritualization. The Trillium operas, as works of music theater, are of a different medium than purely instrumental works; they are intermedia works. Bell has described ritual itself as its own, distinct medium, a “complex sociocultural” one “variously constructed of tradition, exigency, and self-expression” that plays “a wide variety of roles to communicate a rich density of overdetermined messages and attitudes.” Like opera, ritualized activity is an interdisciplinary medium, one that uses “gesture and word, in contrast to theological speculation or doctrinal formulation,” in order to “have people embody assumptions about their place in a larger order of
things.”182 This embodiment is at the heart of ritualized activities’ “efficacy.” Through its use of gesture, word—and often sound (music), costumes (masks), and other aspects often associated with theater—ritual shares much with artistic, performative practices such as music theater. Schechner goes beyond only movement and spoken text, identifying the intersections of multi-sensorial aspects as a site of ritual’s unique power: “I would guess that a function of ritual is always this subversion of experience—to substitute or undermine ordinary experience with another hyper-experience. This hyper-experience is not abstract, but just the opposite: it is made of definite sensuous items to do, smell, hear, see, and touch. More than any other kind of art or entertainment, ritual is synaesthesia.”183

In the article “‘What I Call a Sound’: Anthony Braxton’s Synaesthetic Ideal and Notations for Improvisers,” Graham Lock hones in on a trans-sensorial aspect of Braxton’s practice. As Lock points out, Braxton has related stories about drawing “the solos of his favourite saxophonists” as a young man, and in interviews Lock conducted for the book *Forces in Motion*, Braxton explains “that he actually sees each of his compositions, ‘as if it were a three-dimensional painting’….” Locke finds additional evidence of Braxton’s “highly individual perspective” on the relationship between sonic and visual perception throughout Braxton’s body of work. Early in his career, Braxton developed a series of “sound classifications,” “types of sounds that Braxton…compiled into a basic musical vocabulary. There are nearly 100 classifications…and he gives each one its own visual designation” [Fig. 26]. In addition, Braxton utilizes graphics (and numbers) to title his pieces, rather than text. As discussed in relation to

182 Bell, *Ritual*, xi
Trillium J’s schematics, the visual titles comprise “a mix of lines, shapes, colours, figures, numbers, and letters, which encodes both the structural and what he calls the ‘vibrational’ elements of the music” [Fig 27]. Expanding beyond the titles, Braxton has created a vast body of purely graphic scores. In his Falling River Music, for example, all of the musical information is conveyed visually [Fig 28]. Avoiding any explicit guidelines for how to interpret the images, “Braxton refuses to assign any specific meanings to the notations of his Falling River scores, since part of their purpose is to allow each performer to find her own way through them. He explains, ‘I am particularly interested in this direction as a means to balance the demands of traditional notation interpretation and esoteric inter-targeting.’”

Lock looks closely at such graphically notated scores in his essay, speculating that Braxton might have “a particular form of synaesthetic perception called chromaesthesia, or colour hearing, which would mean that he does literally see sounds as colours and shapes.” More than a connection to color, however, Braxton’s sonic perception—or at least how he describes his perceptual experience to others—involves a three-dimensional experience:

I have never only heard a sound. If I hear a sound, I hear spectra . . . it’s more three-dimensional than the actual sound. I did not even realise that until I took ear training in college and I came to see that I wasn’t exactly hearing what everyone else was hearing….The attempts to notate the great solos from the masters of improvised music only capture maybe two-thirds of what actually happened in the music and that difference is part of what we’re talking about….I think, for instance, that this concept of two-dimensional pitch in the Western music system is a form of reductionism compared to what is actually happening….there is a continuum of information that has always emphasised three-dimensional presences, vibrational presences.

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184 Lock, “‘What I Call a Sound’: Anthony Braxton’s Synaesthetic Ideal and Notations for Improvisers.”
185 Wilmoth, “Excerpts from the liner notes to Anthony Braxton/Matt Bauder – 2+2 Compositions.”
186 Lock, “‘What I Call a Sound’: Anthony Braxton’s Synaesthetic Ideal and Notations for Improvisers.”
This three-dimensional conception of sound relates directly to Braxton’s move via his ritual music to the creation of environments in his pieces, or even—as is the case in Trillium—to create pieces as environments. As Chapter One mentions, Braxton identifies the construction of “environments” as central to what distinguishes his ritual music from other musics within his system. These environments are the physical space in which the ritual participants—the performers and friendly experiencers—move through the ritual activities proposed by the “fantasy scenarios.” These environments can be read as three-dimensional extensions of Braxton’s graphic titles and notations. When designing the projections for Trillium J, Jonas used Braxton’s drawings for the multiple projections that create the opera’s three-dimensional space [Figs. 10, 13 and 29].

The use of three-dimensional, intermedia, synaesthetically suggestive components—sets, costumes, video projections, and choreography—in other words, Trillium’s musical-theater trappings—is one of the ways that Braxton, following Bell, differentiates and privileges the ritualized activities of Trillium from other musical activities within his system.

Trillium J also contains within its scenarios imagery and themes that underscore the ritual intent behind the operas. Although Bell argues that there are no universal ritual symbols, objects, or behaviors, there are symbols, objects, and behaviors that have been identified and studied within ritual contexts. One of the ways that the composers Sheppard discusses build their ritualized music theater works is through an exotified incorporation of non-Western iconography that suggest ritual to Western audience members. For example, masks—symbols appropriated from ancient Greek and Noh theater—play a significant role in modernist music-theater’s attempts to create ritualized performances. The specifics of the “appropriation or interpretation
of the relevant exotic tradition” varied “markedly,” yet the mask was a consistent marker of ritualized intent.\textsuperscript{187}

Braxton’s incorporation of ritual symbols does not fall into the category of easy appropriation. Rather, the ritual “symbol” that permeates \textit{Trillium J} is an invocation of Turner’s liminal state itself, the “phase of transition,” the rite of passage. In order to facilitate the ritual subject’s embodiment of this movement from one state to another, from one identity to another, ritualized activities often involve physical movement. “The passage from one social status to another is often accompanied by a parallel passage in space, a geographical movement from one place to another.”\textsuperscript{188} In Act One of \textit{Trillium J}, the discussions of new technologies of transportation evoke this theme of “geographical movement”: “Let’s hear it for the new technology.”\textsuperscript{189} Scene One is a celebration of the completion of the railroad; the “YO-YO like structural logic”\textsuperscript{190} at the outset of Scene Five actualizes this metaphor, as a railroad car swings back and forth. In Scenes Three and Six the dialog is comprised entirely of a list of different railroad cars and steam ships, respectively. Even in the outlier scene of the first act, Scene Two, which takes places in a more futuristic environment, the persistent theme is that of transition, transformation, or again, movement from one state to another as scientists discuss the developmental status of their test subjects. Here the rite of passage is not physical; it is process of mental and/or emotional change that is anticipated in the test subjects.

\textsuperscript{187} Sheppard, \textit{Revealing Masks}, 25-41.
\textsuperscript{188} Turner, \textit{From Ritual to Theatre}, 25.
\textsuperscript{189} Braxton, Liner notes, \textit{Trillium J}.
\textsuperscript{190} \textit{Ibid.}
In Act Two the Princess of Curiosity interludes—with their gradually unfurling electronic and vocal music, patient choreography, and slowed-down images of flowers blooming (i.e. changing from one state to another)—seem to be extended explorations of the liminal state itself. Act Three also includes an interlude devoted entirely to a narrative state of transition: during the hallway scenes, with projections of spooky passageways, the act’s storyline bounds ahead, ending each time with a new murder.

Additionally, the two scenes of Act Four both focus on a transitional moment for a character. The extended interrogation of the gangster in Scene One and the lengthy examination and cross-examination of Mrs. Walton in Scene Two both explore a sort of perverse liminal moment. Facing a barrage of accusations of violent acts, each character’s social status hangs in the balance. If determined to be guilty, each would lose their current position (as member of this particular mafia organization or as respected wife). The gangster has lost the trust of his colleagues, but the action of the scene does not reveal his fate. The scene ends inconclusively. None of the characters seem trustworthy and the accusations build to horrifying yet absurd levels. Similarly, no verdict is determined in Mrs. Walton’s trial. The scene ends in ambiguity, with her guilt or innocence undecided. As Jonas explains, in both scenes the same joke is told over and over again, expressed “a thousand different ways.”¹⁹¹ The details change, but the form remains the same. The act is stuck in a surreal loop. Neither scene resolves; both end with the character’s social status continually deferred in a perpetually ambiguous state.

The orchestral music in Act Four supports this sense of suspended animation. The first scene—which lasts for twenty-one minutes and is initiated by the thickest chord that opens any

¹⁹¹ Jonas, conversation with author.
of the acts—spins through a series of variously dense orchestral sustained pitches. These are punctuated infrequently by more active lines. These chords overlap, one after the other, with constantly changing instrumentation and orchestration choices contouring the orchestral texture. Even when the orchestra music briefly rests, the syntax of the libretto, the contours and metric placements of the vocal lines, and the solo instrumental improvisations provide additional cross-hatching. The occasional silences that dot the music are charged silences. Some hold comedic emphasis [Fig. 30]. Others are suspenseful [Fig. 31]. Incorporating the intermedia components into the analysis, the dance and video projections “blow through” or create motion across some musical rests. In these ways, the opera’s music spirals incessantly without any cadential relief. Even when the lights go out, indicating the end of Scene One, the audio-visual silence lasts only a few seconds before the Syntactical Ghost Trance choir begins the double Dutch interlude.

Within Braxton’s system, Trillium’s ritualization evidences itself in its status as opera, as musical theater with three-dimensional, multi-media constructed environments. Furthermore, the musical and dramatic content of the scenes offers the performers and audience members a chance to immerse themselves in a variety of liminal states. The specific ways that Braxton wields these strategies distinguishes Trillium from non-ritual works within his system, other operas, and other large-scale works from the experimental and improvised traditions. How else does Trillium, through its process of ritualization, distinguish itself? Answering this question digs into the intended efficacy, following Schechter, undergirding Trillium: the project of self-discovery and realization that Braxton sets out for the performers and listeners.

192 The DVD edit of the live performance provides a nice example of this at 9:49, when the music stops and the dancer continues her subtle arm movements.
“This is really a spiritual music”: The Individual within the Group

Braxton aims for the audience members, the friendly experiencers, not just the performers, to find autonomous decision-making opportunities within the Trillium opera complex. This desire acknowledges the traditional relationship of the audience to the stage in opera: “While actively engaged in the social rituals of opera-going, and often more than willing to communicate its reactions to the stage and thus potentially affect the performance directly, the traditional opera audience was not required to participate. Opera took the proscenium for granted.”

Not taking the proscenium for granted, Braxton imagines the audience as a collection of personal DJ’s and VJ’s, selecting and mixing their own audio-visual journey through the Trillium complex. Much of this participation relies on yet-to-be-refined technology and vast financial resources, but he describes these possibilities in detail in the Composer’s Notes that accompany the libretto in the Liner Notes to Trillium J. He offers “drone surveillance options,” “video replay options,” and proposes that the solo instrumentalists and singers “wear hats with television cameras” in order to capture “these special viewpoints” and “re-pipe [them] back to the ‘real time performance space.’…This way the uniqueness of every event can be captured and re-integrated into the holistic reality of the music.”

Braxton’s relationship with technology has been rich and complex throughout his career. Chapter Two recounts his use of scientific rhetoric, and, of course, many of the Trillium

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193 Sheppard, Revealing Masks, 115.
194 Braxton, Liner notes, Trillium J.
scenarios involve fantastic, futuristic, or science fiction tropes. Consider the second scene of Act One of *Trillium J*, in which the scientists discuss the developments of their humanoid test subjects. In *Trillium E*, the plot in Act Two involves cloning, and Act Three is a send-up of *Star Trek* that “gleefully parod[ies] popular culture forms as a means of reflecting on imperialisms, past and future.”\(^{195}\) Beyond this, Braxton has also actively incorporates electronics into his music. In *Trillium J*, electronics convey changes in scene and suggest temporal shifts. In Act One, electronic music creates the transition between the first two scenes, which move from a historical setting to a futuristic one. In addition, the music for Act Two’s Princess of Curiosity interludes is entirely electronic, a timbral change that helps set them apart from the action in the rest of the act. Beyond the operas, Braxton also builds Supercollider patches to use during improvisation, and he has an entire category of compositions, *Echo Echo Mirrorhouse*, that involves performers improvising with playback on iPods loaded with recordings from his extensive recorded output.

Furthermore, other aspects of Braxton’s work come into a techno-centric orbit, if, following Alexander Weheliye’s thinking in relation to posthumanism, we broaden the range of technologies considered beyond the digital. “Because theories of posthumanity are so closely associated with theorizations of cyberspace, computer-mediated communication often appears to be the precondition for becoming posthuman….Incorporating other information media, such as sound technologies, counteracts the marginalization of race rather than rehashing the whiteness, masculinity, and disembodiment of cybernetics and informatics.”\(^{196}\) Take, for example,

\(^{195}\) Lock, *Blutopia*, 206.

\(^{196}\) Weheliye, “‘Feenin’: Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Popular Music,” 24-25.
Composition No. 9 for four amplified shovels (1969). The detailed 30-page graphically notated score prescribes specific actions—depth and rotation of the shovels, for instance—in order to get a wide range of sounds from the shovels digging in coal. The piece also calls for costumes and projections to create the atmosphere of a mine. Although not set on a planet in another galaxy, the sounds and theatrical scenario of No. 9 investigate the labor involved in excavating the fossil fuel that is one of the most significant sources of energy for the production of electricity around the globe. And as we know, electricity is necessary for all of our digital technologies today.

Composition No. 9 has never been performed. This could be, in part, due to the logistical difficulties of successfully amplifying four shovels. While the technology exists now, in 1969 it would have been very difficult to effectively amplify the shovels in a way that did not impede the theatrical effect. Nevertheless, Braxton wrote the piece, gambling that technology would eventually exist to realize his piece.

Such technological optimism helps explain Braxton’s somewhat confounding statements about the twelve Trillium operas being performed on twelve different planets (this might not be possible today, but one day….), as well as his desire for the friendly experiencer to be able to move through the music freely, deciding what they would like to hear and see at any given moment. Ideally, each of the three primary layers of the ensemble (the singers, the orchestra, and the instrumental soloists) would be on separate audio-visual channels, so that audience members could create their own mix and edits, navigating the materials as they would a session in a recording studio, selecting the tracks and perspectives they want to engage with at any given time. Rather than sitting still in a concert hall, audience members could move virtually or physically, listening and watching from as many different vantage points as desired. Braxton
intends *Trillium* to

allow the friendly experiencer to travel ‘inside the music’ space and experience a given ‘actual event’ from many different spatial perspectives. From small ensemble to large ensemble…my hope is for the friendly experiencer to have an increased perception space for the most positive ‘actual experience.’ The concept of multiple perspectives in this context also takes into account the spatial positioning of the performance sound system and the total use of the environment space. I want sound and imagery coming from every direction—including the floor….197

Amidst multi-channel sound, immersive intermedia environments, layers of musical information, and diverse fantasy scenarios friendly experiencers have a lot of options for the type of experience they find within *Trillium*.

In the *Trillium J* premiere, however, the audience remained in a traditional position in relation to the performers, preserving the traditional operatic proscenium. Simply rearranging the seating in Roulette and encouraging the audience to move throughout the space would have been a gesture toward a different kind of audience engagement. Without technology like what Braxton envisions, however, a given audience member would probably have a difficult time truly exploring a range of locational, temporal, or sonic perspectives on the performance / ritual without interrupting the experience of another audience member or performer. In other words, incorporating the audience members as fully as the performers into *Trillium’s* processes of ritualization is not achievable with a simple solution. To do so, future productions of the operas should take Braxton’s technological suggestions seriously and consider other ways to present the operas that might offer a deeper, more active level of participation by audience members.

Indeed, many of Braxton’s ideas require technologies just beyond current capabilities—or at least beyond what even the most extravagant art-project budget can achieve. Others,

197 Braxton, Liner notes, *Trillium J.*
however, are achievable, if given extensive resources of personnel, space, and time. Some of Braxton’s desires for *Trillium* are available now to a friendly experiencer with the intellectual curiosity and imaginative capacity to accept the experiential offer Braxton extends. Exploring the opera over an extended period of time—i.e., in performance and then afterward via the available documentation of a stereo recording and as DVD / streaming video—a friendly experiencer could utilize *Trillium J*, for example, as a platform for their own reimaginings of themselves, their relationship, or their world.

Returning to the experience of the performers, much of *Trillium*’s spiritual and ritual potential for the singers lies in his conception of characterization as Chapter One begins to suggest. Speaking to the singers Braxton explains, “each of you are singing from a particular character…But in fact what makes this…unique or special to me is that actually I don’t want you to embody the character. I want you to be who you are because who you are is the reason we wanted to have you come and be with us.”\(^{198}\) Although the singers work with a particular character in a particular scene, they are to remain themselves.

Perhaps this is no different from traditional acting, as actors do not literally become the characters they assume for the duration of the performance. This slippery space between the reality of the theater and the reality beyond the theater, however, holds a lot of potential. As Schechner states, “What has always appealed to me about theater is its unavoidable tension between ‘artificiality’ and ‘real-ness.’” Like Braxton, Schechner identifies “the troublesome area where ‘characterization’ leaves off and the ‘real person’ begins” as a richly ambiguous space.

\(^{198}\) Braxton, *Trillium J*, “Anthony Braxton on Trillium J” (Bonus Feature).
“The ‘character’ does not exist except as the player plays him; and the player exists as a character only in the realm of the play. Yet even as they play, the performers cannot entirely leave behind their own contingent personal and social selves.”

Braxton’s conception speaks to Schechner’s but makes a further distinction. In his theatrical conception, the characters and scenarios of the opera are not so much acted or portrayed as they are utilized to have an experience, to explore “the real time psychology on the plane of the individual.”

Such a conception resonates with aspects of the ritualized modernist music theater that Sheppard considers. Sheppard identifies “the radical reconceptualization of the role of the performer” as “[t]he clearest indication of a new performance aesthetic” in experimental, ritualistic theater works by composers such as Benjamin Britten and Harry Partch.

Similar to Braxton’s description of the role of the singers, in these works of music theater, “[t]he performer…most often does not attempt to counterfeit a character.” For the ritualization to take place within and through these works, the creators believe that the performer needs to assume a role different from that of traditional Western theater.

Braxton also directly links the multivalent roles the singers maneuver to Trillium’s efficacy as “the corner-stone of my spiritual musics,” for the singers are to convey the “apparent story,” as well as the “philosophical associations.” At the same time, they also must navigate the complex rhythms and pitch material of the notated music alongside moments of

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200 Braxton, Trillium J, “Anthony Braxton on Trillium J” (Bonus Feature).
201 Sheppard, Revealing Masks, 20.
202 Ibid., 20.
203 Braxton, Liner notes, Trillium J.
collective improvisation. And throughout they must “be themselves” within the fantasy space and use the operas as an arena for self-exploration. “[I]n the real time action space, my hope is that whenever possible you will be able to, inside of your postulation, come from yourself, because this is really a spiritual music. But I don’t mean spiritual in the classical sense of spiritual, I mean spiritual in the sense...[that] we are always looking for self-realization.”

Reinforcing this, Braxton also compares his conception for *Trillium* with the I-Ching: “when you go to the I-Ching it gives you a proposition or story and each person takes that information in based on their own experiences...” The spiritual is a highly personal experience for Braxton.

While Wagner’s dramatic and musical sense of scale impressed Braxton, it was the late Romantic composer’s “metaphysics” that asserted the most profound influence on Braxton’s operatic project: “Trillium is a post-Wagnerian opera that rather than celebrate Christianity or monotheism, instead what we have here is a multi-hierarchical thought unit that is relevant to the modern era...” This multi-hierarchical structure is necessary to allow for the myriad of distinct, individual experiences Braxton intends the operas to facilitate. These individual spiritual experiences are, in response to Bell’s third question, the sacred spaces that *Trillium* carves out.

Braxton expands the possibilities for not only the singer’s role in his *Trillium* operas, but also the role of instrumentalists. Recall that each opera is composed for three layers of

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204 Braxton, *Trillium J*, “Anthony Braxton on Trillium J” (Bonus Feature).
205 Braxton, “Anthony Braxton explaining the Trillium opera complex during rehearsal 01.31.2014.”
206 Braxton, conversation with author.
207 Braxton, “Anthony Braxton explaining the Trillium opera complex during rehearsal 01.31.2014.”
performers—the vocalists, the instrumental soloists, and the orchestra. The solo instrumentalists navigate freely improvised and fully notated music in a way that is unusual in opera but idiomatic within Braxton’s oeuvre. Within the realm of instrumental performance, these performers pursue analogous goals to those of the singers. In this way, Braxton infuses the instrumental music with the same spiritual potential—the same opportunity for exploration and self-discovery—that the singers have utilizing the characters and scenarios.

The scope of instrumental self-realization is something that Braxton has been avidly exploring since the creation of *For Alto* in 1969. Fred Moten describes the impact of Braxton’s solo voice in this way:

> [Braxton’s sounds] allow and require us to be interested in the unlikely emergence of the unlikely figure of the black soloist, whose irruptive speech occurs not only against the grain of a radical interdiction of individuality that is manifest both as an assumption of its impossibility as well as in a range of governmental dispositions designed to prevent the impossible, but also within the context of a refusal of what has been interdicted (admission to the zone of abstract equivalent citizenship and subjectivity…).  

Moten makes a powerful argument for Braxton’s commitment to the project of creating his own, personal “irruptive speech.” Braxton, however, extends this project beyond himself. Having found his own spirituality in the house of music, his own “radical interdiction of individuality” through creative sound, Braxton’s intent is that *Trillium* can serve as such a space for others.

The third scene in Act Two, discussed in detail in Chapter Two, provides an illuminating example of how the solo instrumentalists interact with the singers and orchestra. The orchestral music underscoring David/Luna’s seemingly benign statement about the weather is a thick stacked octachord from the winds and strings [Fig. 32]. The orchestration and instrumentation

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208 Moten, “Jurisgenerative Grammar (For Alto),” 18-19.
emphasize the dissonant second interval. For example, the bassoons retain the semitone intervallic distance from the first chord even as the vertical sonority shifts to the next chord five beats later. Similarly, the basses and cellos, who play a more rhythmically active role within the texture, move in parallel minor seconds. The orchestral texture throughout the first few lines of dialog remains gnarly. The winds and strings sustain clusters, and every measure features rhythmic and intervallic motion, as the low strings and harp zigzag across the sonic terrain.

The musical texture becomes even more complex when Luna/David utters the opera’s “secret password”—“Just between you and me”—which initiates a back-and-forth between the characters on the concept of Affinity Dynamics. This is when Instrumental Soloist Nine joins the fray, improvising in response to the music and text. This interconnected yet independent voice adds further counterpoint to the music. Nine measures later when Ashmenton/Vadoo responds, Instrumental Soloist Eleven enters, adding to the music’s ever-expanding sonic spectrum.

The density reaches an apex at the conclusion of Ashmenton/Vadoo and David/Luna’s dialog with a multiple voice section that brings in five additional vocalists (the other animals from the garden), along with eight of the twelve instrumental soloists. The vocalists’ notated parts move with extreme independence, as text constantly and differently overlaps, while the solo instrumentalists improvise within, against, around, and through the musical/textual composite soundworld.

Anne Rhodes explained to me that the secret password’s appearance in the libretto suggests a shift in the content of the libretto from the action of the scene to the philosophical exegesis. I have not confirmed this relationship with Braxton, and although I can find instances of this shift, there are also many times when the libretto shifts modes without using the secret password.
Saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock, who performed the role of Instrumental Soloist Three when during *Trillium J*’s premiere, recalls that for the most part, the instrumental soloists were left to do their thing—to be themselves within the context of the music. Like the singers, they were chosen because of their abilities as readers of notated music and as improvisers, with the expectation that as improvisers they would use their own voice to meet the demands of the musical moment. “As a soloist…your role was to tune in to the fabric to do what you want to do.” Verbal instructions from Braxton conveyed that the ethos of the music was interactive. The soloists shouldn’t “just blow”; it was “really about the whole…even as a soloist you’re a little piece of the whole thing [and you try to] keep the whole world in mind.…”

One linkage that integrates this whole is the connection between instrumental soloists and specific characters. Although the score does not specify with whom a soloist should be interacting at a given moment, Braxton explained during rehearsals which *Trillium J* characters the instrumentalists should “shadow.” With this in mind, Laubrock came to understand her role as “somehow representing the subconscious of the character.” For example, at the end of Act Four, Laubrock shadows the character of Mrs. Walton, performed by Kristin Fung. Dancer Melanie Maar performs an extended solo throughout this scene, as well. During her solo moments, Laubrock improvises between, around, and within the text, vocal music, and Maar’s movements. Laubrock describes feeling “very strongly a triangle between Melanie, Kristin, and me,” as though they were expressing “different aspects of the same person.” Braxton never specifies the details of this triangulation and multi-perspective expression. Rather, he trusts that sensitive performers will find their way within the music. *Trillium* gives the performers the

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210 Laubrock, conversation with author.
freedom to explore the potential of a given scene as is most fulfilling and meaningful for them. The instrumental soloists and dancers have exceptional improvisational latitude to express their “affinity,” Trillium J’s central philosophical theme (as discussed in Chapter Two).

More broadly, an improvised musical practice offers particular potential for performers to explore their “vibrational nature or sensibility.” In a solo context the improviser negotiates their expressive, sonic, and physical limits and desires in relation to the acoustic space, predetermined musical goals, and the reactions from the audience. The improviser must face head on their own affinities amidst the shifting terrain of the improvised moment, with all its unpredictability. As Braxton expresses it in an interview with Lock, “It seems to me that the significance of improvisation, as it’s been practised through the trans-African continuum, has to do with its relation to affinity dynamics and affinity insight…”

A collective musical experience offers improvisers opportunities to explore other dimensions, such as affinity convergence (“the phenomenon of different vibrational sensibilities coming together”), when an individual’s limits and desires intersect with those of other musicians. When working in an ensemble or group, the improviser’s personal affinities bump up against, resonate with, and conflict with those of others. This is the challenge—and joy—of collective improvisation. If the spiritual dimension of Braxton’s music—its sacred space—exists in its potential to be an arena for individual self-realization, then its ritual dimension fully emerges in its potential for a shared experience.

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211 Braxton, Tri-Axiun Writings, Volume One, 538.
212 Lock, Forces in Motion, 231.
“A negotiated fantasy space”: A Group of Individuals

Throughout his compositional oeuvre, whether composing for one or one hundred players, Braxton has consistently sought to balance individual autonomy with the musical priorities of the piece and demands of the ensemble. Recall, Braxton’s description of freedom as a mixture of fixed and open variables. The themes and music of Braxton’s operas reinforce the idea that the needs of the individual must be balanced with the needs of the group. In fact, self-realization and independence manifest within the space of the collective. “So-called freedom has not helped us as a family, as a collective, to understand responsibility better….”

Many of the operas’ fantasy “backdrops” present different scenarios in which the characters must negotiate their own desire with the demands of their community. In Trillium J, greed and individualism threaten a family unit, an emergent frontier town, an insular mafia organization, and a group of strangers who must survive one night in a creepy, creaky mansion. Similarly, Braxton describes Trillium as a “‘negotiated fantasy world’ that pivots between the vocalist/solo instrumentalists and the conductor (or the conductor and the orchestra) in a vibrational dance that radiates the ‘magic performance space’ on the tri-plane.” This “magic performance space” is the space of Trillium’s ritualization. Ritualization emerges through the shared individual (spiritual) performances and experiences, through the personally seized “opportunities for positive experiences” that emerge from the particular group that coalesces around a performance of an opera.

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213 Cox and Warner, 249-250.
214 Braxton, Liner notes, Trillium J.
215 Ibid.
Ritualization also emerges in the logistics and realities of mounting a *Trillium* performance, which is a decidedly collective undertaking. From my experience performing in the orchestra for *Trillium E* and *J*, I can attest to the collaborative spirit that infuses these productions. A community of performers coheres around the monumental task of performing or recording one of these lengthy, complex, and technically demanding works. Braxton’s energy and passion inspire commitment and openness from the performers. Ingrid Laubrock describes how significant it was to be a part of a project that was “still evolving in rehearsals”: “Anthony would rework things as we were going on along and [others] would facilitate and make it happen…”

The Princess of Curiosity interludes, for example, evolved extensively during rehearsals. This required extensive addition of video footage on short notice.

Video collaborator, saxophonist, and long-time Braxton ensemble member Jonas also emphasizes Braxton’s collaborative approach. As with the singers and the instrumental soloists, Braxton gave Jonas much creative latitude in creating his visual contributions to *Trillium J*. Early on in the process, Jonas and Braxton met in Middletown. They spent the whole day together, talking and looking at Braxton’s sketches for the opera. At the end of the day, Braxton said, “Sir, I’ll leave [the video projections] to you….Make your own creative choices…” As the project developed the collaborative process became more “iterative.” Jonas presented proposed structures, textures, and content for the video and then present this to the principal collaborative team, which included Braxton, director Acushla Bastible, and synchronous conductor and second-in-command Taylor Ho Bynum. Building on their feedback, Jonas continued working

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216 Laubrock, conversation with author.
217 Jonas, conversation with author.
and revising. Jonas likens this more generally to “what it is to be a performer in Anthony’s world.…” You are presented with “impossibly difficult music,” in which you must read complicated polyrhythms, follow a conductor, and then “suddenly there’s a triangle.” This sends you off into other notated material before you rejoin the group. By then, the ensemble has moved on (“which page are you supposed to be on?!”) But in these complex moments your task is actually quite simple: “do your best, and doing your best in collaboration you form a community.…” This series of collective decisions, this collaborative process is the ultimate goal. As Braxton says, “the most important thing for me is to have fun, make a mistake, kick it about, find a surprise. We’re never going to make any money from our music, and since we’re never going to make any money, we might as well do our best.”

Here, finally, lies the answer to Bell’s last question: how does Trillium’s process of ritualization “transcend the powers of human actors”? The possibility to transcend the power of a single human actor exists in the series of collective decisions, the fleeting mistakes and exquisite surprises only possible within Trillium’s collective, collaborative experience.

These transcendent moments, palpable in the joy and exhaustion felt after a performance of Trillium, are but one of Trillium’s many layers—the three layers on which the libretto functions: the apparent story, the philosophical associations, and the spiritual fundamentals; the multi-layered ensemble of singers, instrumental soloists, and orchestra; the layers of composed orchestrational decisions; the trans-temporal approach to time and the trans-harmonic approach to pitch; the many “masks” the singers wear as they perform the roles of archetypal characters,

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218 Ibid.
219 Braxton, “Anthony Braxton explaining the Trillium opera complex during rehearsal 01.31.2014.”
characters within a specific scene, and remain themselves; the triangulated interactions between
the performers; the interaction between the videos, dance, and music. All of these are necessary
for *Trillium* to fulfill its role as ritual music within Braxton’s system. “*Trillium* is conceived as a
forum to experience past, present, and future particulars…[as] an attempt to better appreciate
universal ‘balance’ and vibrational oppositions as well as the beauty and unbeauty of existence
and sound wonder.”

Like other aspects of *Trillium* these transcendent moments are also not as they appear. Or
rather, the moments in *Trillium* that I understand as the stuff of transcendence do not necessarily
appear transcendent. They are not feverish moments of religious ecstasy. These moments do not
take the ritual participants out of their bodies. On the contrary, these collective decisions—many
of which might seem inconsequential or perhaps even quotidian—ground the participants more
solidly in the moment and in their bodies. These bodies are now not only individuated bodies but
bodies interconnected through collaborative sociability.

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220 Braxton, Liner notes, *Trillium E.*
CONCLUSION

I sit down to write this conclusion with a desire to share more of my experiences as a performer and ritual participant in *Trillium J*. The 2014 performances at Roulette are more than three years in the past at this point, and although I’ve poured over the documentation, I haven’t played the music since then. So I put together my bassoon and read through the part I played in order to jog my memory.

Opening the Act One score, I start at the beginning with the *Trillium J* melody. Admittedly, I haven’t been practicing much in the past few months (this document is in part to blame), but the melody is somewhat difficult to play. The line begins with a descending leap of a major seventh, and bounces up and down from there with very little stepwise motion. Some strategic tonguing would make the passage easier to play, but the score contains a *legato* marking, one of the few articulations in my part.

As I warm up, I feel more fluent with the melody and continue on. The first bassoon section entrance reminds me of the richly dissonant writing for the orchestra and takes me back to the demands of playing in the ensemble. Much of the music for the bassoons is written in rhythmic unison with the two instruments hovering a minor second apart from each other. Such passages are difficult to tune. This particular disjunct, dissonant phrase ends with a unison low B-flat leap up to G. There’s no fudging intonation when you shift to such an assertive unison.

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221 It depends on the exact pitches, but on the bassoon, slurring down is generally harder than slurring up.
Braxton’s music is technically demanding. It requires instrumental facility in order to accurately execute the notated material. A pristine performance, however, is never the goal. For me, as a lapsed classical musician, the removal of this pressure to “not mess up” makes performing in the Tri-Centric Orchestra a completely different experience from my previous orchestral experiences. In college, I would spend most of my time in orchestra worrying about missing entrances and coming in out of tune, unable to think about the composition’s formal characteristics or how the ensemble was functioning as a whole. When performing *Trillium J*, I’m sure I miscounted a few rests and I know I had to be very attentive to keep those seconds in tune, but these mistakes didn’t dominate my experience. I knew the music was about much more.

Without this cloud of accuracy anxiety hanging over my head, I was able to play, to listen, watch, and enjoy *Trillium J*. This afforded me the mental space to attend not only to my own performance, but to expand outward from there. During rehearsals and shows, I remember thinking about the Braxtonian quality of the bassoon section’s sound. I recall reflecting on how the winds interacted during a Language Music improvisation. I know I remarked to myself on how amazing Vincent Chancey’s French horn solos were and how joyful the jump rope interlude felt. I laughed at funny moments in the libretto [Fig. 33]. I enjoyed the costumes and projections, when I could see them. I appreciated the singers’ virtuosity and diction, and I empathized with the string section during their difficult pizzicato passages in Act Three. This mental freedom to explore the music while performing helped me feel connected to the other musicians and enhanced the collaborative spirit that Braxton fostered in rehearsals and behind the scenes.

These moments—when my awareness darted around the band and back-and-forth between the sounds, the meanings, and the interpersonal dynamics of the ensemble, cast, and
crew—were not “mistakes” or instances of distracted attention that I would reproach myself for. Rather, these were moments when I was participating in *Trillium’s* processes of ritualization. As a ritual participant, my musical self-expression gained meaning in how it connected me to others. My multivalent thinking was evidence of my embodied participation in *Trillium’s* ritualization and a subtle instantiation of the opera’s transcedent power. I did not lose the experience of individual musical expression; rather, my personal self-realization was made possible by an awareness of connections to others. Bell defines the ritual body in the singular, as “a body invested with a ‘sense’ of ritual.”²²² Transcendence in *Trillium* exists when we ritual bodies found a “sense of ritual” through plurality.

*Trillium* lives and breathes on the tension between self-definition and shared experience within Braxton’s complex and particular cosmology. Like any world view, Braxton’s will connect with certain individuals more than others. Not everyone will find their way into this philosophical-spiritual-aesthetic ritual built around such a distinctive music, and even for those of us who do, the transcendent potential is not immediate or guaranteed. Like in other practices the ritual bodies will not necessarily experience transcendence. Rather, persistence and engaged participation predicated on a hope that this transcendence might reveal itself is necessary.

A very palpable feeling of hope is what brings me back to *Trillium* as a performer and friendly experiencer. *Trillium’s* stories and music are not simplistically optimistic, but they persist. The scenarios explore humans and groups in process. There are problems but the jury is still out. In its musical rigor and generous humor, *Trillium* encourages me to retain hope. Braxton

²²² *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 98.
very directly conveys a positivity grounded in sustained creative work to his collaborators and those friendly experiencers afforded the opportunity to speak with him about the music.²²³

For me, the enduring effect of Braxton’s work—with *Trillium* as its ultimate expression—is as a model for how to build a socially conscious creative practice. Working with Braxton and participating in the ritual of *Trillium* is not the end, rather it is part of a larger process that each of us must follow on our own. Braxton’s work and experiences with *Trillium* have been important parts of my development of a personal creative practice. Braxton’s cosmology is beautiful, powerful, and inspiring but one of its fundamental principle is that we must each find our own perspectives, build our own cosmology, and make our own music. Braxton’s unflagging commitment to this ongoing process, to a life’s work dedicated self-realization and musical sociability, invigorates me to persist with my own music and to evolve this work through self-reflection, collaboration, and by cultivating community.

²²³ Online sources—there are many choice video clips on YouTube—provide another access point. Braxton speaks about his work with an honesty that opens the experience up to the uninitiated, despite his idiosyncratic vocabulary and syntax. I have witnessed this in my teaching. In a course on improvisation, I teach Braxton’s Language Music system. Students report finding it difficult—and even off-putting at first to read Braxton’s writing or listen to the music without context. Watching a few videos of Braxton speaking about his work, about the ideas behind it and what the music means for him, however, draws the students in. Several of the initially most skeptical ultimately found deep inspiration from his musical system for their own creative practice.
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Fig. 8 - *Trillium J* cast and crew photo (photo credit: Dylan McLaughlin)

Fig. 9 - *Trillium J* premiere production DVD screenshot: Act One
Fig. 10 - *Trillium J* premiere production DVD screenshot: Act One

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Fig. 15 - *Trillium J* premiere production DVD screenshot: Act Four
Fig. 16 - *Trillium J* premiere production DVD screenshot: Act Four

![Fig. 16 - *Trillium J* premiere production DVD screenshot: Act Four](image)

**Opening Chords**

![Opening Chords](image)

Fig. 17 - *Trillium J* comparison of each acts opening chord

![Fig. 17 - *Trillium J* comparison of each acts opening chord](image)
Fig. 18 - *Trillium J* premiere production DVD screenshot: Act Four

Fig. 19 - *Trillium J* premiere production DVD screenshot: Act Four
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![Fig. 20 - *Trillium J* premiere production DVD screenshot: Act Two](image)

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