



# Everybody Is a Star!: Uplift, Citizenship, and the Cross-Racial Politics of 1970s U.S. Popular Culture

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*Everybody Is a Star!:*

*Uplift, Citizenship, and the Cross-Racial Politics of 1970s U.S. Popular Culture*

a dissertation presented

by

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to

The Committee on Higher Degrees in American Studies

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Everybody is a Star!: Uplift, Citizenship and the Cross-Racial Politics of 1970s U.S.

Popular Culture

Abstract

“Everybody is a Star!: Uplift, Citizenship and the Cross-Racial Politics of 1970s U.S. Popular Culture,” examines the ways in which popular culture in the mid-1970s operated as a site of citizenship formation for marginalized subjects, particularly African Americans, in the decade after the Civil Rights advances of the 1960s.

Historically, the cultural production of black people in the United States has occupied a curious position, cohering as both a foundation of *and* marginal to the larger narrative of American popular culture. As a result of that positioning, African American popular culture often strikes a balance between expressing both “national” and “racial” identities. My dissertation looks at the tensions inherent in such a balancing act, and contemplates what roles history, cultural appropriation and citizenship formation as a process of “cultural adaptation” play in the production, dissemination and maintenance of African American cultural production.

I first analyze this work—popular music, Hollywood film and Broadway theater aimed at mainstream audiences—as cultural citizenship work, broadly defined as the production of and interaction with culture by marginalized individuals as a way to negotiate the terms of citizenship alongside the more formal, political arenas in which citizenship is enacted.

In the first chapter, I use a case study of the 1976 musical *Bubbling Brown Sugar* to argue that the aesthetic labor of this cultural citizenship work was used by African American culture producers to align the divergent strands of the “national” and the “racial.” Through analysis of *The Wiz* and *Saturday Night Fever* my second and third chapters ask a similar question yet from different, perhaps opposing textual vantage points: how does cross-racial cultural sharing enhance yet critique the American project? How can we theorize what I call the “usability” of race across the “color line” to critique embodied practices of cultural belonging?

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## INTRODUCTION

1.

“What is this ‘black’ in black popular culture?” Cultural theorist Stuart Hall first asked this question in 1991 at a three-day conference in New York City.<sup>1</sup> In one way, Hall’s question was an attempt to get at a meaning for a mutable, unstable, historically constituted racial identity marker. In his attempt to de-naturalize and historicize this “black,” Hall encourages attention toward the “dialogic” and “hybrid” ways in which “blackness” circulates within and throughout cultural production as an aesthetic rather than as some concretized, biologically rendered essence.<sup>2</sup> Even as he cites bell hooks and Gayatri Spivak to suggest that some aspect of “essentialism” has been necessary, historically, for racialized subjects to “win some space,” Hall ultimately posits that the signifier “black” plays out in an arena that is “*profoundly* mythic.”<sup>3</sup> Not only is this blackness in popular culture, mythic. It is also “contradictory...a sight of strategic contestation.”<sup>4</sup>

Hall’s question or, at least, a version of this question, is the topic that generated this dissertation. Expanding upon Hall, this dissertation asks: “What is this ‘black’ in *American* popular culture?” This dissertation considers the ways in which African American cultural producers—at the historic moment when Americans are not only grappling with the complicated legacies of the groundbreaking Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s and the lingering effects of Black Power rhetoric, but also dealing with the

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent and Michele Wallace (The New Press, 1998), 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

jingoistic celebration of the nation's Bicentennial—sought to use popular culture to align the “racial” aspects of themselves and their work with the “national” aspects of themselves and their work, to conceive of themselves as racial(ized) subjects working in a national(ized) context. Here I also think of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s formation of “blackness of (the) tongue.”<sup>5</sup> Gates is suggesting a theory of “difference” in African American literary production, a difference constitutive of black English vernacular. I am interested in how that vernacular, that “blackness of tongue,” has been embedded in American popular culture more broadly, in the musical and theatrical performance that is the basis of it. As African American cultural production has cohered as simultaneously *foundational of* and *marginal to* the American project, African American artists in the 1970s used popular culture to embed blackness—the floating signifier that is race, as Stuart Hall has called it—into the firmament of the American cultural imaginary.<sup>6</sup>

Borrowing from the work of theorists of immigration and cultural adaptation, I argue that the work being done by African American performers and producers, on Broadway stages, in recording studios, on film screens, is a kind of cultural citizenship work, meant to build upon the political and legal attainment of citizenship as mandated through legislation (or birthright). Gerald Delanty posits cultural citizenship as a way to use culture such as food, music, and clothing to bring about societal inclusion beyond the official mandates of purely civic responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> Aiwha Ong considers cultural

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<sup>5</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 92.

<sup>6</sup> “Stuart Hall - Race, the Floating Signifier - | Media Education Foundation,” accessed April 6, 2016, <http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=407>.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald Delanty, “Two Conceptions of Cultural Citizenship: A Review of Recent Literature on Culture and Citizenship,” *Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 1, no. 3 (March 3, 2002): 60–66.



citizenship a dual process of “self-making and being-made” within the larger narrative of the nation’s civic and legal regimes, wherein the individual uses culture, rather than solely civic duties—voting, taxpaying—to self-fashion as a member of the larger polity.<sup>8</sup> Delanty, Ong, Renaldo Rosato and others frame cultural citizenship as a kind of activism, in which the oppressed body uses cultural forms to further embed themselves into the national fabric, to braid together the “racial” and the “national.” “Everybody is a Star!” thinks about the ways in which the work of many black cultural producers cohered as cultural citizenship work in the 1970s.

It can be a risky proposition to prescribe temporal boundaries to any particular historical moment. However, I situate my work in the 1970s in order to mark what I observe as a transitional moment during which African Americans—buttressed by the Civil Rights gains of the 1950s and 60s, but before the global cross-over abundance of the 1980s—staked a claim for themselves and the importance of their contributions in the (popular) cultural sphere. During the 1970s black cultural producers built upon the labor of previous generations to ensure that blacks no longer occupied a position, to quote Todd Boyd, as “objects within popular culture,” but as subjects in control of their representation.<sup>9</sup>

The kind of cultural work in the 1970s I am talking about was not new for African Americans. Blacks in the U.S. have long used culture—their music and literature, especially—to contribute to and embed themselves in the national artistic landscape. By

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<sup>8</sup> Aihwa Ong, “Cultural Citizenship as Subject Making,” *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 5 (December 1996): 737–62.

<sup>9</sup> Todd Boyd, *African Americans and Popular Culture*, vol. Vol. 1 Theater, Film and Television (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2008), viii.

hoping for that work to signify their humanity in the face of oppression, black culture workers intended for that work to have political and social value as well.

In the 1970s, however, the artistic and cultural landscape had changed quite drastically from the time of, say, the Harlem Renaissance. First, and perhaps most obviously, technology had changed, making it possible for cultural products to reach wider, more diverse audiences faster than ever; from records to film to television, the growing ease and speed with which products could move from production to distribution to consumption resulted in enormous sales, box office receipts, and ratings that created not just massive income for producers but also created new markets for the distribution of goods. Second, in the 1970s, ownership of the means of cultural production—record labels, production companies, theaters—became a real and tangible possibility for African Americans not content to just be the talent on stage. Considering the long and complicated history of black talent becoming famous while also being exploited by white power brokers who, in many ways, “owned” their artistry, the chance to own the vehicles by which black culture could reach the public was a significant change.

Add to these changes the rise of Black Studies programs in universities across the nation, which created not just a space for the study and appreciation of African American history and culture but also contributed to the development of a substantial black middle class eager to support black artistic work, and the stage was set, so to speak, for the kind of “boom” in black popular culture that the *New York Times* wrote about in 1976.

Yet, for all these apparently positive strides, the 1970s maintains a decidedly fraught reputation, marked as it was by economic downturns, political scandal, and

seismic social shifts. Historian Andrew Killen calls the decade “a virtual synonym for weakness, confusion, and malaise.”<sup>10</sup> It was “an odd blend,” wrote David Kennedy, “of political disillusionment and pop-culture daffiness that gave the 1970s their distinctive flavor.”<sup>11</sup> Though historian Thomas Borstelmann describes the 1970s as “a decade of ill repute,”<sup>12</sup> he also acknowledges that it was a time with “unprecedented opportunity to press for reform and improvement of American society,” a time when “Americans moved to eliminate the remnants of discrimination from public life.” Borstelmann’s two-sided description of the decade speaks quite well to the state of black people and race relations in the decade. Perhaps to describe the decade in pop cultural terms, it was a time when black communities found themselves either, as per the theme song of the sitcom *Good Times*, “keeping their head[s] above water” while “scratching and surviving” amid “temporary lay offs and easy credit ripoffs,” while others were, like the black family on *The Jeffersons*, now “up in the big leagues” getting a turn at bat as they were “movin’ on up.”

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It is not surprising that the theme songs quoted above reference the perils of the labor of black people in their lyrics, even as they point out some version of “success.”

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<sup>10</sup> Andreas Killen, *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol, and the Birth of Post-Sixties America*, Reprint edition (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2007), 2.

<sup>11</sup> David Kennedy, editor’s introduction to *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore* by James T. Patterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), xii.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013), 1.

During the 1970s the tensions between “scratching and surviving” and “movin’ on up” may have been evident across the racial line, for African Americans the chance to “get [a] turn at bat” often arrived only through diligent political and social work. Even as their representation grew on stages and screens around the country, African American performers and artists were still fighting a system that often rendered their aesthetic and creative labor sidebars to the national narrative of inclusion, of “shared culture”. In the 1970s, African American cultural workers (often alongside whites) took advantage of the legal and political strides created by the Civil Rights Movement to find a way to re-center that labor, to work to insure continued representation in the 1970s.

Broadway in the 1970s is a good example.

In an essay about popular culture, theater historian David Savran points to Broadway as, at one time, a “national tradition,” a monument of a “shared, participatory culture” that linked Americans through their love and appreciation of the “so-called pop standards that between the 1920s and the 1960s, were listened to, sung, and applauded by millions.”<sup>13</sup> What Savran does not refer to in his essay is the fact that during those glory years between the 1920s and the 1960s, African American talent did not get to perform those pop standards or share, on stage, in that participatory culture as readily and easily as white performers. There were, indeed, black performers in Broadway shows—musicals more likely than not—but Broadway at that time was not much different, of course, than U.S. society at large: in the years preceding the Civil Rights gains of the 1960s, African Americans were shut out of many aspects of society.

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<sup>13</sup> David Savran, “Toward a Historiography of the Popular,” *Theatre Survey* 45, no. 2 (2004): 211.

In a 1976 *New York Times* article about the rise in black talent on Broadway and the increasing numbers of black audiences coming to witness it, theater critic Mel Gussow referred to Broadway as “the Great Black Way,” playing on the “Great White Way” nickname that had adorned Broadway for years, and which had over the course of the past few decades become increasingly, racially, descriptive in terms of its lack of black talent.<sup>14</sup> Gussow’s article reported on the growing amount of black talent both onstage and behind the scenes. “There is so much black talent working there—actors, singers, writers, directors,” Gussow wrote.<sup>15</sup>

A month after that article appeared, Eleanor Holmes Norton, head of the New York City Commission on Human Rights (NYCHR), opened a public hearing to investigate hiring practices of Broadway orchestras. Acting as chairperson for the day’s proceedings, Norton acknowledged Broadway’s vast cultural impact upon the theater-going public, saying in her opening, “Broadway often tells us how we act and how to act.”<sup>16</sup> Her words align well with Savran’s point, with the ways in which Broadway—bearing its reputation as a site of universalist, middlebrow entertainment—had been thought of over the years. However, even as the Commission on Human Rights hearing that November day was occurring during a new “boom” in black presence on Broadway—and in popular culture beyond Broadway—it was titled “The Exclusionary Effect on Minority Musicians.” It was a hearing investigate the increasingly noticeable

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<sup>14</sup> Mel Gussow, “Broadway Enjoying Black Talent Boom,” *The New York Times*, October 15, 1976, C1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> New York City Commission on Human Rights, “Hiring Practices for Broadway Musical Orchestras: The Exclusionary Effect on Minority Musicians,” November 18, 1976, 4.

inequities faced by minority pit musicians trying to find work in the musicals appearing on the Great White Way, despite the growing black presence on Broadway stages.

There may have been many notable black singers and dancers gracing Broadway stages in 1976, directed and costumed and choreographed by African American talent like Vinnette Carroll, Geoffrey Holder, George Faison and Billy Wilson, even further behind the scenes, in the unseen orchestra pits from which emanated the music that animated the hit musicals, there was an increasingly noticeable dearth of black talent getting hired by the (overwhelmingly white) contractors tasked by producers with the role of staffing orchestras.

Commissioner Norton's hearing accomplished several things, as it revealed perhaps unexpected consequences to the reported "boom" in black talent on Broadway in the 1970s. It showed that despite the excitement of seeing black talent occupy a more central position on Broadway stages and increasingly public representations of black mainstream success, the glamour of that success, the performances of African American artistic excellence that garnered celebratory newspaper columns, could still obscure the kinds of structural inequities that had so plagued African American labor opportunities in the Broadway space (as well as in entertainment beyond Broadway)<sup>17</sup>. The hearing also brought attention to a deep irony: the ways in which—to quote Savran—Broadway, a "national tradition" of "shared, participatory culture" partially created by the music and talent of African Americans, nonetheless participated in the continued rendering of black

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<sup>17</sup> Earlier in the decade, the Los Angeles Musicians Union grappled with the lack of hiring of black musicians for television show orchestras. For more on the protests and debates around that issue, see Bill Lane, "Are Black Musicians Denied Top TV Jobs?," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 7, 1971, B17.

performance as invisible, as unacknowledged and bereft of the mainstream reckoning it desired and deserved.

The way in which the cultural citizens of 1970s popular culture attempted to shift that paradigm, during the volatile period bordered by the end of the “classic” Civil Rights era and the period historians have called the end of the Black Power era, is the focus of my dissertation. I am interested in the ways in which African American cultural workers in the mainstream popular arts of the mid-to-late 1970s built upon the political and social advancements made possible through Civil Rights legislation and the cultural imperatives of Black Nationalism and Black Power to (re)claim for blacks a more fully recognizable role in the creation and maintenance of popular culture in the U.S.

3.

But even I am invested in thinking about this “blackness” in American popular culture, this project is just as curious about the “whiteness” therein as well. Or, to be more precise, the ways in which certain bodies have become “white,” particularly through the ways in which they shared with, parodied, appropriated, and helped to create “blackness” here in the U.S. “Everybody is a Star!” looks at the “cross-racial”-ness of American (popular) culture, the bred-in-bone mulatto-ness of American (popular) culture (to cite Albert Murray).<sup>18</sup>

And because I am invested in that “cross-racial”-ness, the archive from which I draw my main texts of study in “Everybody Is A Star!” are performances, theater pieces, films and music which are considered “mainstream” in their appeal and consumption.

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<sup>18</sup> Albert Murray, *The Omni Americans* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1983), 22.

They are, also, what scholar Dana Heller, building from Richard Dyer, has termed “unruly delights.”<sup>19</sup> In his work on film, Dyer argues for a methodological approach that factors in the need for considering the “radical pleasures” of entertainments that do not immediately conjure the sorts of ideologically bound readings to which academic critique seems so drawn. My texts of study are Broadway musicals, (black) Hollywood romances, Blaxploitation films, disco music and pop songs and the divas who sing them. These texts were chosen, in part, for their unruliness: in the case of the black Broadway musical revues, disco, and Motown music and film, and a 1970s teen dance drama which I posit as a “white Blaxploitation film,” I wanted to think about the “blackness of (the) tongue” and how that “blackness” has been inflected by the influence of and relation to “whiteness” in terms of production and reception. I also wanted to consider how, in the 1970s, these unruly delights do, nonetheless, arrive with their own mix of “political disillusionment and pop-culture daffiness,” as outlined by David Kennedy, providing ample access to think about blackness, its usability, as an aesthetic, a politic, a site of becoming.<sup>20</sup>

“Everybody is a Star!” is organized to examine the ways in which blackness and the way it has been embedded into popular culture has been inflected by history, by hybridity, and by appropriation. The dissertation opens with a chapter about Broadway primarily because of the history of theatrical performance which predates the more modern representations exhibited through film and recorded music. Broadway also has roots in the complex nuances of minstrel performance and is also one of the first sites of African

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<sup>19</sup> Dana Heller, *Hairspray* (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 6.

<sup>20</sup> Kennedy, introduction, xii.



American ownership and control of production. In the 1970s, Broadway became a premiere site of black historical narratives supported and advanced by the financial ownership by black producers and the creative ownership of black playwrights and directors, and my goal with this chapter is to goal to correct the historiographical distortion that has resulted from the unnatural removal of African American Broadway musicals from the history of Broadway entertainment as well as the narrative of black popular culture influenced by the cultural, political and economic Black Power rhetoric that defined the 1970s. The scholarship on black expressive culture could benefit from a restoration into the scholarly picture of a cultural history that tries to reveal connections between socio-political projects like cultural citizenship and aesthetic labors that were always there. That is where my work intervenes.

“Strollin’ Through Broadway History: *Bubbling Brown Sugar* and the Performance of Cultural Citizenship in the 1970s,” looks at the 1970s revival of the African American musical revue. Between 1975 and 1981, Broadway saw a succession of successful all-black (or mostly black) revues, most of which were biographical in approach or simply built around choreographed songbooks of noted African American composers. Among these shows were *Eubie*, *Ain’t Misbehavin’*, *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, *Me & Bessie*, and *Sophisticated Ladies*. Big hits on the Broadway stage, as well as touring productions in major American cities, these shows were upbeat, celebratory affairs that usually eschewed the traditional “book musical” format and foregrounded instead the litanies of hits written and performed by such era-defining musical artists as Eubie Blake, Fats Waller, Bessie Smith and Duke Ellington, acting often as tuneful history lessons about the entertainment legacies of African Americans.

In this chapter I argue that this cohort of musical revues had as their central project the historicizing of the early twentieth century African American musical. As popular as these composers had been in their time, as influential as the music and choreography of their shows are considered to be, as classic as their songs have become, representative as many of them are of both the so-called Jazz Age and the mid-century modernist moment, there is often little mention of many of them next to names like Gershwin, Berlin, and Porter in the Broadway historiography and what has been named the Great American Songbook. Popular vocalists and song stylists have recorded many of these composer's songs, yet few of them are anointed with the "greatness" accorded white composers of the same era. I posit that this moment in 1970s Broadway musicals, the decade whose middle was dominated by a Bicentennial celebration of America and her culture, was also a reclamation project, a way to reclaim a position of "greatness" for these composers in the narrative of American aesthetic exceptionalism that had come to define Broadway musical theater. These producers and cultural workers were working through a desire to correct the erasure of this talent from the American musical theatre narrative, to re-enshrine black music into its place as an architectural building block of Broadway music. As Harry Elam writes, "The lack of [a] written down history for African Americans has often meant that performance becomes a subversive strategy, acting as a form of historical resistance to the omission of the black presence."<sup>21</sup>

Even though there was criticism of the capitalistic, middle-brow (and predominantly white) Broadway theater space among many black nationalist-leaning critics and thinkers, I argue that the productions of these historical African American

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<sup>21</sup> Harry Elam, "Making History: Rethinking African American Theatre Historiography," *Theatre Survey* 45, no. 2 (October 2004): 219–27.

revues, often by black producers, operate in a neo-nationalistic way. They did not traffic in the kind of aggressively political racial rhetoric of the time, but these productions were very often the result of overt African American resistance to white control of black bodies, voices and music on the Broadway stage, and the methods taken by some of these producers to ensure African American audiences were based often in the discourses of localized, grassroots community building learned from the much-documented work of Black Power activists.<sup>22</sup> With these revues, I believe, these African American producers, like Woodie King and Ken Harper, were *making* African American cultural history by *making* history *about* African American culture. Harry Elam writes, “The history of African American performance is always already implicated in the history of African American social, cultural and political struggles for freedom.”<sup>23</sup> And though his point discusses the emphasis on historicism needed to rethink current scholarship on African American theater, his theorizing that “African Americans can and do make history, [that] these performances constitute history in themselves” also speaks directly to the processes of history-making and –sharing that defines the revues I write about in this chapter. “The process of history can be one of imaginative creation, “ he writes. “History is not simply found but made.”<sup>24</sup>

Chapter 2, “The Black Version: Citation, Adaptation, and the Blackness(es) of Motown Film Production,” thinks about what’s often been called “the black version.” One finds “black versions” in various kinds of popular culture forms, though my research

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<sup>22</sup> Mance Williams, *Black Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s : A Historical-Critical Analysis of the Movement*, Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, 0069-0624 ; No. 87 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), 69.

<sup>23</sup> Elam, “Making History: Rethinking African American Theatre Historiography,” 219.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

has found that the Broadway theater utilized the form more than almost any kind of media or theater form. In the 1970s, the most famous and successful “black version” on television was the NBC sitcom *Sanford and Son*, which was adapted by American producers from a British comedy series. In the US, “black versions” in popular theater date back to the dueling *Mikados* which appeared on Broadway in the late 1930s. Both adaptations of the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *The Mikado*, one show, *Hot Mikado*, billed itself as “jazzier” than the WPA production of *Swing Mikado*. Popular due to the starring role played by the legendary Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, the *Hot Mikado* played the World’s Fair after appearing on Broadway. Another early Broadway “black version” was Oscar Hammerstein’s *Carmen Jones*, in 1943, which was an adaptation of the Bizet opera, updated to a present-day African American community. The “black versions” disappeared for many years on Broadway—though that might have been because black performers on the whole disappeared from Broadway stages. During its “golden age,” despite the sonic beauty and choreographic excellence derived from black forms, its musical origins in black American dance music and jazz, Broadway was a white performance zone. The box office and touring success of David Merrick’s all-black *Hello, Dolly!* featuring Pearl Bailey and Cab Calloway as Thornton Wilder’s early 20<sup>th</sup> century matchmaker and millionaire led to producers working hard to locate black talent and bring them to Broadway. *Guys and Dolls*, *The Pajama Game* and *Kismet* were three classic 1950s musicals brought to life with black talent.

But what exactly does a “black version” mean? Particularly when one considers the musical and choreographic origins of Broadway performance styles, steeped as they are in blackness, dating back, some theater historians believe, to minstrel shows and

“coon” shows that drew large audiences at the turn of the century and just after? Many “black versions” were merely producers capitalizing on the sudden vogue of black talent on Broadway. But what does it mean to do a “black version” in the 1970s, in the decade after the progressive strides made for African Americans in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement? Theater writer Warren Hoffman asks, “Were these productions a kind of reverse minstrel show?”<sup>25</sup> Considering the years in which black performers were not given roles in Broadway musicals (unless the part called for a slave character in one of the many shows depicting life in the pre-Civil War South), why, now that black actors were being cast, were they being cast in roles already made famous by white performers? Was this a kind of Civil Rights advance? Did the “black version” merely satisfy white liberal guilt over shutting out black performers, resulting in a “sharing” of white cultural production as a site of political and social change? Was the black performer somehow uplifted by now appearing in a show made famous by white people?

Perhaps the biggest “black version” of the 1970s was *The Wiz*, a soul musical adaptation of the L. Frank Baum classic series of children’s novels. *The Wiz* ran for many years and won multiple Tony Awards and staked a claim as one of the biggest shows of the 1970s, fighting past the resistance of critics and some audience members who felt as if such a classic narrative—made even more so by MGM’s classic film starring Judy Garland—should not have been sullied by a “soul” version. *The Wiz* became a motion picture, produced by Motown, the record label which defined “crossover” in the 1960s and 70s, yet was often scrutinized and criticized for seeming “whitened” or “watered down” compared to real, authentic black music. In fact, Diana Ross, the biggest star at

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<sup>25</sup> Warren Hoffman, *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 115.

Motown found herself being called “The Black Streisand”—a black version of a white pop star (and ultimately, like Diana, movie star). In many ways, perhaps Diana Ross and Motown courted the “black version” comparisons. Diana Ross and the Supremes even recorded an album of songs from *Funny Girl*, Streisand’s big Broadway and movie hit. What did it mean that a black act worked so hard to be a pop act, to use sleek Hollywood glamour as a mode of presentation that went against the expected grain of rough-hewn black r&b? What did it mean that Diana Ross, a black woman, was called a “black Streisand,” when Streisand, a Jewish woman, made a name for herself singing the kinds of bluesy torch songs made famous by older singers influenced by black blues and jazz singers? How does one frame black cultural production or black performance through a prism of white-embodied performance? When does this framing foreground influence rather than reference citation? This chapter grapples with what I posit as the “usability” of race, particularly around this post-Civil Rights time in the 1970s when black freedoms allow black cultural workers to shake off the expectations of “blackness”.

In Chapter 3, “‘Say it light/I’m white and outasight’: Social Belonging, Ethnic Revival and the Disco Crossings of *Saturday Night Fever*,” I posit *Saturday Night Fever*, the popular 1977 disco-set teen movie, as a “white Blaxploitation film.” Deeply embedded in the cross-racial enmity at play in big urban US cities in the mid-70s, *Saturday Night Fever* depicts the daily lives of a bunch of working-class Italian boys who find selfhood in the way in which they separate themselves from black people while yet finding influence for their style, mobility and popular culture through blackness.

This chapter thinks about *Saturday Night Fever* as not just a film about the 70s but also a historical document of the era, when major shifts in political affiliations and

Civil Rights advances for African Americans which resulted in communities of white ethnics feeling left out of the national narrative, a time when the idea of the American melting pot gave way to new notions of pluralism and ethnic pride. “Kiss Me, I’m Irish...or Italian...or German,” t-shirts read. One magazine asked “If there’s Black Power, why isn’t there Ukrainian Power?”<sup>26</sup> In the midst of this dramatic cross-racial strife, however, there was a music genre called disco. Dying its last breaths as the movie was released, it saw a newfound popularity thanks in part to the catchy tunes written and performed by the Bee Gees. Only this time, the symbol of cross-racial, cross-gender, cross-sexuality sharing emblemized by disco’s “everyone is a star” mentality was a rough, working class Italian kid who used the n-word easily and treated women poorly. The symbol of disco became a white suit, so symbolic in itself as the costume, the uniform, for white ethnic male pleasure in a world where joy seemed in such short supply.

When, this chapter asks, is cross-racial sharing more than the cultural appropriation that it seems to be? How does a film that steals all its tricks, sonically, narratively, market-wise, from the success of Blaxploitation films, exploit blackness while also celebrating it, exalt blackness while also stealing from it, loving it, as per Eric Lott, but also thieving its pop cultural dominance? By thinking about *Saturday Night Fever* as a document from the frontlines of urban malaise and despair, I try to locate the possibility for some moment of utopic possibility, where the diva citizenship of Tony Manero—his public moment to shine where his joy can push against, resist, the ways in which he himself is a victimized by society—can result in not just white mastery of

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<sup>26</sup> Dominic Sandbrook, *Mad as Hell: The Crisis of the 1970s and the Rise of the Populist Right* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2011).

blackness and black forms, but a genuine redemption story that uses race as a conduit to something bigger than our limited, circumscribed states of being.

In closing, I cite Henry Louis Gates, Jr. from his book *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*. He writes: "...Every black American text must confess to a complex ancestry, one high and one low (literary and vernacular), but also one white and one black. There can be no doubt that white texts inform and influence black texts (and vice versa), so that a thoroughly integrated canon of American literature is not only politically sound, it is intellectually sound as well."<sup>27</sup> Though he writes of literature here, his point is profoundly applicable to culture writ large.

It is important to emphasize that this dissertation aims to think about and reveal the "black" in American popular culture in the 70s as it operates through cross-racial exchange. It seeks to locate, historicize and think about the "usability" of the "blackness" which is embedded so deeply into the American cultural firmament. But it is not a dissertation searching for the essential nature of blackness as a way to suggest the import of cultural representation. I hope it points to the ways in which cross-racial exchange results in a richer vein of culture to tap, which reveals new ways of considering black history, appropriation, and the various kinds of technologies which have influenced the circulation of blackness as a performative, usable aesthetic.

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<sup>27</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr, *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 39.



*Chapter 1*  
*Strollin' Through Broadway History: Bubbling Brown*  
*Sugar and the Performance of Cultural Citizenship in the*  
*1970s*

“If history were past, history wouldn’t matter. History is present... You and I are history. We carry our history. We act our history.”

~ James Baldwin<sup>1</sup>

### **The Great Black Way and the Black Artist as Cultural Citizen**

Broadway theaters in the 1970s, like other popular cultural forms in the US, felt the effects of the galvanic political victories marked by the Civil Rights legislations of the 1960s. Broadway stages in the Times Square area of New York City began to be populated by significant numbers of African American performers, as both leading and secondary characters, and often as entire casts. African American performers appeared so frequently on Broadway stages that *New York Times* critic and columnist Mel Gussow famously referred to the theater district as “the Great Black Way,” playing on the famous “Great White Way” nickname that had adorned Broadway since 1902.<sup>2</sup>

Theater historian Samuel O’Connell (building upon James Hatch’s contention that the 1900s and 1920s were the two greatest decades of black musicals) calls the 1970s, with its increased African American presence and the acknowledgement of African American history which arrived through many of the productions in the 1970s, the third great decade of the black musical.<sup>3</sup> The shows of this era existed in a moment rendered commercially viable for blacks by an increased mobilization of African American representation in the U.S. public sphere. But there were also political and social implications in the rise of black representation on the stages of Broadway. Inspired by the

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Mead and James Baldwin, *A Rap on Race*. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1971), 188.

<sup>2</sup> Mel Gussow, “Broadway Enjoying Black Talent Boom,” *The New York Times*, October 15, 1976, C1.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel O’Connell, “Fragmented Musicals and 1970s Soul Aesthetic,” in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre*, ed. Harvey Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 158.

social, political and cultural developments in the United States in the early-to-mid 1970s—for instance, the rise in numbers of an educated black middle class with spending power and the creation of black studies programs in numerous American universities—the increase in black presence on Broadway, I will argue in this chapter, was also marked by two significant dynamics: the “post-Civil Rights” era rhetoric of Black Power and the complicated racial dynamics of maintaining what Renato Rosaldo and other theorists have construed as “cultural citizenship.”

In 1976, Vinnette Carroll, the producer and director of *Your Arms Too Short to Box with God*, one of the biggest hits of the 1970s, explained in a press release about the show: “...black awareness has grown and black people have begun to like themselves better. We, as a people, have been increasingly able to deal with the serious concepts of black self image...Now that we can comfortably use ourselves as positive images and know that we have black audiences to relate to, like every other group of people, we find comfort and strong reinforcement in our heroic figures.”<sup>4</sup> In an interview I conducted with George Faison, the Tony-winning choreographer of *The Wiz*, Faison described the decade as a liberatory period for African American artists on Broadway: “We were twentieth century people liberated from the shackles of stereotypes that had preceded us. We still talked black and sang black and danced black, but the *attitude* had changed.”<sup>5</sup> Though the references to “heroic figures” and “attitudes” hint at a consideration of “representation” as a primary mode of analysis, this chapter instead aims to take Carroll’s and Faison’s proclamations as a starting point toward reading the work of several black

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<sup>4</sup> Press Release, Vinnette Carroll and The Merlin Group, LTD., “On the State of Bliss” (Press Release, New York, N.Y., n.d.), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>5</sup> George Faison, Interview by Scott Poulson-Bryant, New York, NY, July 21, 2014.

Broadway artists in the 1970s as not just heroes but as liberated cultural citizens engaging in aesthetically heroic, cultural citizenship work that sought to align the divergent “racial” and the “national” narratives that often define American popular culture.

Theorists of social and cultural movements, particularly in the area of immigration and Latino Studies, have produced useful insights about the work of “cultural citizenship,” which is often broadly defined as the production of and interaction with culture by marginalized individuals as a way to negotiate the terms of citizenship alongside the more formal, political arenas in which citizenship is enacted. Pieter Boele van Hensbroek regards cultural citizenship through the lens of political and social activism. It is, he writes, “the ability to co-author the cultural context in which one lives,” adding that cultural citizenship is the work that creates space in which “to be co-producer, or co-author, of the cultural contexts (webs of meaning) in which one participates.”<sup>6</sup> As both an “ongoing struggle and site of lived experience,” cultural citizenship often arrives in the context of popular culture and reflects the ways in which marginalized individuals locate his or her position as a member of a larger community.<sup>7</sup> In his work about film, Toby Miller observes that “The popular and the civic brush up against each other.” In the collision of these spheres, Miller argues, there is an alliance of activist work and popular culture production that allows marginalized communities to experience political *and* cultural belonging. I take up this definition of cultural citizen to show in this chapter the ways in which African Americans on in the very mainstream, “middlebrow” space of Broadway, approximately ten years from the civil rights advances

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<sup>6</sup> Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, “Cultural Citizenship as a Normative Notion for Activist Practices,” *Citizenship Studies* 14, no. 3 (June 2010): 322.

<sup>7</sup> Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, “Mediated Citizenship(s): An Introduction,” *Social Semiotics* 16, no. 2 (June 2006): 197.

which assured their *political* positions as citizens of the United States, were continuing the work accomplished by political victories as the Civil Rights era moved into the Black Power era and beyond. This community of artists was looking to solidify their relationship to the national body—expressing black pride and a version of black power through artistic production—by participating in cultural practices indebted to their own histories.<sup>8</sup>

As for history, this increasing number of black bodies on Broadway stages was less a new phenomenon than it was a return to form. In the 1920s, black talent—composers, dancers, singers—redefined the American Broadway musical, through their groundbreaking musical and choreographic work and the influence that work had on the field. The cultural production of black artists is deeply embedded in the decidedly cross-racial origins of Broadway musical theater; as historian Rachel Rubin observes, finding the origins of Broadway music in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural shifts created by the geographical relocations of Eastern European immigration and the Great Migration, “What we now call Tin Pan Alley depended on a meeting of Jews and African Americans in the modern American city, where the two cultures interacted informally in neighborhoods, music halls and businesses.”<sup>9</sup> These cross-racial interactions, however, did not always render themselves productive for both sides of the color line. Sarah Taylor Ellis, writing about the increasing crossover successes of black composers in the 1900s as the sheet music business grew beyond commercial expectations, notes the way in which the black roots of Ragtime music became increasingly elided and writes that “black

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<sup>8</sup> Toby Miller, *Technologies Of Truth: Cultural Citizenship and the Popular Media*, 1 edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Rachel Rubin, “Broadway and Tin Pan Alley,” *Tribeca Film Institute*, undated, <http://americasmusic.tribecafilminstitute.org/session/view/broadway-and-tin-pan-alley>.

composers' essential contributions to American popular culture were rendered spectral as the music was promoted as a national rather than a racial sound.”<sup>10</sup>

For black artists, this alignment of the “racial” and the “national”—to not just embed its culture more firmly into the American cultural imaginary but to also receive acknowledgement for its importance—is one of the main components of cultural citizenship work. It has been the tendency of U.S. critics, tastemakers and canon-builders to insist upon maintaining what Raymond Knapp terms “our collective image of ourselves,” even as the “selves” engaged most often with canon-building so often ignore or downplay the contributions of non-whites—blacks especially—whose cultural work cohere as somehow both *foundational* of and *marginal* to U.S. culture and history <sup>11</sup>. Knapp parses this distinction by acknowledging not just the ways in which cultural production by marginalized groups in U.S. culture itself gets devalued in the rush toward “collective image” but also how the groups themselves remain positioned along the margins, even as they attempt to be part of that “collective.” Anne Cheng, too, notes the tensions between how “racialized” communities find themselves “constitutionally” integrated into the United States yet due to “difference” often remain marginalized in the “national narrative.”<sup>12</sup>

Embedded in this tension, the historiography of Broadway theater shows that though black contributions to American (popular) culture had an assumed place in American society, the names of many black composers, choreographers, dancers and

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<sup>10</sup> Sarah Taylor Ellis, “Doing the Time Warp: Queer Temporalities and Musical Theater” (UCLA, 2013), <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/1k1860wx>.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 12.

performers in the Broadway space have seemed lost to history, erased from the memory of Broadway as white songwriters, musicians, choreographers and performers taught and influenced by those African Americans assumed their place in the canon of cultural production. If Broadway really was, to quote historian David Savran, a “national tradition,” a monument of a “shared, participatory culture” that linked Americans through their love and appreciation of the “so-called pop standards that, between the 1920s and the 1960s, were listened to, sung, and applauded by millions,”<sup>13</sup> African Americans have nonetheless maintained a decidedly more fraught relationship to the creation and dissemination of such Tin Pan Alley classics and the Broadway shows in which many of them were introduced to the public. Black artists participated mightily in the boom in Broadway’s African American composing and performing talent just after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 1920s. However, an increasing erasure of black performers and composers from the Broadway stages and *Playbills* occurred from the 20s to the 1960s. There also occurred a whitewashing of the dance music and jazz music that was not just becoming the idiomatic sound for stage music since the 1920s, but was also coming to be known as classic Americana. Indeed, Broadway may have taught Americans “how [they] act and how to act”: despite its common reputation as a site of frivolous singing and dancing, Broadway musicals had, by the 1970s, taken up such socially relevant topics as industrialization (*Show Boat*, *Sweeney Todd*); American imperialism (*The King and I*, *Pacific Overtures*); political struggle (*Strike Up the Band*, *Hair*) and even racial struggle

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<sup>13</sup> David Savran, “Toward a Historiography of the Popular,” *Theatre Survey* 45, no. 02 (2004): 211.

and bigotry (*West Side Story*, *Finian's Rainbow*)<sup>14</sup>. However, this mid-century reach for social relevance, set as it was against the shifting political and social terrain marked by the Civil Rights battles occurring in schools, workplaces and residential communities, did not provide direct and accessible chances for African American talent to be part of Broadway's national creative conversation.

This labor being done on the stages of Broadway houses in the 1970s had a few aims in its alignment of the "racial" and the "national." First, by retrieving particular choreographic and sonic themes related to African American performance history, artists looked to historicize the legacy of black performance on Broadway and share in the circulation of cultural knowledge(s) that contributed to American citizenship. Second, artists sought to validate black performance modes by reinscribing into the ongoing narrative of Broadway excellence the lost stories of black talent who had done nothing less than help create the form of the modern Broadway musical as contemporary audiences knew it. Between 1975 and 1979, Broadway saw a succession of successful all-black (or mostly black) revues, which were either biographical in approach or simply built around choreographed songbooks of noted African American composers. The most popular of these shows were *Eubie*, *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Me & Bessie*. *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, which opened before the others, in 1976, is considered to have ushered in the new vogue in biographical-based African American musical revues. It will be the main text of analysis in this chapter. These shows, big hits on the Broadway stage (and often as touring productions in both major American cities and abroad) were upbeat, celebratory affairs that foregrounded the hit songs written and performed by such era-defining

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<sup>14</sup> David Savran, "Toward a Historiography of the Popular," *Theatre Survey* 45, no. 02 (2004), 215.



musical artists as Eubie Blake, Fats Waller, and Bessie Smith. Presenting themselves as tuneful history lessons devoted to the entertainment legacies of African Americans, the musical biography revues served significant cultural purpose in the landscape of both Broadway and African American artistic expression: they operated as historicizing, archive-building aesthetic labor seeking to reclaim for African American culture a more significant position within the larger narrative of American cultural production.

The choice to center *Bubbling Brown Sugar* in my thinking about this process of historicization, this work of cultural citizenship, is based not just on the show's position as the first of these many shows, but most importantly because of the way in which it operates as a living archive of historic black performance modes. The musical tells the story of a trio of veteran Harlem entertainers who lead a curious young Harlem couple on a magical time-traveling tour of Harlem's musical history, making stops at such famous hotspots as Small's Paradise and the Cotton Club along the way, the places where "you would see Ethel Waters and Josephine Baker," when Harlem "was a way of life rather than a condition," as *Brown Sugar* star Avon Long (who played Sportin' Life in the original Broadway production of *Porgy and Bess*) told a magazine after the show's opening.<sup>15</sup>

Long's participation in the show, starring alongside other African American theatrical legends such as Thelma Carpenter and Joseph Attles, became the musical's biggest marketing point and box office draw. Having performed in the original productions of, among other hit shows, *Kiss Me, Kate*, *Bloomer Girl* and *Carmen Jones*, Long had been one of the original black Broadway stars, who had danced his way

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<sup>15</sup> Alex Bontemps, "Bubbling Brown Sugar," *Ebony*, February 1976, 129.

downtown after making his stage debut in 1932 in a revue at Harlem's famed Lafayette Theatre, and was a direct and embodied connection to the era the show celebrated. Attles, seventy-seven-years-old when *Brown Sugar* opened on Broadway, made his Broadway debut in Lew Ayers' all-black revue *Blackbirds of 1928*. The casting of these veterans in a new Broadway musical spoke to the show's desire to produce a historical evocation of African American theatrical performance, to create a living archive of sorts that would not only place emphasis on the historical value of black Broadway performance, but also mobilize a historical moment in which to appreciate how the labor of those performers still had social and cultural relevance. The exceptional talent on display and the historical authenticity of the performing bodies displaying it drew huge audiences, both black and white.

Loften Mitchell, who wrote *Bubbling Brown Sugar's* libretto, told *Ebony* magazine in 1976 that the goal of many shows, including *Bubbling Brown Sugar* was "to [dispel the myth that] the history of black entertainment is a story of black-face buffoons shuffling off to 'Bandannaland'." <sup>16</sup> That Lofton felt the need to reach all the way back to a 1908 Will Marion Cook musical for a comparison speaks to the way in which black Broadway talent in the 1970s saw their cultural work as working not just *in* history but also, to paraphrase theatre historian John Bush Jones, *as* history. <sup>17</sup> As Harry Elam writes, "African Americans can and do make history, these performances constitute history in

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<sup>16</sup> Bontemps, 130.

<sup>17</sup> John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves : A Social History of the American Musical Theater* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, published by University Press of New England, 2003), 2.

themselves.”<sup>18</sup> To think of themselves *as* history was to imagine themselves as doing heritage-sustaining cultural work that was part of a long legacy of black performance, as part of a repertoire of movement and vocalization that had sustained African Americans even as they’d once felt bound by controlling images trafficking in oftentimes less than heroic fashioning.

A 1980 *Newsweek* article titled “The Great Black Way” sings the praises of “an almost forgotten era: the exuberant Black Broadway of the 1920s, whose rhythms and ragtime changed the pulse of American music forever,” noting how the music of composers like Fats Waller and James Johnson had been “eclipsed for decades,” and praising Eubie Blake—whose musical autobiography was nominated for several Tony Awards in 1978 and ran for 439 performances—for “[giving] Broadway syncopation.”<sup>19</sup> In a *New York Times* profile of Vivian Reed, one of the stars of *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, Reed describes her co-stars Avon Long and Joe Attles (who, the article notes, sang and danced with Bill Robinson) as “legendary,” as “walking books of knowledge” from whom she could find out anything, from Harlem landmarks to vaudeville techniques.<sup>20</sup> During the 1970s, Eubie Blake and his contemporaries such as Avon Long, Joe Attles, and Rosetta LeNoire (who would go on to create *Bubbling Brown Sugar*) personified the “cultural citizen.”

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<sup>18</sup> Harry Elam, “Making History: Rethinking African American Theatre Historiography,” *Theatre Survey* 45, no. 2 (October 2004): 222.

<sup>19</sup> Annalyn Swan, “The Great Black Way,” *Newsweek*, May 26, 1980.

<sup>20</sup> “Vivian Reed Tearing Up This Town in ‘Brown Sugar,’” *The New York Times*, March 15, 1976.

## **Black Power, Black Heritage, Black Roots**

Though some historians believe that the Black Power movement had all but run its course by the mid-1970s moment that greeted the success of the African American revues, others argue that although such organizations as the Black Panthers, considered the vanguard group of the movement, had disbanded or found more mainstream ways to perform their activism, even working within “the system” to find ways of sustaining itself<sup>21</sup>, the key elements of Black Power thinking still circulated throughout black communities, through music, movies, fashion and even education. Emerging at a time when the integrationist-inclined Civil Rights Movement was seeming less and less viable as an impetus for the kind of radical social and political changes being demanded by some corners of the liberation struggle community, the movement fostered the creation of several organizations, among them the Black Panthers, US, and the Revolutionary Action Movement, many of them inspired by the fiery and thoughtful rhetoric of Malcolm X, whose assassination in 1965 (alongside uprisings in various urban communities around the US) spurred a community to begin to think and behave in far less conciliatory ways than those exhibited by Civil Rights activists of the 1950s and early 60s.

Though popular consciousness still often portrays members of many of these groups solely as violent, separatist revolutionaries seeking to arm themselves toward a bloody race war or merely separate themselves from the mainstream American polity, it can be argued that the main mission of Black Power activists was to raise the race consciousness of the black community, to push black people to consider themselves part

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, of the Black Panthers move into local community electoral politics, Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (Pantheon Books, 1992).

of a global struggle for racial equality and to think of themselves as a powerful, beautiful nation-inside-a-nation within the United States. As part of the rising Black Nationalist fervor that informed some Black Power thinking, a coterie of artists, writers, and thinkers led by Amiri Baraka (formerly Le Roi Jones) and Larry Neal propagated a Black Arts Movement, a purposefully direct and racially-inscribed assemblage of poetry, theatre and music, through which they hoped to galvanize black people into a culturally-driven black consciousness.

This movement and its aftermath coincided with an ever-increasing visibility for African American popular culture in the mainstream. Even as black theaters and community arts organizations were opening and thriving across the country, playing to predominantly black audiences, Hollywood movies, television shows, and the popular music charts were seeing a growing presence of black power-inflected characters, themes and sounds, produced and shepherded often by black producers who saw in black power a commitment to and investment in black ownership of the cultural production that had been a major component of African Americans' legacy in the United States . As Bruce Schulman observes in his book *The Seventies*, for many politically inclined African American artists at that time, influenced by Black Power discourses, “art was a vehicle to concrete economic and political power.”<sup>22</sup> Additionally, some historians have argued that during the Black Power moment of the early 70s, highlighted by the Black Arts and Black Nationalist movements that emphasized an avowedly revolutionist approach to African American cultural expression, “culture” began to supplant “politics” as the mode through which the African American community would find its footing in the wake of

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<sup>22</sup> Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift In American Culture, Society, And Politics* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2002), 63.

perceived failings of the integrationist ideal as defined by the organized Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s<sup>23</sup>. In his influential study of the era, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975*, historian William L. Vandeburg observed that for cultural nationalists, “black culture *was* black power. By asserting their cultural distinctives via clothing, language and hairstyle and by recounting their unique historical experiences through the literary and performing arts, cultural nationalists sought to encourage self-actualization” in the black community.<sup>24</sup> Blackness was more than just skin color, the Nationalists believed; through the dissemination of “culture” it could be demonstrated that blackness was an essence, a way of being, that demanded its own political and social platforms through which to sustain itself.

So, even at a time of many black firsts (new black mayors; the first secretary of the army; the first black member of the New York Stock Exchange; the first black bishop in the Episcopal Church; Shirley Chisolm’s political bids) which resulted from the efforts of both Civil Rights era advances and Black Power era demands for change, there was still for many, as Amy Ongiri observes “a desire for separate spheres of [popular culture] articulation at the precise moment when African American culture saw increasing

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<sup>23</sup> For more on the distinctions between culture and politics as well as their overlap as part of the Black Power era, please also see Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness : the Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010); Jeffrey Ogbonna Green Ogar, *Black Power : Radical Politics and African American Identity*, Reconfiguring American Political History (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic : Politics and Popular Culture in the post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 171.

inclusion in the mainstream.”<sup>25</sup>

During this period of what Harold Cruse called, for African Americans, a shift from a “politics of civil rights” to a “politics of black ethnicity,”<sup>26</sup> there was, arguably, no work of African American cultural production outside of popular music more mainstream than Alex Haley’s *Roots*, the 1976 bestseller in which the author recounts the seven generations of his family, from the capture in Africa of his ancestor Kunta Kinte, through slavery, emancipation, and Jim Crow, and his own trip to Africa to begin the familial search for ancestry that would animate his project. In his review of *Roots* in the *New York Times*, James Baldwin noted the “careful muffled pain and panic” limning the nation as it recovered from celebrating the Bicentennial, drawing an uneasy line between the complicated racial politics of the nation’s 200<sup>th</sup> birthday, the upcoming election that November, and the release of a book which he called “a study of continuities, of consequences, of how a people perpetuate themselves.”<sup>27</sup> In a close reading of the *Roots* media phenomenon, historian Matthew Jacobson parses both the marketing strategy that sold the book as “the saga of an *American* family” [emphasis mine] and the book reviews that claimed that *Roots* “speaks not only for America’s black people but for all of us everywhere.” Jacobson sees in this transference and alignment of group identity narratives the “emergence of heritage as an idiom of American nationalism.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, “heritage” had blanketed the nation as a way for communities to frame their

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<sup>25</sup> Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*, 117.

<sup>26</sup> Harold Cruse, *Plural But Equal* (New York, N.Y.: William Morrow, 1987), 5.

<sup>27</sup> James Baldwin, “How One Black Man Came to Be an American,” review of *Roots*, by Alex Haley, Jr., *New York Times*, September 26, 1976, The New York Times Book Review, BR1.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 56.

“Americanness,” as a way to invoke a naturalized mode of identity essence through communal belonging. Yet the contradictions of this “belonging” were not lost on African Americans, promised post-segregation success and still struggling with the “racial”/“national” divide that only became more complicated in the wake of Black Nationalism’s impact on community thinking. *Roots* spent 46 weeks on the *New York Times* bestsellers list and was eventually adapted into a TV mini-series playing to over 80 million viewers, revealing itself to be a way for African Americans to connect the black power that an emphasis on black heritage could sustain with what Jacobson calls the “interest in refashioning the national narrative.”<sup>29</sup>

Poised at that intersection, at that contradictory crossroads, a couple of African American members of the Broadway community saw “heritage” as a way to bring black history to Broadway. Their show was called *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, and it would open on Broadway just as Bicentennial fever began to heat up around the nation, and a few months before *Roots* became a bestseller.

### **Doing it for the Kids**

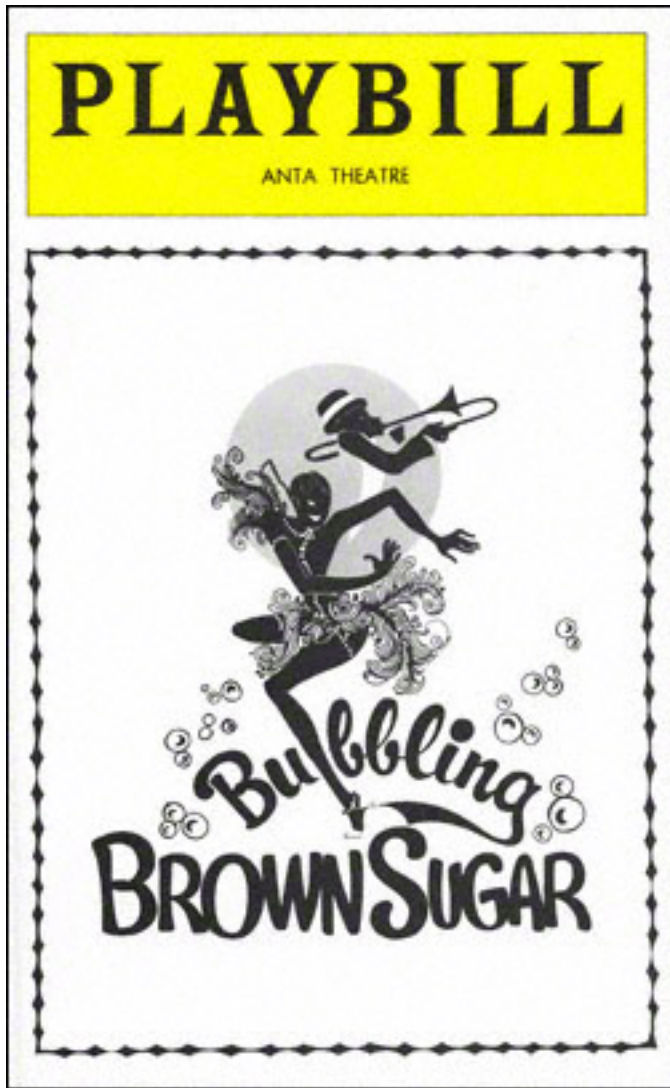
*Bubbling Brown Sugar*, from its conception to its Broadway debut two years later, was nothing if not about roots, history, legacy and cultural heritage. As conceived by African-American actress Rosetta Le Noire for AMAS Repertory Theater, the small but thriving non-profit off-off-Broadway house she’d founded in 1968, which was devoted to creating new musicals and promoting the concept of non-traditional, multi-racial casting, *Bubbling Brown Sugar*—or, as it was originally entitled, *Reminiscing With Sissle and*

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 41.



*Blake*—was intended as a love letter of sorts to LeNoire’s theatrical heroes, most notably composer Eubie Blake, whom she considered her main artistic mentor dating back to the day Blake began tutoring her in music when she turned thirteen years old.



[Bubbling Brown Sugar Playbill 1](#)

LeNoire became a theatrical pioneer in her own right. Born in 1911 and raised in Harlem by her politically active father, LeNoire credited Blake with using music to cure her of a debilitating “inferiority complex,” telling an Australian newspaper in 1990 that

Blake “changed [her] life.”<sup>30</sup> Later she achieved her own success on the New York stage, most notably appearing as one of the Three Witches in Orson Welles’ 1936 Haitian-themed Federal Theater Project production of *Macbeth*. She made the first of her twenty Broadway appearances in 1939’s *The Hot Mikado*, a hit all-black staging of the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, and followed that with roles in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cabin in the Sky* and *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, among other shows. Even in the wake of her apparent success, LeNoire never lost sight of the complicated position of African American actors performing in mainstream theater or the ever-looming potential for limitation in the wake of that success: she often said in press interviews that she’d played “every maid’s role on Broadway.”<sup>31</sup> When she launched AMAS (Latin for “you love”), it was her intention, as a black woman who’d played Scottish witches and Japanese geishas, to set up a multi-racial theater company that was “dedicated to bringing people of all races, creeds, colors, religions, and backgrounds together through the creative arts” and in the process establish an educational source and professional network for black performers in the New York area.<sup>32</sup> In honor of her mentor, she named the children’s division of the company The Eubie Blake Children’s Theatre. LeNoire believed that artists like Blake and Sissle, who’s trailblazing work set the stage—literally, in many ways—for African Americans to work on Broadway, yet who’d disappeared from the cultural and historical landscape, “needed remembering;” she told the *Amsterdam News* shortly before the show’s

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<sup>30</sup> Kevin Sadlier, “Style of Life,” *The Sun Herald*, December 9, 1990, 40.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Carlson, “Rosetta LeNoire: Actor and Producer Who Pioneered Non-Racial Casting,” *The Guardian (London)*, March 26, 2002, sec. Guardian Leader Pages.

<sup>32</sup> Linda Kerr Norflett, “Rosetta LeNoire: The Lady and Her Theatre,” *Black American Literature Forum* 17:2 (July 01, 1983): 69–72.

Broadway opening, “Everyone should know about these great men. This team helped make Harlem the elite playground of the world.”<sup>33</sup>

Taking some of the most famous and remembered songs by Sissle and Blake, including “I’m Just Wild About Harry” and “Love Will Find a Way,” from *Shuffle Along*, their ground-breaking 1921 musical revue, LeNoire crafted a boisterous, melodic evening of song and dance that she hoped would serve as an entertaining history lesson as well as a corrective to the corrosion of racial pride that once defined the production and reception of African American expressive culture as a contribution to the larger American culture. “We’ve tried to correct the distorted image of the black community as a place full of junkies, winos and cats beating their mothers,” Lofton Mitchell, *Brown Sugar’s* book writer told *Ebony Magazine*. Harlem was once a place that “engendered hope and built pride.”<sup>34</sup> These are not words often heard to describe the motivation behind the creation and production of a splashy singing-and-dancing Broadway musical, yet the origins of *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, the first in a series of such revues to arrive on Broadway in the 1970s, are steeped in a “heritage-work” narrative that blends the uplift discourse of an era defined by “black pride” with the representational ethos of American ethnic pride that coursed through the popular culture of the 1970s.

By the time LeNoire found a way to graduate her tribute to Sissle and Blake from its basement environs in New York’s St Paul’s and St. Andrew’s Church (where the AMAS Theater was located in the early days of its formation) to a successful touring production working its way toward Broadway’s ANTA Theater, she overcame

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<sup>33</sup> Norman Darden, “Bubbling Brown Sugar,” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 6, 1976, D1.

<sup>34</sup> Bontemps, “Bubbling Brown Sugar,” 130.

unexpected legal battles that prevented her ability to secure rights to Sissle and Blake's music by opening her show's frame and converting it into a wider-looking history lesson. Included in the newly named show (which was now connected directly to LeNoire's own theatrical history as well; "Brown Sugar" had been her godfather Bill "Bojangles" Robinson's nickname for LeNoire as a little girl<sup>35</sup>) was the music of legendary African American composers Duke Ellington, Earl "Fatha" Hines, Cab Calloway and Fats Waller, some of whom, particularly Waller and Hines, had fallen out of fashion and out of the memories of many Americans.<sup>36</sup> Instead of focusing just on the tunes of Sissle and Blake, the show would become, now featuring a book by renowned playwright and historian of African American expressive culture Loftin Mitchell, a musical tour of the Harlem Renaissance's historic jazz and blues scene, and a tribute to the arrival of black talent on Broadway that occurred in the wake of the success of Blake and Sissle's revues.<sup>37</sup>

In the first draft of *Bubbling Brown Sugar*'s libretto (dated April 1975), the show opens as The Harlem Heritage Youth Group is taking a tour of the uptown Manhattan neighborhood that gives it its name. The lights come up on 131<sup>st</sup> Street and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard. As the group poses for a picture upstage, they can see a checkers game being played downstage between an older gentleman named Checkers, "tall, ageless, droll," and a younger man. They're soon joined by Irene Paige, "sixty, with a regal carriage and a very youthful body", and John Sage, "agile" and also "ageless." Soon, the three of them are teasing and signifying—it becomes clear quite early that though the men haven't seen Irene in a long time there is a long shared history between

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<sup>35</sup> "Rosetta LeNoire," *The Glasgow Herald*, March 29, 2002, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Of course, after the success of *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, Waller would, in 1978, become the subject of his own successful Tony-winning Broadway musical, *Ain't Misbehavin'*.

<sup>37</sup> Darden, "Bubbling Brown Sugar," D1.

them—but their joshing around comes to a quick halt when Irene turns toward the Heritage Youth Group after overhearing a young man’s statement. Jim, the group’s leader, has pointed out a space on the boulevard, claiming it as the location of the old Lincoln Theater. Irene corrects him. No, she tells him, “It was the Lafayette, son.” Jim questions her knowledge, assuming her to be just an old lady whose memories have been lost to time. But Irene tells him how she knows: “Because I got my start there before you got yours with a diaper!” We find out that the show, *Colored Magic and Music*, eventually moved downtown to Broadway, taking Irene with it.<sup>38</sup>

There are several changes made in the performance text of *Bubbling Brown Sugar* by the time of the final, frozen draft of the libretto, the version which opened on Broadway after a long tour, and published in 1984: some characters’ have been changed; the core romance between Irene and John is deepened with more background about the theatrical experience that ended their relationship; there are songs added and taken out. But there is one very noticeable addition. In the Production Note, Mitchell writes: “The one area where Rosetta LeNoire and this writer remain dogmatic is this: We have tried to create a family show without swear words, vulgarity, and with an emphasis on positive images.”<sup>39</sup> Were these characters, John, Irene, and Checkers, the former entertainers who will escort some young people—and the audience, and Broadway—on a musical tour of Harlem the “heroic figures” Vinnette Carroll wrote about in her press release, being used for “positive images”? Perhaps. But perhaps those heroes are what the playwright needed to tell his story, to ensure a legacy and animate a history, to unite the warring poles of

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<sup>38</sup> Loften Mitchell, “Bubbling Brown Sugar” (Libretto (first draft), April 15, 1975), SUNY Binghamton, The Loften Mitchell Collection.

<sup>39</sup> Loften Mitchell, *Bubbling Brown Sugar* (Middletown, New York: Broadway Play Publishing, Inc., 1985), i.

“national” and the “racial” that complicate African American social positioning and cultural belonging.

In the final draft of the script, rather than playing a checkers game on a slow Harlem afternoon, the characters enter singing, the title tune, while projections hit a big screen upstage, displaying glamorous shots of “prominent Harlem musical figures over the years.”<sup>40</sup> After the song ends and, in typical Broadway musical fashion, daily life on Adam Clayton Powell Blvd. resumes, the audience encounters Checkers and John Sage differently than in the first draft. The checkers game and playful signifying are now replaced with a bit of comic business between the two older men, as they struggle down the boulevard carrying a huge old trunk. When Irene asks after its destination, Checkers tells her “Abyssinian Baptist Church,” while John intones “The Schomburg Collection!” (“where Harlem’s history is kept,” John will say to a young character later in the opening scene). This time Jim isn’t leading a Heritage Youth Group, but is instead being led around town by his “old lady” Ella, who trying to give him a history lesson about Harlem.<sup>41</sup>

The old trunk comes in handy for Ella’s purposes: it contains a collection of old stage costumes which Checkers, Irene and John wore in their shows in the 1920s, as well as a hat worn by famous blackface Follies star Bert Williams during one of his standout routines. “Do it for the kids!” Irene begs John Sage.<sup>42</sup> Sage then dons the hat, strikes a pose and “becomes” Bert Williams’ sad sack poker loser, bemoaning his bad hand of cards. Sage-as-Williams, as per the stage directions, “follows Bert’s famous Poker Game

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 7.

Pantomime,” dealing imaginary cards, losing a round or two, coming from behind, then eventually losing the whole game, all to the bluesy sighs and sways of the orchestra’s accompaniment.<sup>43</sup> As Sage-as-Williams relinquishes his chips to the winner of the game, leaving the past as evoked in the performance and returning to the present tense of the scene, Irene tells him, “John, you took me back. Way back!” And Jim, the young observer, offers, “Mr. Sage, you make me admit: I wish I could have been there.”<sup>44</sup> Irene’s command to John—“Do it for the kids!”—mobilizes *Bubbling Brown Sugar*’s impulse to engage cross-generationally, to insist upon the need not to just educate a present-day audience (onstage as well as beyond the footlights) about a seemingly lost history, but to actually embody it, to not just conjure memory but to actually perform it. Harlem becomes not just a locale where history has happened but also a site of cultural memory, where, as John tells the young man, first in words, then in song, “The old folks say that just before the sun’s setting a wisp of cloud floats across the sky, breaking off a single ray of light. You look straight at it and, if you believe hard enough, Time will stop

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<sup>43</sup> Considered one the greatest entertainers of the vaudeville era, and at one time half of the leading comedy duo Williams and Walker with George Walker, Bert Williams (1874-1922) was also a best-selling recording artist and was the first black performer to take a lead role in a Broadway play. *In Dahomey*, his show with Walker, featuring music by Will Marion Cook and Paul Laurence Dunbar, became the first black-written show to appear on Broadway. Williams starred with Walker in other successful Broadway shows, *Abyssinia* (1906) and 1908’s *BandannaLand* (which featured the famous Poker Pantomime sketch, which was filmed by Biograph Studios in 1916) After Walker suffered a stroke in 1909, Williams joined *The Ziegfield Follies* in 1910, integrating the long-running revue, and performed with it until 1919. For more on Bert Williams, see W. T. Lhamon Jr, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2000); Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America*, African American Music Reference (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); and Camille F Forbes, *Introducing Bert Williams: Burnt Cork, Broadway, and the Story of America’s First Black Star* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2008).

<sup>44</sup> Mitchell, *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, 8.

still and take you back, back on a tour through time and space. Time will stop still and take you back, back on a tour through time and space. For, time in Harlem is a relative thing...” The stage then darkens, a ray of sunlight appears, and as the music rises, the characters find themselves not in 1976 anymore but in a 1920s speakeasy with the strains of Shelton Brooks’ “Some of These Days” lingering in their ears.<sup>45</sup>

It is now clear that *Bubbling Brown Sugar* sees itself as a history lesson, as a show about cultural memory. If “history,” as Robert O’Meally and Genevieve Fabre write, “is not so much a fixed, objective rendering of ‘the facts’ as it is a process of constant rethinking and reworking in a world of chance and change,”<sup>46</sup> the characters who lead us on a tour of Harlem’s entertainment past with, I argue, the goal of reinstating African American back into American theatrical history writ large, are indeed historians, entrusting their own memories of their showbiz experience—experience marked by celebration of their excellence that devolved into a kind of dispossession and erasure of it—to inform this shared moment of engagement across generations and time. Just as history is not “fixed,” “blackness” is also not a fixed marker of identity and experience, revised as it is by socio-historical moments. Yet, these historians, “watchful people, people of long memories,” nonetheless understand the need to remember.<sup>47</sup> In fact, often in the musical, the recurring word for the older characters, to each other, is “remember”—that song? that show? that performance? that star?—as if it is a mantra of sorts, a coaxing to themselves to retain the embodied knowledge of “stomping at the Savoy” or “jumpin’ the jive”, so that that knowledge—of African American contributions

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Genevieve Fabre, *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.



to the social and cultural fabric of America—adheres to the memories of the young people, on stage with them and in the audience beyond them, who too can become valued repositories of knowledge themselves.

*Bubbling Brown Sugar*'s raison d'être seems to be no less than to perform, as per Diana Taylor on the archival nature of performance, "vital acts of transfer," which transmit often-lost versions of knowledge and memory, doing a kind of "cultural citizenship" work.<sup>48</sup> In the first scene of both available drafts of *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, Jim and Ella encounter "The Tree of Hope." The Tree was a symbol of good luck to black performers. According to legend, a black actor standing under the tree hoping for work, meets a manager who offers him a job. Ever after, before auditions especially, black performers flocked to the tree hoping such good fortune would alight upon them as well. Jim snickers at the sad-looking stump that remains of the once-glorious tree. We learn from Checkers that the city cut down the tree once the ubiquity of automobiles necessitated widening Harlem streets. And John informs us that "Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson had the stump moved over here—for the people of Harlem."<sup>49</sup> Soon, the orchestra is launching into "Doin' the Lowdown," and John and Checkers recreate a Bill Robinson routine, one lost to the ephemerality of live performance, one that doesn't highlight the curly-haired blondness of Shirley Temple. (Though we do hear a character shout: "You know he taught Shirley Temple how to dance!")<sup>50</sup>

Clearly, in their post-performance years, John and Checkers have taken on the roles of unofficial community leaders, of teachers, of tour guides, standing in (and up) for

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<sup>48</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>49</sup> Mitchell, *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, 6.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

a knowledge that has historical value and yet registers as so displaced enough from the community that created it that the character Jim bemoans his lack of access to it. “The only history I ever heard was rhetoric,” he tells Ella as the 1970s characters mingle in the old 1930s Savoy Ballroom, literally standing inside of history on this magical, time-traveling trip.<sup>51</sup> “Words, words, words—which didn’t mean a thing. But, seeing it, hearing it, reaching out and touching it! Seeing the Tree of Hope alive and well! I’m going to hate to see this end.”<sup>52</sup> These words, corny as they may be, redolent of the musical’s reach for “positivity,” nonetheless precede a moment of visual and sonic surrogation that exemplifies the ways in which *Bubbling Brown Sugar* is not just theorizing on the momentary fleetingness of performance but also understanding itself as haunted by the constant state of interaction between present and past which drives, as Baldwin says in his *Roots* review, “the vehicle of the history that produced us.”<sup>53</sup> After Jim’s words about history, Ella tells him, “It won’t end—as long as there’s you and me.”<sup>54</sup> Beyond Ella’s articulating the kind of cliché b-movie romance trope, it is notable, as one of two African American bodies in a romantic moment on a Broadway stage, that she launches into “Love Will Find a Way,” the Eubie Blake love song which made history in 1921 as the first love ballad duet performed by two African American performers in an era when African American performers weren’t expected or allowed to play romance. After the song ends, Irene informs Jim and Ella (and the audience) “When that song was written, it was taboo for Blacks to make love on stage.”<sup>55</sup> The audience has

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Baldwin, BR2.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

now experienced a moment of surrogation—1976 actors Ethel Beatty and Chip Garnett echoing the disappeared performance of 1921’s Jessie Williams and Harry Walton—that animates multiple histories constitutive of the “racial”/“national” divide: these two actors have performed a song that broke racial and theatrical barriers in 1921, yet seemed to have lost its historical importance in its life as an American (“national”) standard. One can only imagine Lofton Mitchell writing this scene, knowing that the song would be recognizable in a way that its racial history might not.

The characters also visit “The Pearly Gates” which, according to playwright Mitchell, was the nickname of the entrance to the subway stop at 135<sup>th</sup> Street and Lenox Avenue in Harlem, where eager newcomers looking for Harlem success entered the Uptown world.<sup>56</sup> As a plot element, these discoveries introduce the two young people into not just a lost world of success and cultural creativity, but also provides them with the kind of knowledge that does not show up in the official record of Harlem Renaissance popular culture. Mitchell sets forth his aging characters Checkers, Irene and John, as the carriers of that official record, embodying cultural memory. Extra-textually, however, *Bubbling Brown Sugar* is providing its audience, many of whom only know of this world perhaps through old recordings, if at all, with an archive of memory that represents a lost narrative of African American cultural excellence. Once the characters begin to sing, dance, and perform the music that defines the times—“Sweet Georgia Brown” and “Honeysuckle Rose” and “God Bless the Child”—there are often younger versions of the old performers who share the stage, enacting a passing-on of cultural memory and aesthetic labor while they also create a genealogy of shared experiences across

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<sup>56</sup> Bontemps, “Bubbling Brown Sugar,” 130.

generations—old Irene watches Young Irene step off the train into Harlem; old Irene watches young Ella behave as she once did as well. Like *Roots*, these moments provide a “study of continuities, of how a people perpetuate themselves.”

The fact that the three main characters are played by real-life Harlem Renaissance-era stage stars serves not just to reproduce and restore their labor but also to transmit the rituals they learned and performed, first-hand, to un-disappear them, if you will, to conjure the presumed lost quality, ephemerality, of live performance. There is cultural knowledge being shaped here, even in the sentimental cauldron of nostalgia, producing a knowledge, validating a history, embedding into the contemporary moment a heritage-appreciation that never made the history books. Perhaps we must go back to *Brown Sugar*'s original title to fully appreciate the acts of transfer on display. Rosetta LeNoire asked her audience to reminisce with her, about Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle, to not just “remember,” but to acknowledge and embrace lost African American cultural production as a method of cultural belonging, to center African American culture within the overarching narrative of American progress. It may not have the explicit political agenda of more radical artistic production which has come to define the black Arts moment of the 1960s and early 1970s, but I'd argue that this version of black pride, perhaps best enacted by the recreation of the “Stroll” dance that becomes the show-stopping number in Act 2 of the show, sustains itself not just through the sharing of culture and the acknowledgement of African American talent, but it also, as per David Roman, “engage[s] contemporary matters, enable[ing] a reimagination of history and genealogy, both individual and communal, and demonstrate[s] how performance

functions as an archive itself.”<sup>57</sup>



Though *Bubbling Brown Sugar* was conceived and originally performed at AMAS as early as 1973, it opened on Broadway four months before the biggest birthday American citizens had ever known: the Bicentennial. “It was probably,” according to John Bush Jones, “no coincidence that this very positive backward look at black American popular culture opened when America was celebrating its Bicentennial.”<sup>58</sup> It was a time when many Americans across the racial divide, influenced by Alex Haley’s

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<sup>57</sup> David Roman, *Performance in America : Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts*, Perverse Modernities (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>58</sup> Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves*, 226.

bestseller and swept up in the heritage-seeking ontology of what historians call the Ethnic Revival, were eager to search for their “roots” amidst the shared cultural legacy of American citizenship. Americans were living in a world “that they believed had been disrupted by geographic and social mobility, mass media, and a sense of impermanence.”<sup>59</sup> Impermanence, potential rootlessness, with communities of color feeling marginalized after a decade of hope, change, supposed progress. *Roots* spoke to black Americans’ search to connect themselves to the American narrative, even as many spokespeople for the race had spent much of the decade demanding accountability, advocating separatism. Looking for “roots” amid the feelings of impermanence meant that “those who felt excluded from grand national narratives could find in local history and genealogy a place for themselves in America’s history in its celebratory bicentennial year.”<sup>60</sup> Asked whether *Bubbling Brown Sugar* was merely playing off what some critics thought of as a 1970s trend toward “nostalgia,” actress Josephine Premice, who played Young Irene in *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, told CUE Magazine a few days before the show opened, “Maybe nostalgia [means] just trying to find one’s roots.”<sup>61</sup>

Rosetta LeNoire’s request that we “reminisce” about Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle originated in her small non-profit theater, started in 1969, “in reaction to,” according to an essay about her work, “the racial tension and reversed attitude of separatism which accompanied the Black Power Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.”<sup>62</sup> And yet, her musical about African American cultural heritage, about two men

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<sup>59</sup> Beth L Bailey and Farber, *America in the Seventies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 38.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Marilyn Stasio, “An Elegant Harlem,” *CUE*, March 1976. 11.

<sup>62</sup> Norflett, “Rosetta LeNoire,” 72.

who “should be remembered” set off a litany of musical history lessons that restored performances of black excellence back into the Broadway narrative, where it had been away for too long. LeNoire’s work reminded audiences of the joy of regarding “blackness,” performing “blackness,” as was a way of life, rather than, to quote Loftin Mitchell, a condition.<sup>63</sup> LeNoire’s work, the heritage-building, history-acknowledging project, serves to remind that every kick isn’t necessarily a shuck and every tap isn’t always a jive, that nostalgia can have value if it’s in service to cultural belonging and buttressed by the pleasures of performing the history that nostalgia fetishizes, of “holding” it, to quote playwright Robert O’Hara,<sup>64</sup> then of passing it on, of gesturing toward the ghosts who haunt the complicated histories of black performance as they dance, to quote Aimee Glocke and Lawrence Jackson, on the national shoulders of their racial ancestors.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Bontemps, “Bubbling Brown Sugar,” 129.

<sup>64</sup> Robert O’Hara, *Insurrection: Holding History*, 1st edition (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1998), 1.

<sup>65</sup> Aimee Glocke and Lawrence M. Jackson, “Dancin’ on the Shoulders of Our Ancestors: An Introduction,” *The Journal of Pan African Studies (Online)* 4, no. 6 (September 1, 2011): 1.

***Chapter 2***  
***The Black Version: Citation, Adaptation, and the Blackness(es)***  
***of Motown Film Production***



“The American idea of racial progress is measured by how fast I become white.” ~ James Baldwin<sup>1</sup>

“Has this ever happened to you? Did you ever have a *very* favorite dress, and you gave it to a friend. And she took it home, she shortened the hem, changed the buttons, and dyed it another color, and the next time you saw this dress you were bowled over by how *great* it looked? Not that it didn’t look good before! But a few changes here and there and it had a whole new life! Well, that is *exactly* what happened to me, and not too long ago. And I want for you to see it, too!”<sup>2</sup>

Those are the typically effusive words of musical comedy star Carol Channing, spoken on the stage of Broadway’s Shubert Theatre at the 1968 Tony Awards. Channing was introducing the performance of the then-current company of the hit Jerry Herman musical *Hello, Dolly!*, the musical which Channing opened in 1964 and for which she won the Tony as Best Actress in a musical. Many actresses followed Channing in the iconic role after she left the production, including Ginger Rogers, Martha Raye and Betty Grable. Though they all “borrowed the dress” from Channing and perhaps changed the hem or buttons, none of them “dyed it another color,” as it were. That change in design was the sole work of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dolly to appear in the original Broadway production: African American actress/singer and former vaudevillian Pearl Bailey.

One can assume that the metaphorical description in Channing’s words—most likely written by a hired award-show writer—were meant to convey Bailey’s blackness

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<sup>1</sup> James Baldwin and Randall Kenan, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011), 143.

<sup>2</sup> “Hello Dolly! Pearl Bailey 1968 Tony Awards,” Filmed [April 1968]. YouTube video, 09:34. Posted [April 13, 2012]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4eS0x16v1k>

without stating it outright, acting as a kind of inside joke to the liberal, well-meaning Broadway audience fully aware of the Civil Rights-era implications of producer David Merrick's decision to cast his hit show with black stars and sit back and watch as the show became a hit once more. The previous chapter looked at the big boom in blackness that occurred on Broadway stages in the 1970s, and many historians believe that that boom was the direct result of David Merrick's casting Pearl Bailey and Cab Calloway in *Hello, Dolly!*<sup>3</sup> In a *New York Times* article published a few months before Mel Gussow's naming of "The Great Black Way," in October 1976, Broadway producer Philip Rose, most famous for producing the original production of Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 classic *A Raisin in the Sun*, lamented to the *Times* his difficulty finding theaters for his shows after finding early success with black musicals earlier in the decade—the Tony Award-winning musicals *Purlie* (in 1970) and 1973's *Raisin*. Not only was there competition for theater space in which to launch shows, there was intense competition for the black talent to cast in the shows. As Rose told writer John Corry, "Now everyone is trying to find a black show to do."<sup>4</sup> In addition to the numerous bio-historical shows dotting Broadway houses, black performers played roles in two additional trends: either taking lead parts in shows like *Hair*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Pippin* (in which Ben Vereen played, literally, The Leading Player), and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and starring in black versions

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<sup>3</sup> For more on this David Merrick saga, please see Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006); Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves*; Andrea Most, *Making Americans : Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Bruce Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business : Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process*, Theater in the Americas (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005); Bernard L Peterson, *A Century of Musicals in Black and White : An Encyclopedia of Musical Stage Works By, About, or Involving African Americans* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> John Corry, "Broadway Column," *The New York Times*, May 7, 1976.

of classic Broadway musical comedies like *Guys and Dolls* (1976), *The Pajama Game* (1973), *Kismet* (renamed *Timbuktu*, 1978) and an aborted version of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, called *Alice*, also in 1978.

Concurrent to the blackness finding performative space on the Broadway stage in the 1970s, Berry Gordy, the founder and leader of Motown Records, sought to take his empire to Hollywood. He wanted to conquer the movie industry as he had the record business. Discussion of Motown's music is rife with debates about the "blackness" of the Motown brand and sound, whether the label de-blackened its artists as a way to cater to crossover to white audiences. There is less scholarly attention paid to the films Berry Gordy's company made, one of which is arguably the most famous "black version" of an American classic ever produced in American popular culture: *The Wiz*. A Broadway smash, running for over 5 years, and ultimately a culturally contested cult-classic film in 1978, *The Wiz* stands as an iconic example of African American success on Broadway, much as Motown does in the music world, yet the pairing of the two as it transitioned to film, sparks many questions about authenticity, blackness, the idea of the "black version" in U.S. popular culture.

Although the concept of "authenticity" will appear here, my interest in this chapter is not with whether or not Motown adhered strongly enough to a "black enough" or "not black enough" mode of expression. I am interested in the way in which Berry Gordy *used* the Motown brand—particularly its time as a movie production entity—to directly contradict the authenticity dictates of the late 1960s and 1970s. Berry Gordy released black performance from expected modes of race-bound representations by staging the racialized narrative so prevalent in American society—black artists

performing for white audiences—then brokering a new racialist discourse in 1970s popular culture. Gordy brokered a Politics of Glamour which not only articulated a framework for re-thinking the possibilities of “blackness” as a social and cultural marker of identity and performance, but also how the performance of that glamour contributed to American popular understandings of black bodies in the commercial, cultural marketplace, in this case a marketplace influenced by radical social and political shifts in U.S. society.

Through an analysis of Motown’s visual imaging, from costuming and choreography to filmic representation, this chapter examines the intersections of “blackness” and “whiteness” that characterize Motown’s creative output in the 1970s. It explores the ways in which Motown has been able to shape public notions of blackness in the U.S. public sphere through its visual work and complicate some fixed notions of what constituted black popular cinema in the 1970s, as the U.S. experienced the post-Civil Rights era

Berry Gordy’s Motown strategy to cross black music (and culture) over to white America was more than just a cynical bid toward capital reward. The work it did was not just about tamping down “blackness” to make it more palatable to whites, but instead to open the possibilities about what “blackness” in fact *meant* as a way of being in the world, a world increasingly focused on integration as the utopic hope for U.S. race relations. Gordy, in many ways, abided by the sentiment of theorist Albert Murray, who wrote in his book *The Omni-Americans*, that “American culture, even in its most rigidly segregated precincts, is patently and irrevocably composite. It is...incontestably

mulatto.”<sup>5</sup> If we allow racial “difference” to be untethered from cultural and historical (and, essentially, biological) contexts, what is the strategy for thinking about black popular culture, blackness itself, outside of strict racialized binaries that naturalize black cultural expression? And how can glamour, as an aesthetic and a politic—a mode of achieving citizenship, negotiating position within society—mediate the strategy?

### **Visualizing Motown**

“...being [in]The Supremes - we wanted to make a difference for our race you know. We wanted to - every time we'd go up there, we wanted to be viewed as not only good people but let people see that black people weren't what they were saying we were - you know. And that we were beautiful and that we were successful.”

~ Mary Wilson, to the Victoria and Albert Museum<sup>6</sup>

Motown didn't produce very many movies in the 1970s—either in tandem with major Hollywood studios or as lone producers, the Motown Film Corporation made 4 motion pictures for theatrical release in the decade: *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), *Mahogany* (1975), *Bingo Long and the Traveling All-Stars* (1976) and *The Wiz* (1978), and one TV biopic, detailing the life of composer Scott Joplin, named after its subject, which aired on NBC in 1976—but its output nonetheless remains quite memorable in the public imagination. All of the theatrical releases except *Bingo Long* still appear frequently on cable and network television; it could probably be argued that that longevity might be because all of the films, except *Bingo Long*, star Diana Ross, the most popular female artist to record for Motown Records, and other than Michael Jackson, the most successful

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<sup>5</sup> Murray, *The Omni Americans*, 22.

<sup>6</sup> “The Story of the Supremes,” *Victoria and Albert Museum* website (2010), accessed December 1, 2014, <http://vimeo.com/15809686>.

crossover artist the label produced. It argues that Motown cinema, in its reach for relevance at the time, nonetheless had a complicated relationship to the anxieties circulating around the performance of blackness in Hollywood film and popular culture. As a result of this, Motown “blacks up” the Hollywood film as a way of both maintaining its stature as premier producer of crossover pop culture as well as seeking to uplift the black community, by embedding blackness into already established filmic, narrative forms.

Maxine Powell, who died in 2013, at the age of 98 in Detroit, Michigan, was Motown Records’ director of artist development. Her job at the famously black-founded and -owned record label was to tutor the artists—many of whom, she told National Public Radio in 2007, “came from humble beginnings” and arrived at her tutelage “using street language, [acting] rude and crude”—on how to present themselves in public, to audiences that would be paying especially close attention to a group of young black performers who considered themselves “the sound of Young America.” Powell did not fancy herself as preparing these talented young charges for just an appearance on *American Bandstand* or a publicity stop at a record store on L.A.’s chic La Cienega Boulevard. Powell told her artists, completely in line with Motown founder Berry Gordy’s goal to get his music played by everyone and heard everywhere, that she was preparing them “for the White House and Buckingham Palace.”<sup>7</sup>

*The New York Times*, in its obituary for Powell, called her “the Miss Manners of Motown,” and in noting that she presided over probably the “only finishing school at an

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<sup>7</sup> Gene Demby, “Remembering The Woman Who Gave Motown Its Charm,” *NPR.org*, accessed December 18, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/10/15/234738593/remembering-the-woman-who-gave-motown-its-charm>.

American record label at anytime,” described her as being “in no small part responsible for its early success.” Martha Reeves of the Vandellas, who studied with Powell alongside label-mates Smokey Robinson, the Temptations, Marvin Gaye, and Diana Ross and the Supremes, told the *Times* that Powell was “a lady of grace, elegance, and style.” They all emulated her, Reeves recalled, adding “Every asset of my personality has been by her influence. Even to the end, she was making sure that I was standing with posture and exuberant grace.” Diana Ross told the paper that Powell was “the person who taught me everything I know.”<sup>8</sup>

The aesthetic labor of another behind-the-scenes worker left an imprint on Motown as well. Choreographer Cholly Atkins, who died in 2003, was brought to the label by Berry Gordy in the mid 1960s because Gordy saw in Atkins’ work—up to then most notable for a legendary tap act with dancer Honi Coles and as stager of slick, upscale nightclub acts for mainstream stars—the smoothness he desired in his own acts, as he envisioned them crossing over into the mainstream. As Gordy’s concept for Motown, Smokey Robinson told journalist Nelson George, “was to make music with a funky beat and great stories that would crossover” to reach young white America, it followed that Gordy needed his artists to be as refined as possible, as close in model to mainstream performers like Frank Sinatra and Patti Page, while yet maintaining a musically hip enough street credibility to appeal to young radio listeners and record buyers. From the dapper sweep of the arms one saw with the Temptations, to the refined over-the-shoulder glances and half-turns of the Supremes, Cholly Atkins sought to create

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<sup>8</sup> Margalit Fox, “Maxine Powell, Motown’s Maven of Style, Dies at 98,” *The New York Times*, October 16, 2013, sec. Arts / Music, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/17/arts/music/maxine-powell-motowns-maven-of-style-dies-at-98.html>.

a coterie of mainstream superstars who didn't—shouldn't—merely move their bodies wildly to the beat. Motown artists needed to be black but not *too* black. They needed to be edgy but not *too* edgy. Above all they needed to have “class.” Atkins was said to “virtually define” the idea of a “class act,” by the *New York Times* (Atkins used that phrase to name his 2001 autobiography) and Atkins’s wife directly homed in on the central tension of Motown artists when talking about her husband’s work. “He didn't take their soul away and didn't make them white,” she said. “He groomed them to represent themselves in a very, very classy way.”<sup>9</sup>

This idea of “class,” of performing a kind of elegance and sophistication, a demureness and refinement, comes up often in narratives of Motown’s founding, goals and aims. “You had to have brains, energy, ambition and a degree of class to pass muster with Berry,” long-time Supreme Mary Wilson wrote in her autobiography.<sup>10</sup> Discussing Gladys Knight and the Pips with dance historian Jacqui Malone, Cholly Atkins pointed out the group’s status as “prime class material.” Whereas many Motown acts had to be taught to behave with—to indeed, perform—“class,” he said, “it just so happened that all of the members [of the Pips] possessed that.”<sup>11</sup> According to Nelson George’s celebrated study of Motown’s formation, the goal of the work of Powers and Atkins in Artist Development “was to vanquish the unsophisticated, gum-cracking manners and attitude”

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<sup>9</sup> Martin, Douglas. “Cholly Atkins, 89, Dancer and Choreographer.” *The New York Times*, April 23, 2003. Accessed January 2015.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/23/arts/cholly-atkins-89-dancer-and-choreographer.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Wilson, *Dreamgirl and Supreme Faith: My Life as a Supreme*, Updated Edition ed. (New York, N.Y: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 73.

<sup>11</sup> Jacqui Malone, “‘Let the Punishment Fit the Crime’: The Vocal Choreography of Cholly Atkins,” *Dance Research Journal* 20, no. 1 (1988): 11.



that newly-signed artists brought with them to the recording studio and concert dates.<sup>12</sup> Powell insisted that “singers be mindful that unacceptable onstage deportment included grimacing, closing your eyes, protruding your buttocks, hunching your shoulders, and standing with wide-spread legs.”<sup>13</sup> “I teach class,” Powell told a reporter once. “And class will turn the heads of kings and queens.”<sup>14</sup>

These examples of unvarnished behavior *could* be read as just the unpolished conduct of youth—many Motown acts were signed as high school students; Diana Ross and Smokey Robinson were classmates and neighbors in Detroit’s Brewster Projects. But these were black teenagers, working-class black teenagers, so race, “blackness”—the performance of it, the corporate exchange value of it—and “whiteness”—the audiences Gordy wanted to sell records to, the comparative usefulness of it as part of his crossover mandate—was and remains the defining aspect of the Motown mythology, its well-known narrative of black uplift as race-inflected achievement of the American Dream. These are also black teenagers learning and performing and succeeding at their crafts at a historical moment in which black Americans were waging a new battle for citizenship, political and cultural. The modern Civil Rights Movement was beginning to take shape in public ways, driven in part by rhetorics of respectability and integration—and both Powell and Atkins were most aware of how their work, as individuals tasked with the deportment of blackness on the national stage, would be interpreted, judged and assessed.

Both Powell and Atkins saw their work as political work, labor of uplift yoked to the positive imagery needed to produce a successful Civil Rights Movement, as a way to

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<sup>12</sup> Nelson George, *Where Did Our Love Go?: The Rise & Fall of the Motown Sound* (Omnibus, 2003), 87.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-89.

<sup>14</sup> Fox, “Maxine Powell, Motown’s Maven of Style, Dies at 98.”

break the stereotypes of incivility that shaped public perceptions of the black community, to “turn the heads of kings and queens.” “All my life,” Powell told the Victoria and Albert Museum, “I was thinking of things that would help my race become outstanding and I thought of class, style, and refinement as two things that would be accepted around the world.”<sup>15</sup> Atkins took his job at Motown precisely because of the political shifts—“the Black movement” as he called it to Malone—happening at the time. “[W]e were very conscious of, and to be a part of something destined to become a first and contribute to the future of Black artists was an opportunity.”<sup>16</sup> Though Powell’s work has received a bit of attention in the mainstream press, beyond some references to both in popular histories of Motown, their work has not been a part of popular culture scholarship. Scholars of popular dance have neglected the span and influence of Atkins work upon the popular music scene. Popular music historians tend to focus on Motown’s crossover sound more closely than they do the moves and deportment of its performers, as do historians of the civil rights era, who understand Motown’s popularity as prime sonic evidence of an integrationist ethos.

### **From Music to Film**

Motown music dominated the airwaves and music charts in the 1960s, and though it wasn’t “freedom music” in the explicit and traditionally political sense, it did become, arguably, the sonic representation of the Civil Rights era, a sound created to integrate. Motown symbolized, in many ways, the beginnings of what the music industry would ultimately codify as audience-spanning “crossover” music, recordings by artists in one

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<sup>15</sup> “The Story of the Supremes,” *Victoria and Albert Museum*.

<sup>16</sup> Malone, “Let the Punishment Fit the Crime,” 14.

genre—usually rhythm & blues or soul—that found popularity in an audience usually interested in another genre of music. Motown grew from a small family-owned business that specialized in light romantic pop songs into a critically-lauded producer of sonically and thematically expansive work that engaged political and social topics important to the youthful record-buying public.

By 1972, when Motown relocated its operations from the small bustling bungalow on West Grand Boulevard in Detroit to a gleaming high-rise on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles, its founder and president Berry Gordy had a plan: He wanted Motown to be more than just a record label; he envisioned it as an all-encompassing entertainment empire, which meant, above all else, the production of motion pictures. Starting in 1972 with both the Academy Award-nominated Billie Holiday biopic *Lady Sings the Blues*, which Gordy co-produced as a star vehicle for Diana Ross, his label's leading lady, and Marvin Gaye's critically-acclaimed, top-selling soundtrack for blaxploitation hit *Trouble Man*, Motown did indeed become a force in the movie business, producing top-selling soundtracks to successful films as movie studios began to realize the possibilities of cross-promotions, particularly around films marketed to audiences comprised of young people and people of color.

This success happened concurrently with two important developments, one political and one creative. First, the mainstreaming of Black Power thought was taking hold in black communities around the US, as the black community looked for more forceful ways of exhibiting black pride through black nationalist rhetoric, political power, and black entrepreneurship. Second, following the unexpected success in 1971 of Melvin Van Peeble's independent film hit *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and Gordon

Parks' film adaptation of Ernest Tidyman's detective novel *Shaft*, the early 70s saw the rise of the controversial "blaxploitation" era in Hollywood filmmaking, during which movie studios and producers tapped into the dogmatically racist energy of the Black Power era in order to produce low-budget movies directed at black audiences eager to see themselves on the big screen following years of supporting and/or demeaning roles in major Hollywood films. By transforming those supporting and/or demeaning roles—the hustler and the pimp, for instance—into leading characters living lives in direct opposition to the white mainstream that had defined them as marginal, these films posited a new kind of agency and imbued black characters with a new kind of heroism (and money making potential) that hadn't been experienced before. A rhetoric of "authenticity" coded blaxploitation films as "real," creating an audience that saw their urban experiences as central to cinematic narratives rather than just highlights on the nightly news. Some of the characters may have been "negative images"—which was the argument put forth by the NAACP and other black organizations seeking to abolish the blaxploitation boom in Hollywood, while also demanding that Hollywood produce more black film—but for many black audiences, this shift to centrality spoke louder than the respectable voices aiming to end it.

In its origins, Motown always considered its work to be "authentically" black cultural production, and—despite charges of "whitening" them up—considered its artists as representatives of the black community. As Berry Gordy wrote in his autobiography, in creating Motown, he sought to "capture the feelings of [his] roots," to maintain the

“down-home quality of warm, soulful country-hearted people [he] grew up around.”<sup>17</sup> Yet in its rise, the company nonetheless still regarded itself as somehow different from other black cultural producers, as exemplars of good behavior and classy bearing. By using Maxine Powell to teach artists how to “speak impeccably and stand erect, how to glide instead of merely walking, how to sit in a limousine with the ankles crossed just so,”<sup>18</sup> Even in the context of reaching for stardom and fame, Motown artists, and by extension, the brand itself, were attempting to elevate blackness to a more dignified level. This was the case in the film world as well.

In 1973, Rob Cohen, the 25-year-old producer Gordy hired to run his film division, told the *Los Angeles Times* that Motown wasn't “making *SuperFly* on a budget of \$500,000.” “We're making,” he said, “classy films with glamor and love that whites and blacks can identify with.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, in the midst of blaxploitation's box office-leading coterie of pimps, drug dealers and Super(Black)Men saving the cinematic ghetto from Whitey—operating in what scholar LaMonda Stallings terms the world of the “ratchet”<sup>20</sup>—Motown was aiming to ratchet down the “ratchet,” to *disidentify* with the surplus of cultural representation embodied by so-called “ghetto” blackness, yet also exploit for its own gains the audience created by blaxploitation cinema.<sup>21</sup> The Motown

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<sup>17</sup> Berry Gordy, *To Be Loved: The Music, the Magic, the Memories of Motown* (Diane Publishing Company, 1994), 114.

<sup>18</sup> Fox, “Maxine Powell, Motown's Maven of Style, Dies at 98,” B14.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Murphy, “Motown Casts ‘Unknown’ to Head Film Arm,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 28, 1973, E1.

<sup>20</sup> L.H. Stallings, “Hip Hop and the Black Ratchet Imagination,” *Palimpsest* 2, no. 2 (2013): 135.

<sup>21</sup> By “disidentify,” I am working from Judith Butler's formulation of “misrecognition,” which she posits it as possibility of “politicizing disidentification,” or a “sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong.” Also, I am suggesting that Motown, by exploiting the commercial, racialized possibilities opened up by

Film Corporation went into business at the right time: the rise of blaxploitation film coincided with what has been called the “near economic collapse of the film industry” at the end of the 1960s.<sup>22</sup> Looking for ways to sustain audiences while retrenching and reconfiguring the cumbersome and expensive “studio system” which had been in effect since the 1930s, Hollywood paid attention to the success of *Sweet Sweetback* and tapped into the growing Black Nationalist sentiment circulating through black communities while also acknowledging the complaints from black cultural and political organizations that black representation on the movie screens of America lacked fully-embodied black characters other than the liberal “good black man” represented by Sidney Poitier. Blaxploitation, writes Todd Boyd, “put Hollywood back on its financial feet” in the early 1970s.<sup>23</sup>

By the time Motown was ready to make *Lady Sings the Blues*, and eventually *Mahogany*, there had been enough recent and unexpected black film success for them to aim for a level of big-budget Hollywood sheen to separate itself from the racially stereotypical fare being sold to moviegoers. Motown was practicing a cinematic Politics of Respectability. And yet, as I will show in my reading of *The Wiz*, while positioning

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blaxploitation while also rejecting the expected and stereotypical surpluses of “blackness” performed by blaxploitation is “recycling and rethinking encoded meaning.” This strategy is defined by Jose Estaban Munoz, who builds upon Butler and describes the process of disidentification as a way of “cracking open the code of the majority; [proceeding] to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics of positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.” For more on the concept of disidentification, see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (Psychology Press, 1993); José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers Of Color And The Performance Of Politics* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, First Edition edition (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 70.

<sup>23</sup> Boyd, *The Notorious Phd’s Guide to the Super Fly ’70s*, 20.

itself in this corrective mode, the company was still deploying highly racialized iconography and cultural signification in order to sustain its narrative of black uplift.

### **The Motown Brand**

In a 1973 profile in the *Los Angeles Times* introducing him as the new head of Motown's film division, Rob Cohen said, "My philosophy of movies and Berry's are exactly the same. We believe in good taste above everything else. We are not involved in exploitation. What we are trying to do is make films which are paragons of taste, emotion and sentiment, and steer a neutral course appealing to the black and white middle class."<sup>24</sup> The Motown ethos, its mission, had rarely been stated so plainly outside of Berry Gordy's early pronouncements that Motown would be "the sound of young America." But here in Cohen's words were the filmic version of how he had described Motown's music earlier in the piece: "It packages R&B in a clear and conceptually precise envelope, taking human experience in human terms which are slightly black but not deeply black."<sup>25</sup>

So how does an entertainment company build itself in Hollywood with this kind of mission? It produces, like all good Hollywood studios, biopics (*Lady Sings the Blues*, *Bingo Long and the Travelling All-Stars*, *Scott Joplin*) and soap operatic stories of love lost and found (*Mahogany*), and spends hundreds of thousands of dollars to buy the movie rights and adapt a huge, game-changing Broadway musical (*The Wiz*). This was "class." This was polite moviemaking, the Hollywood version of Motown's sonic and visual ethos at work, aimed squarely at the general market—particularly to white

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<sup>24</sup> Murphy, "Motown Casts 'Unknown' to Head Film Arm," 23.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

audiences—in order to increase popular influence as well as capital. Financially, Berry Gordy’s mandate was to crossover, to make the popular art he shepherded palatable to a white audience. Culturally, there are also valid reasons for the desire for cross-cultural sharing, for imagining a utopic engagement across race and community. But white people had always liked black music, as Gerald Early writes: “Whites were always admirers of black music, and have always, for some reason, felt compelled to make a histrionic point of it.”<sup>26</sup> Politically, it was indeed an important goal for an African-American man in the music industry to want to control and own his own labor. However, Gordy’s mission, to “class” up “blackness,” particularly during the Civil Rights Movement as a record company, then later as a film division as Black Power began to conflate with black capitalism, speaks to the creation of what Early calls a “black public.” Distinguishing between a black “community” and a black “public,” Early understands Motown as helping to “crystallize the formation, not of a black audience (that had existed before), but of a black public and a black public taste that was taken seriously as an expression of a genral aesthetic among a broad class of Americans.”<sup>27</sup> This body of black people, “who have no commitment to each other except the idea that they are consumers whose consumption is given meaning because of their race,” thus also share a bit of cultural power.<sup>28</sup>

Early’s formation here, ironically, I would like to suggest, makes the cross-racial politics of Berry Gordy’s crossover mandate “blacker” than it is often considered. By giving black people “class”—as opposed to just middle-class respectability, which had

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<sup>26</sup> Gerald Lyn Early, *One Nation Under A Groove: Motown and American Culture*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press/Regional, 2004), 5.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*



been a racialized possibility since the turn of the century—Gordy established a system of intersecting racial signification that disabused expected, essentialist notions of race performance. In other words, by casting his mission as one in which black talent can, in fact, be “white” when necessary, when white people can feel “black” by dancing to the music or watching the performance of black actors, Berry Gordy shifted the conversation about racial representation from the burden of socio-political racialized representation into the realm of cultural citizenship, wherein the black public—a combination of talent and audience—claims authorship and ownership of its cultural labor and entertainment, across racial lines. By being “slightly black but not deeply black,” Gordy and the Motown product he released accessed a flexibility of identity performance while avoiding the “controlling images” that threaten black bodies in the public sphere.

Motown’s first two films seemed to avoid trafficking in the abundant “blackness” on display in the blaxploitation films. *Lady Sings the Blues* adapts Billie Holiday’s bestselling memoir, recasting it as a melodramatic Hollywood biopic—a black version, say, of *Love Me or Leave Me*—highlighting the legend’s drug use and rise to fame in a racially-hostile U.S. but also framing the film with a passionate love story that paired Diana Ross’s Oscar-nominated performance with up-and-coming screen hearththrob Billy Dee Williams. The two starred together again three years later in the romantic and sudsy *Mahogany*, as fashion designer Tracy Chambers and local Chicago politician Brian Greene, caught in a trans-Atlantic love story as Tracy globe-hops, chasing fame and fortune.

Many reviewers—some struck by how romantic Gordy’s film played compared to the violent, misogynistic themes of blaxploitation films; others curious about how

“racially neutral” the plot and characters appeared—pointed out *Mahogany*’s Hollywood trappings with excitement, one reviewer noting that *Mahogany* “recalled Hollywood’s Golden Age, given distinction by its nonstandard treatment of black characters.”<sup>29</sup> It seemed as if Black business- and property-owning African Americans experiencing love pains rather than the pain of ghetto strife needed to be seen as “distinct,” as “nonstandard,” as just-happening-to-be-black, in order to foster a message of black progress against the limited representations of surplus “blackness” at play in blaxploitation films directly aimed at a black audience. While Gordy’s films contributed to opening the box office, they also opened the minds of both black and white moviegoers who were coming to terms with the post-Civil Rights freedoms of black Americans. In this new representation of African Americans, Blacks were able to own the cultural hybridity which whites were celebrated for, rather than feel shamed by it.

In the years following *Mahogany*’s release, film theorists and historians have critiqued the film for what they read as its dated and retrogressive politics. Miriam Thaggert studies *Mahogany*’s post-civil rights dynamics between black men and black women, analyzing the film through the frame of the Moynihan Report. She builds from Richard Dyer’s critique that *Mahogany* “both celebrates the American way of life and keeps [blacks] in their place,”<sup>30</sup> arguing that the film actually keeps “the black woman in *her* place,” and questioning the ways in which Ross’s character, fashion designer Tracy Chambers, ultimately adheres to a traditional narrative and relinquishes her own dreams

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<sup>29</sup> Gardner, “‘Mahogany’ Recalls Hollywood Golden Age”, B1.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Dyer, "Mahogany," in *Films for Women*, ed. Charlotte Brunsdon (British Film Institute, 1986), 131.

in support of her man.<sup>31</sup> Other theorists, like Jane Gaines and Robyn Wiegman, critique the way in which *Mahogany* privileges race (as a masculinist trope) over gender in the choices Tracy ultimately makes at the end of the film.<sup>32</sup>

From the beginning of her career as the lead singer of The Supremes, Diana Ross has occupied a precarious position, hovering somewhere between representative of modern black womanhood and “whitened” glamour queen. Cultural historian Mark Anthony Neal writes that Motown displayed “black progress in terms of the integration of mainstream and elite American institutions by blacks with highly textured middle-class sensibilities.”<sup>33</sup> That sensibility informed Ross’s stature as leading lady of Motown’s sonic and visual discourses, which represented aspiration as a glamorous pursuit, as a defining aspect of personhood. It is interesting to consider the ways in which Ross’ long career aligns with a series of shifts in American social and political history: from Civil Rights-era integration symbol to Black Power capitalist to her identifications, particularly through the anthemic declarations of her music in the disco genre, within feminist and queer iconicity. What never changed for Ross, however, was her insistence on glamour as a central aspect of her image. I read that adherence to glamour as a political deployment, meant to render unstable the hegemonic ownership of “beauty” as

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<sup>31</sup> Miriam Thaggert, “Marriage, Moynihan and Mahogany: Success and the Post-Civil Rights Black Female Professional in Film,” *American Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (December 2012), 717.

<sup>32</sup> Jane Gaines, “White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory,” in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Indiana University Press, 1990); Robyn Wiegman, “Black Bodies/American Commodities: Gender, Race, and the Bourgeois Ideal in Contemporary Film,” in *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, ed. Lester D. Friedman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 308-28.

<sup>33</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 88.

the sole domain of whiteness. As Nicole Fleetwood observes in her essay on Ross, “Taking into account the normalization of beauty as white, we...see that one of the major effects of the black celebrity as racial icon is a disruption of iconic whiteness.”<sup>34</sup>

The fascination with Ross as performing a version of white womanhood as her mode of performance is a curious one. These critiques of Ross arrive in comparison to black female performers like Aretha Franklin, a contemporary of Ross’s whose performance of womanhood, of musicianship, of blackness, was always coded with an authenticity narrative derived particularly from her gospel roots. Ross, on the other hand, was a “pop artist,” thus less fully embedded by an essential blackness which made her perfect for crossover success, which in fact, defined her crossover success. In his essay on glamour and “fierceness,” Madison Moore theorizes on the racialized performance and deployment of glamour through a reading of Tina Turner. In his essay, Moore contrasts Ross and the Supremes’ “finishing school primness”—instilled by their work with Maxine Powell—against the “fire-spitting” Tina Turner as a way to spotlight the “whiteness” of the Supremes representation of womanhood, something he reads as directly descendant of Hollywood’s participation in the enduring myth of idealized white womanhood and beauty. Though Moore’s use of “fierceness” as a way to recast Tina Turner as a beauty icon and push back against the mainstream rock press’s aim to represent her as less than feminine is a valuable intervention, his (and other critics’) insistence on defaulting to “whiteness” as a way to describe Diana Ross’s appeal and aesthetic shortchanges the work I argue that Berry Gordy and Diana Ross are doing in the

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<sup>34</sup> Nicole R. Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 63.

late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>35</sup>

It is productive to imagine, beyond just the capitalistic impulses of Gordy's strict crossover ethos, that Motown's reach for "class" was a way to posit glamour as a potential site of political and social power. Beyond a politics of respectability, Motown sought to expose the ways in which—as white performers had historically tapped "blackness" as a performative mode, often in search of authenticity or belonging—black artists might invest in the "usability" of whiteness to create alternative ways of performing blackness. To put it another way, Motown asks, "What is this 'white' in unmarked popular culture?" To critique Motown as a site of "whiteness" is to actually enshrine "whiteness" as more powerful than it needs to be as a marker of class, glamour, beauty or goodness. Motown disregards the presumption that "whiteness" is something to aspire to rather than just a constructed category with usable elements to be emulated. The dialogic relation between "blackness" and "whiteness" as separate sonic, visual, or cultural spheres renders them both merely usable modes of performance, nothing more. They only have power allotted to them by the individuals and communities who regard them as powerful, who submit to the expectations they arouse.

*Mahogany's* screenplay, by Bob Merrill, received an Oscar nomination in 1976. Toni Amber, credited with the original story on which the screenplay is based, shared in the nomination. Had the film won, had the two writers appeared together on the Dorothy Chandler Pavillion stage, the world would have known that Tracy Chambers, Diana Ross' iconic character, the sassy, ambitious black girl from the South Side of Chicago, was based on the life of a white woman. Though this fact now seems little known by the

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<sup>35</sup> Madison Moore, "Tina Theory: Notes on Fierce," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 1 (March 2012), 77.

hordes who adore the film, it is curious to imagine how this information would impact consideration of Diana Ross as whitened crossover icon. The original script, titled *The JAP* (for Jewish American Princess), was about a girl named Tracy Dannenberg who, to quote the *Los Angeles Times* profile of Amber, “left her ordinary beginnings, traveled around the world seeking romance and excitement and did a lot of crazy things.” “It was really about a girl with chutzpah who would do anything she wanted,” Amber told the reporter. “She was always doing things to meet the right man.” The script, which began life on the back of an checkbook as Amber flew home to New York from Greece, found its way to Motown as a vehicle for Diana Ross.<sup>36</sup> To know this backstory—Jewish girl’s story becomes major film vehicle for black superstar—is to consider the history of representations of blackness in American film, to consider the cross-racial implications of this racialized narrative shift in the context of the American film industry’s origins in blackface, in the donning of cork by Jewish entertainers as a means, as Rogin and others have argued, to locate their “whiteness,” their Americanization, through the exploitation of blackness. This adaptation, as it were, of Hollywood history, a transvaluation, in a way, of racialized imagery and cross-racial sharing, seems symbolic of the racial “usability” I cited earlier. However, I also read in this a representation of utopic possibility in cross-racial sharing. Citizenship can be thought of as a practice of adaptation, a kind of crossing over, and acting like “white people”—borrowing cultural forms, sharing cultural ideas—is not the same of “being white.”

Motown’s next film *The Wiz*, in many ways, best represents the utopic possibilities of cross-racial sharing that defined the Motown ethos. A big-budget musical

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<sup>36</sup> Ron Rapaport, “One Gal’s Fantasy Is Another’s Film,” *The Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 1975.

based on a Broadway hit which, itself, broke racial barriers in terms of its relationship to standardized expectations of American popular culture, *The Wiz* seemed to engage overtly with the surplus of racial representations found in blaxploitation cinema, attempting to meld the “classy” with the “ghetto” in a way that ultimately resulted in the film being neither and yet something else.

### **He’s The Wiz...and He Lives in...the World Trade Center**

Like blaxploitation did for Hollywood in the early-to-mid 1970s, it has been said that Broadway in the same time period was kept afloat by a sudden boom in black musical theater which brought new audiences to theaters and created new outlets for black talent long kept off-stage in leading and substantial roles.<sup>37</sup> When *The Wiz* opened on Broadway in 1975, after a stressful, battle-scarred tour through Baltimore and Detroit, black shows had won Best Musical Tonys, producers like David Merrick, Philip Rose, and Ashton Springer had exposed the lucrative and crowd-pleasing use of black talent, and there was an air of excitement about the strides made by blacks in this newly-integrated Broadway scene. In this milieu, New York radio DJ Ken Harper saw a chance to be a part of this new black scene, and sought to fulfill two dreams: to produce a Broadway show and to produce a version of the L. Frank Baum’s (and MGM film) classic *The Wizard of Oz*.

Early on in the planning stages, Harper knew he wanted young people involved in the creation and execution of his show. He approached dancer and choreographer George

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<sup>37</sup> For more on the box office importance of Blaxploitation, see Kara Keeling, *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Duke University Press, 2007); Robert E. Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century* (NYU Press, 1998).

Faison, a former Alvin Ailey dancer who was, at the time, a dancer in the hit *Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope* and choreographer of his own dance company, about staging the dances for what Harper had begun to think of as *The Wiz*. After negotiations with Geoffrey Holder resulted in Holder becoming the costume designer and director of the show, taking over for Gilbert Moses after a poor preview showing in Baltimore before the show arrived in New York, Faison went to work imagining the movement of the characters.<sup>38</sup> "I was coming from concert dance, modern dance," Faison recalls. "And this was fantasy, so I could make the characters be anything I wanted them to be movement-wise."<sup>39</sup> Billed as "Broadway's Soul Musical," *The Wiz* had a score that dabbled in r&b arrangements, gospel stylings, and disco attitude; and it was, upon arriving in New York, at least to critics, a flop.

Critics praised some of the performances, yet there was felt by many in the company a not-so-underlying resistance to this group of black talent adapting an American literary classic into a funky, modern stage show. Though Martin Gottfried of the *New York Post* liked most of the show, he called the idea of the show "foolish."<sup>40</sup> In the *New York Times*, Clive Barnes called the show "cold."<sup>41</sup> "The contemporary overlay is feeble at every turn," wrote Walter Kerr, also in the *New York Times*. But critic Rex Reed, writing in the *New York Daily News*, cut the deepest: "Next to bombing the White House, I can't imagine a better way to start a race war than to denigrate *The Wizard of Oz* and everything it stands for in the minds and hearts of children of all ages. Descendants

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<sup>38</sup> Faison, interview.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Steven Suskin, *More Opening Nights on Broadway: a Critical Quotebook of the Musical Theatre 1965 Through 1981* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), p. 970.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 970.



of L. Frank Baum, creator of the *Oz* stories should sue. Judy Garland fans should picket the theater where this monstrosity is playing...How dare they demolish the greatest American fairy tale. Garbage is garbage, no matter what color it is, and this all-black sacrilege is at the top of the rubbish pile.”<sup>42</sup> The black press was much more enthusiastic about the show, and with good word-of-mouth and the heavy investment of \$650,000 dollars by film company 20th-Century Fox, the show was able to run. Which it did, for over five years.

Though it has remained, since its release in 1978, a fan favorite, often called a “classic” by fans of black film, the film version of *The Wiz* was greeted with a similar kind of critical derision. This was a result of many bad decisions made, by Berry Gordy and by Universal Pictures, the Hollywood studio which co-produced the adaptation—which was so enthusiastic about bringing *The Wiz* to the screen that executives at first did not assign a fixed budget to the production<sup>43</sup>—and by the director Sidney Lumet, a second-choice, whose film aesthetic seemed worlds removed from an effervescent, fantastical project like *The Wiz*. I read the film version of *The Wiz* as and against blaxploitation, arguing that Lumet’s film invests *The Wiz* with added racial emphasis that actually does not serve a project already deeply reveling in blackness. One of the ways in which it did this was to remove *The Wiz*, geographically, from its Midwestern/Americana trappings in order to set it in New York City. To understand how this shift in the story’s location informs my reading of the film, we should first look at the filmic and social context of New York-based film in the 1970s.

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<sup>42</sup> Rex Reed, “Review of *The Wiz*,” *The New York Daily News*, 1975, 35.

<sup>43</sup> Joanna E. Rapf, ed., *Sidney Lumet: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 75.

As described by photojournalist Allen Tannenbaum in his book *New York in the 70s*, NYC was “dirty, dangerous, and destitute.... stagnation coupled with inflation created a sense of malaise... abandoned buildings and widespread poverty... It seemed as if the entire infrastructure was in decay... When the proud City of New York had to beg the Federal Government for a financial bailout, the President said no. *The Daily News* headline said it all: “Ford to City - Drop Dead.” The tone of Tannenbaum’s words may be dramatic, melodramatic even, but his words aren’t wrong, or false. He goes on to write: “One day in 1973, a large section of the roadway of the elevated West Side Highway collapsed, rendering the entire structure useless. It would be hard to find a better example of the city's crumbling infrastructure.”

New York at this time was, indeed, on the brink. White flight (and some colored flight, too) filled the surrounding suburbs with city escapees looking for better schools, better housing, better everything—less dirt, danger, and destitution, away from those sections of Harlem and the Lower East Side, for instance which had deteriorated into what “looked like European cities which had been bombed during World War Two.”<sup>44</sup> Sociologist Miriam Greenberg calls New York, over its 350-year history, an “unparalleled metropolis—the city of fun and fear, of bedlam and golden dreams” that nonetheless “came to epitomize the declining industrial city of the 1970s.”<sup>45</sup> Yet *all* was not completely lost during that decade of decay that plagued New York City. Tannenbaum points to a vivid artistic boom coursing through the city at the time, a boom in visual arts, music, and cinema, all rising from the ashes of a decaying city, modern

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<sup>44</sup> Allan Tannenbaum, Yoko Ono, and P. J. O’Rourke, *New York in the 70s* (New York: Overlook Press, 2011), 12.

<sup>45</sup> Miriam Greenberg, *Branding New York: How a City in Crisis Was Sold to the World* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 38.

statements of city living, edgy, jagged responses to the decaying metropolis.<sup>46</sup> The city may have been on the verge of financial bankruptcy, but a coterie of artists, thinkers, and musicians were far from aesthetically bankrupt, salvaging art from the wreckage, arguably none more so than a number of filmmakers—many of whom had gotten their starts in the massive television production market that had also escaped from New York in the 50s and 60s for the sunnier climes of Hollywood—who found New York City to be the perfect place against which to set their stories. In fact, according to Greenberg, in 1975, at the height of the fiscal crisis under the Beame administration, forty-six films were shot in New York, many of them what she refers to as “asphalt jungle” films.

The makers of these movies took advantage of New York’s image as the “capital of urban crisis” to provide an added layer of gritty realism to their films, perhaps trying to capture a vibe of finality, of post-war fatigue and spiritual malaise that had crept into the culture and eventually perhaps much of the films shot on the streets of the crumbling city. Some of the films made in this period include *Taxi Driver*, *Marathon Man*, *Three Days of the Condor*, and several New York-based blaxploitation adventures, from 1970’s *Shaft* to *Across 110<sup>th</sup> Street* to *Black Caesar*.<sup>47</sup> New York was, as historian Mark Shiel wrote, “a paradigm of modernity,” where modern artists were looking for a new way of “visualizing the novelty, activity, labor, speed, chaos, routine, density, and intensity of

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<sup>46</sup> Tannenbaum, Ono, and O’Rourke, *New York in the 70s*, 13.

<sup>47</sup> The most famous Blaxploitation shot in New York City in the 1970s are Aaron Loves Angela, *Black Caesar*, *Claudine*, *Come Back Charleston Blue*, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, *Gordon’s War*, *Shaft*, *SuperFly*, *Hell Up in Harlem*, *Shaft’s Big Score*, *Three the Hard Way*, and *Willie Dynamite*. For more information, please see The Museum of Uncut Funk website at <http://museumofuncutfunk.com/2011/10/07/1970%E2%80%98s-blaxploitation-in-the-city/>

the metropolis of metropolises.”<sup>48</sup> Perhaps we can look to a character from a film Sidney Lumet made two years before shooting *The Wiz*: Diana Christensen, the brittle exec played by Faye Dunaway in *Network*, Lumet’s satire of TV news, who intones, “The American people are truly sullen. They’ve been clobbered on all sides by Vietnam, Watergate, inflation, the depression. They’ve turned off, shot up, and fucked themselves limp and nothing helps...The American people want someone to articulate their rage for them.”<sup>49</sup> In this scene, Diana is speaking of the spectacle of Howard Beale, the half-cocked, recently fired newsman who is about to announce to the world that “he’s mad as hell” and “not going to take this anymore.”<sup>50</sup> But in a larger sense, she could have been speaking of the filmmakers, who looked through their lenses at New York city life and found not just filmic representation of moral and emotional decay but also created characters who howled, perhaps with regret, often with desperation, for meaning.

It was in this world that Sidney Lumet and his screenwriter Joel Schumacher decided to set the film version of *The Wiz*.<sup>51</sup> It was into this world that the notoriously New York-centric Lumet recast the story of a little Kansas girl’s reclamation of “home” and the safety of family after a fantastical excursion to Oz, into a grown woman’s descent into a fantasy-urban-crisis dark side that gave her a chance to “believe in herself” and see the world beyond 125<sup>th</sup> Street. Now, an “urban-musical-fantasy with realism as the

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<sup>48</sup> Mark Shiel, “A Nostalgia for Modernity: New York, Los Angeles, and American Cinema in the 1970s,” in *Screening the City*, ed. Jude Davies et al. (London: Verso, 2003), 166.

<sup>49</sup> *Network*. Directed by Sidney Lumet. 1976; Burbank, California: Warner Home Video, 2006.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> It should be noted here that Schumacher had become something of Hollywood’s go-to-guy du jour for black films with music, having had success with *Car Wash* and *Sparkle* before writing this screenplay.

recognizable factor,” *The Wiz* was, at the time, the highest-budgeted black-cast motion picture ever, the most expensive movie musical ever committed to screen, and, ultimately, one of the biggest box office disasters of the 1970s, costing just over 35 million dollars to make and market, and returning about 13 million dollars to the box office.<sup>52</sup>

Ken Harper, the original Broadway producer of *The Wiz*, may have told Canada’s *Globe and Mail* newspaper that the film “would be bigger than *Star Wars*,”<sup>53</sup> but that was not to be, and it is hard to consider how it might have been, given the choice of director, who admitted at one time, to a “preoccupation with America’s decline”<sup>54</sup>, who’s idea for adapting the film was to make it, he told *Positif* magazine, “the odyssey of a young black girl who was afraid of crossing 125<sup>th</sup> street, the border of Harlem.”<sup>55</sup> Asked by another journalist how he thought of his version of *The Wiz* in the context of the original Frank Baum novel and the MGM classic starring Judy Garland, Lumet told him he read the theme of the original book as about “finding home; home being inside of yourself rather than a place to live...and that statement,” he added, “becomes doubly important when thought of in terms of the black experience.”<sup>56</sup> Transferring Dorothy Gale’s story from the mythic America Kansas of its origins (where the Broadway *Wiz* kept it situated) to the hard-edged urban milieu of New York City almost demanded that Lumet and his team encode their version of *The Wiz* within an (arguably) soon-ending, contemporary blaxploitation context, eager as they may have been to court a black audience beyond the

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<sup>52</sup> Rapf, *Sidney Lumet*, 13.

<sup>53</sup> Jay Scott, “The Whiz Behind the Wiz,” *The Globe and Mail*, January 28, 1978, 31.

<sup>54</sup> Scott Siegel et al., *The Encyclopedia Of Hollywood*, 2nd ed. (New York: Checkmark Books, 2004), 256.

<sup>55</sup> Rapf, *Sidney Lumet*, 83.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 76.

locals and tourists who had seen the play on stage. Shifting Dorothy and her crew's search for meaning to the detritus of a decaying city, delving them, for instance, into terrifying subways, re-writing Miss One, the first good witch Dorothy meets, as a "numbers-runner" and the Poppies as seductive, predatory prostitutes replete with "magic dust," it seems that the movie's mixing of "realism and fantasy," as Lumet called it, wants to break boundaries and set new rules for movie musicals.<sup>57</sup> Lumet and Schumacher seem to mistake "opening up" the film from its theatrical origins for "blacking up." The mapping of a specific, urbanized "black experience" onto the story feels as if the filmmakers are trying to "black up" an already significantly realized "blacking up" of the source material, to "out-black" the Broadway musical that gave the movie its reason to be.

By the time *The Wiz* arrived in movie theaters, Broadway audiences had already engaged with the notion "blacking up" in the rise of "black versions" of previous all-white Broadway hit musicals. During the early days of integration on Broadway in the 1950s (and some thirty years after the success of all-black revues and musicals dominated Broadway in the 1920s), black performers often appeared in Broadway musicals, most often in supporting or "step-out" dance or singing parts, but never in leading roles. This work was often considered a means of professional sustainability by producers, an attempt to keep African American actors working in the Broadway arena while also provoking strides toward moving away from the stereotypical representations of blacks that had lasted on the stage since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>58</sup> By the 1970s, the "black

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<sup>57</sup> *The Wiz*. Directed by Sidney Lumet. 1978; Los Angeles, California: Universal Studios Home Video, 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Woll, *Black Musical Theatre*, 272.

version” took hold as a viable production, the start of which most critics and historians credit David Merrick’s immensely successful *Hello, Dolly* in 1969 with Pearl Bailey and Cab Calloway “swinging” the tuneful Jerry Herman score. The form actually had its origins in the previous two decades which saw successful mountings of dueling versions (one of them “Hot” and the other “Swing) of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Mikado* in the 1930s and Oscar Hammerstein’s *Carmen Jones*, a 1943 theatrical re-interpretation of the famous Bizet opera, set in a community of black laborers. This tradition continued with a mixed-race (though mostly black) run of 1954’s *The Pajama Game* in 1973 with Barbara McNair and Cab Calloway, a Robert Guillaume-led *Guys and Dolls* in 1976, and a 1978 Geoffrey Holder-directed rewrite of *Kismet*, a 1953 hit, set in Mali instead of Baghdad, called *Timbuktu!*. The success of *The Wiz* galvanized producers to not just cast black actors in traditionally “white” shows, but to adapt “white” source material into black-cast stories. In 1978, producer Mike Nichols attempted to bring Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* to Broadway as *Alice*, a Vinnette Carroll-directed musical starring Debbie Allen and Paula Kelly. Many hit shows in the 1970s also featured black performers in lead roles of otherwise all or mostly white shows—*Pippin*, *Hair*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*—in “racially neutral” parts that nonetheless seemed to be built around signifying a “soul” performance aesthetic as part of the larger theatrical context.

In other words, the singing/dancing black body, already long sought after historically as a mode of entertainment, had arrived at a fashionable moment, where “blackness” had a usability, politically, socially, culturally. In the wake of societal shifts toward integrating workplaces, schools, and communities, Broadway searched for a way to accommodate the black performing artists into its ranks. The success of *The Wiz*, with

its “blackness” readily on view upon the “American-ness” of its source material, was a kind of endorsement of the progressive, liberal values Broadway sells as part of its appeal. This would seem to be the perfect moment in which someone like Berry Gordy, deeply invested in the cross-racial musical labor of African Americans as a socio-political project of integration as well as a self-making money-gaining project, would see *The Wiz* as a perfect Motown production. It brought the “class” embedded in its Broadway imprimatur and origins as a literary and cinematic classic but it also allowed his vision of American popular culture as a site of cultural sharing to grow beyond the confines of Motown.

After the eventual success of *The Wiz* on Broadway, the idea that this show could go from poorly-reviewed expected flop to 7-time Tony winner invested it with a popular culture legend that cemented its status as iconic within the black community. Andre DeShields, the Broadway hooper who gained stardom as *The Wiz*, told a researcher that show was indeed “a black mythology. We’re not stealing a white mythology. We’ve taken the same set of values, the same set of divine purposes and said ‘we can be divine’.”<sup>59</sup> When the Baltimore *Afro-American* newspaper covered the making of *The Wiz* with a breathless series of interviews with the stars and crew, the editors filed the three stories underneath the paper’s rubric of “History Series.”<sup>60</sup> *Mythology and history*. In 1978, African-American-centric popular culture did not receive the kinds of notice and attention given to *The Wiz*. Individual performers became stars; black movies made money. But to a black community in the throes of post-Civil Rights letdowns, the concept

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<sup>59</sup> Helena Churchill, “The Importance of the Musical and Film *The Wiz*,” *Let’s Talk Politix With Helena Madonna*, July 24, 2013, <http://letstalkpolitix.blogspot.com/>.

<sup>60</sup> Ida Peters, “*The Wiz*,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, October 08, 1977, 15.



of a black entertainment product based on such a beloved American work of art meant that it was, to quote a song from the show, “a brand new day.” Berry Gordy’s decision to maintain some form of black ownership over the work—alongside the investment of Fox and then Universal in the claiming of the movie rights—only secured further the mythology of the show, the history of its making and success.

After the enormous amount of money spent to shepherd *The Wiz* to the silver screen, however, the project became mired in several conversations, in the print media especially, about the value of such an expenditure. By 1978, as Hollywood had begun to recover from its early-70s box office malaise, the mere idea of the “black film” began to be contested. “Black ain’t beautiful out in Hollywood these days,” Ida Peters wrote in the *Afro-American*. “Or even fashionable.” Playing on the black power mantra that had sustained both the black community and the blaxploitation gold rush which had resulted from the community’s support of black-cast films, Peters reported on remarks from Hollywood insider Rona Barrett, who’d claimed that there’d been in recent months a “tacit agreement to cease making movies about blacks.”<sup>61</sup> “Attention Black Americans,” Barrett had intoned on her television show, “The recent gains that have been made in terms of portraying the black experience on the big screen seems now to be a thing of the past.” Citing the lack of overseas success of films with black actors and stressing that Universal, which had *The Wiz* in production, was the main studio involved in such decision making, Barrett’s words resulted in an odd round of comments about *The Wiz*. Sid Sheinberg, the head of Universal told Peters that *The Wiz* “wasn’t a black film.”<sup>62</sup> A

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<sup>61</sup> Ida Peters, “Are Black Movies Facing Trouble in Hollywood?,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, December 3, 1977, 1.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

Cleveland newspaper devoted an entire two-page article to parsing how exactly the \$30 million budget would be spent, whether it would be recouped, and whether Universal and Motown had made the right decision. The picture “will not attract whites in sufficient numbers to effect the necessary ‘crossover’ to payback it’s cost.” This was the biggest-budgeted film of all time, musical or otherwise, to ever top-cast black superstars and featured performers. “The success,” the paper opined, “would change the face of the silver screen.”<sup>63</sup> Rob Cohen, the young head of Motown Film, admitted to being “nervous” about the film, because of the Hollywood belief that “a black picture with an all-black cast should not cost over a certain amount of money.” “There is an almost apartheid policy in movie theaters,” he said in the closing of the article. “There is a black audience and a white audience, and rarely do they mingle in the same picture. But when making a movie that’s as expensive as this one, we’ve had to try to appeal to the entire audience.”<sup>64</sup>

Amidst all of the hand-wringing about *The Wiz*’s prospects as a hit movie, lost, it seems, in the racialized discourse of overspending and whether the movie is “black” or not, “universal enough,” is the fact that this was a music-based movie produced by Motown, one of the most significant American record labels of the past two decades. Here, in the music, was where *The Wiz* would succeed or fail, where it would most likely find an audience, even considering the bad reviews that greeted it upon arrival in movie houses. I would argue that the tensions created by the way *The Wiz*’s visual cues mire the film in seemingly misplaced re-iterations of blaxploitation tropes, the music almost

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<sup>63</sup> Billy Rowe, “The Wiz--A \$30 Million Gamble,” *The Cleveland Call and Post*, November 11, 1978, 6A.

<sup>64</sup> Jack Egan, “The Wiz Worries; Gambling on Hollywood’s Costliest Musical,” *The Washington Post*, October 25, 1978, D3.

always does the work its supposed to do (although often it is doing it against the grain of the visual), and that is the fundamental reason it has lasted as a icon of popular entertainment.

What was called a “soul” musical when it debuted on Broadway in 1975, seems to have been re-imagined as a “disco” musical on film. And considering the 1977 production time, that is not very surprising. This is also the time of misbegotten films exploiting the “disco craze,” like *Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* and *Thank God It’s Friday*, while also the era of *Grease* and *Saturday Night Fever*. Disco’s sonic melismas and melodramas were still charting high and getting radio play (this was a full two years before Cleveland’s infamous Disco Sucks record burning and the large-scale backlash to the form). The best musical moments of Lumet’s *The Wiz* are the scenes where the filmmakers allow the sonic promiscuities of New York “black” music sounds to dictate the action rather than the forced and hollow scenic over-representations of “blackness” that never completely take shape. The “urbanness” the audience hears almost always trumps the “unrbaness” that it sees. Though it may seem at times in *The Wiz* – even for all the criticism of changing the lead character from girl to woman—as if Dorothy should have been played by a gun-toting Pam Grier, it did in fact star Diana Ross.<sup>65</sup> Ross, the “First Lady of Motown Records” had already had a huge disco hit with 1975’s “Love Hangover” by the time she convinced Berry Gordy and Motown to cast her as Dorothy. Michael Jackson, star that he was, was not yet the supernova of tabloid and chart-topping celebrity, but he had rocked the discos with hits with his brothers, including “Dancing Machine” and their cover of “Forever Came Today.” In other words, these

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<sup>65</sup> Lumet, *The Wiz*.

were voices that had helped to cross disco over from just the nightclub to the radio and prom, who'd helped to sell disco's aspirational fervor and glamour to the masses, and by the 1977-78, as Motown was one of the last labels to fully embrace disco and the cultural universalisms in which it trafficked, these sorts of voices may have been necessary, to reach for the crossover dreams *The Wiz* would need to be a success.

That universalism is what a movie needs to be a hit, especially if that movie is an all-black cast adaptation of a Broadway show that had already received its share of resistance for already fooling around with an "American classic." Does one surmise that perhaps Lumet may have trusted his ears—thanks to the musical direction of Quincy Jones—even though as a director his eyes dictated the direction and told him otherwise? The most successful scenes in *The Wiz* are the ones that, understanding itself as a "musical," appeal to the sentimental and schmaltzy side of the story. These scenes, The Emerald City Sequence, in which Dorothy and Scarecrow and Lion and Tin Man arrive to find the multi-hued fashion show-cum-nightclub that welcomes them outside the Wiz's palace, and the film's climax, "Everybody Rejoice/Brand New Day," the scene at Evilene's sweatshop, after Dorothy has vanquished the evil Witch Evilene and set free her, for lack of a better word, slaves. Visually, the dystopic, darkly lit spaces in which these scenes are enacted, are depressing to behold, until the music starts, and the viewer is privy to actual joy, to the actual pleasure of dance as moment of self-creation, to the declaratively universalist mode that actually feels "black" in origin. It does that by realizing the sonically utopic possibilities of experience shared beyond socially (or aesthetically) constructed modes of (raced) presentation rather than foreclosing "blackness" to a search for self by crossing 125<sup>th</sup> street.

The “Brand New Day” sequence—the freeing of the slaves—achieves the kind of boisterous, self-loving energy which made the Broadway show a hit. Written by Luther Vandross, whose smooth vocal tones also sing the opening verse, it was made a part of the original production before the show went to Broadway. It is one of three or four songs not written by Charlie Smalls, who wrote the original Broadway score, the others by classic Motown songwriting team Ashford and Simpson. This is when the film is celebrating black music and independence—a black public, if you will—when it is, in a sense, celebrating the endless possibilities.

Berry Gordy’s reach for “class” by retrieving the Broadway hit—arguably, the single biggest African-American cultural product of the 1970s—into the Motown fold was the savvy move of a “race man” who also saw the bottom line of his companies turn toward filmic production. The hybrid nature of the show’s origins probably spoke directly to his mission to crossover “blackness,” to uplift the race through cultural belonging. I believe his aims can be understood in the words of Maxine Powell, his co-conspirator in Civil Rights era social relations through the circulation of “class.” In her interview with NPR, Powell says that she always told her students at Motown, “Allow me to help you unlearn that [the stereotypes placed on blackness] and realize and discover what a beautiful flower you are.”

*Chapter 3*

*“Say it light/I’m white and outasight”*: *Social Belonging,  
Ethnic Revival and the Disco Crossings of Saturday  
Night Fever*

On June 7, 1976, *New York* magazine published an article by British journalist Nik Cohn titled “Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night.” The story recounted the weekend escapades of a bunch of teenaged Brooklynites who spent their Saturday nights in a local disco, attaining neighborhood superstardom and dreaming of lives outside the limited domains of their white ethnic enclave. Music producer and manager Robert Stigwood, who had earlier made movies of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and The Who’s *Tommy*, bought the rights to the story, hoping to cash in on the disco background, seeing in the story an up-from-nothing tale of teen angst that he believed had cinematic potential. That movie became the classic hit film *Saturday Night Fever*.

This chapter engages *Saturday Night Fever*’s history, production and legacy through a reading of the character Tony Manero, and the ways in which the film raises important questions about cross-racial cultural sharing, ethnic belonging, and how popular culture operated along racial and ethnic lines during the critical historical moment known as the “Ethnic Revival.” My reading considers notions of social belonging and cultural appropriation as I think about the film in the context of disco music and culture and Hollywood cinema’s relationship to race.

But like many a good movie, this chapter opens with a flashback:

On April 3, 1976, while on the presidential campaign trail, former Georgia governor Jimmy Carter told the *New York Daily News* that he saw “nothing wrong with ethnic

purity being maintained" in American neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup> After a rising furor from liberal-leaning political and social leaders across the U.S. and a sustained effort by the media to obtain an explanation for his words, Carter, reportedly quite stubborn according to many who covered his campaign, doubled down on his position. Responding to questions about open-housing laws being enacted around the country to ensure more integrated communities and counteract racist housing practices often aimed at keeping African Americans out of certain neighborhoods, Carter announced that though he supported laws that criminalized the refusal to sell or rent a house or apartment on the grounds of an owner's or tenant's race, color or creed, he was nonetheless against the government "inject[ing] black families into a white neighborhood just to create some sort of integration."<sup>2</sup> He added, "I have nothing against a community that is made up of people who are Polish, or who are Czechoslovakians, or who are French Canadians or who are blacks trying to maintain the ethnic purity of their neighborhoods." That maintenance, Carter told reporters—his face, according to *Time* magazine starting to redden and sweat—was a "natural inclination," and as clarification he offered that the housing policies "ought not to take as a major purpose the intrusion of alien groups into a neighborhood" simply to establish change.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Lind, "How Reaganism Actually Started with Carter," *Salon.com*, February 8, 2011, [http://www.salon.com/2011/02/08/lind\\_reaganism\\_carter/](http://www.salon.com/2011/02/08/lind_reaganism_carter/).

<sup>2</sup> Jules Witcover, *Marathon: The Pursuit of the Presidency, 1972-1976* (Viking Press, 1977), 302-3; Steven F. Hayward, *The Real Jimmy Carter: How Our Worst Ex-President Undermines American Foreign Policy, Coddles Dictators and Created the Party of Clinton and Kerry*, First Edition edition (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2004), 74; Christopher Lydon, "Carter Defends All-White Areas," *New York Times*, April 7, 1976, 1; Christopher Lydon, "Carter Issues an Apology On 'Ethnic Purity' Phrase," *New York Times*, April 9, 1976, 1.

<sup>3</sup> "Candidate Carter: I Apologize," *Time Magazine*, April 19, 1976.



Some reporters of the time and contemporary historians of political culture in the 1970s believe that Carter's rhetorical choices in the *Daily News* interview and in his defenses of it before apologizing were aimed directly toward the (mostly northern) white ethnic voters who had moved away from the Democratic party, and who were now seeking public recognition as they perceived their own political and economic losses in the gains achieved by the black community through the civil rights legislature of the 1960s and early 70s.<sup>4</sup> In the 1970s—as urban historian Suleiman Osman calls it, “the decade of the neighborhood”<sup>5</sup>—white ethnic leaders across the nation found themselves in a precarious position: either defending ethnics against charges of anti-black racism or comparing the economic difficulties experienced by working class white ethnics to those of blacks, while seeking “anti-discrimination” legislature which would include white ethnics as protected categories.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of “white ethnic” identity in the U.S. is strongly tied to narratives of immigration to the US in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, particularly that of southern and eastern Europeans. The 1970s, as will be shown in this chapter, was a time during which many members of generations following that mass immigration resisted the experience of assimilation as formulated through the idea of the American melting pot and instead looked to organize itself around the promotion of a more pluralistic adherence to ethnic heritage identity. For more on this shift, see Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in American Life* (New York: Macmillan Books, 1973), Joe L. Kincheloe, *White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), Stephen Spencer, *Race and Ethnicity: Culture, Identity and Representation* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2006), and Jacobson, *Roots Too*. In this chapter, the “white ethnic” experience of Italians will be the main focus.

<sup>5</sup> Suleiman Osman, “The Decade of the Neighborhood,” in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, ed. Julian E. Zelizer and Bruce J. Schulman (Harvard University Press, 2008), 106.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue and John D. Skrenty, “The White Ethnic Strategy” in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, ed. Julian E. Zelizer and Bruce J. Schulman, eds., (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 183.

Like black leaders of the time agitating against bank redlining or protesting “negro removal” (later called gentrification) in black areas, much of the work done by white ethnic leaders and activists connected them directly to predominantly ethnic enclaves, neighborhoods which felt under siege, by anti-discrimination housing laws which diversified and shifted the ethnic centrality of their living areas and also by school busing laws which would bring black students to white school districts. If Carter was currying favor from an embittered white ethnic community, playing to a “new localism” which animated a willingness “to preserve ‘turf’ and home ownership with confrontation tactics,” his referencing the “ethnic purity” of American neighborhoods was the right move: according to the *Christian Science Monitor*, “neighborhoods [had] become the ‘politics of the ‘70s.’”<sup>7</sup>

Jimmy Carter, of course, went on to become the 39<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, and this moment of political campaign maneuvering has largely disappeared from popular memory. However, an event on April 2 in Boston—one day before Carter’s interview—remains very clear in the public consciousness. The nation’s attention had been captured by the protests and riots resulting from community resistance to the passing of Massachusetts’ Racial Imbalance Act in 1965, a government-approved order to desegregate public schools. Almost ten years after that enactment, after years of protests and lawsuits, the first court-ordered school buses brought black students into one heavily Irish community, and an example of the “confrontation tactics” referred to by the *Christian Science Monitor*, meant to “preserve tradition and ‘turf,’” became national news. Angry, shouting, armed mobs “attacked school buses, beat black students, and

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<sup>7</sup> “A Nation of Neighborhoods: Series Explores ‘New Localism,’” *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 9, 1977, 35.

instituted a reign of terror against the city's black population.”<sup>8</sup> On April 2, in the midst of this tense and ongoing busing crisis, *Boston Herald American* photographer Stanley Forman snapped a photograph outside City Hall during an anti-busing protest, capturing the horrific image of black attorney Ted Landsmark being attacked with an oversized American flag by teenager Joseph Rakes.

Titled “The Soiling of Old Glory,” the photograph won the Pulitzer Prize and still stands as a visual testament to the tensions which defined urban cross-racial relationships in the United States in the 1970s. Spurred by the national economic downturn which followed the legislative victories of the 1960s—the Voting Rights Act, the Civil Rights Act, numerous housing and educational desegregation appeals from Detroit to St. Louis to Boston—tensions rose between blacks, who wondered whether they had in fact overcome, and white ethnics who felt threatened by the celebrated gains for blacks that marked the Civil Rights movement of the decade before.<sup>9</sup>

I rehearse this brief history of some rhetorical and physical violences that circulated around race and ethnicity throughout the U.S. in the mid-1970s to provide context for thinking about *Saturday Night Fever*'s arrival onto a popular culture landscape deeply invested in the cross-racial tensions embedded in the idea of community, of “neighborhood”—during a time that historian Michael Novak describes as

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<sup>8</sup> Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: the Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), 176.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the bus crisis and other ethnic confrontations, please see: Jefferson R. Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (The New Press, 2013); Dennis Deslippe, *Protesting Affirmative Action: The Struggle Over Equality After the Civil Rights Revolution* (Baltimore, Md.: JHU Press, 2012); Hollinger, *Postethnic America*; Kincheloe, *White Reign*; Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies* (Macmillan, 1973); Osman, *Rightward Bound*.

“the decade of the ethnics”—and as a document of that decade’s interest in ethnic heritage, in the “new localism” and the “defending of turf.”<sup>10</sup>

When people think about *Saturday Night Fever*, the blockbuster 1977 film which took John Travolta from TV star to movie icon, memories conjure the sonic lushness of the disco music that laced the best-selling soundtrack—the falsetto-crooning of The Bee Gees, the funky r&b groove of Tavares, the plaintive vocals of Yvonne Elliman. They also often visualize the sleek pearly-white suit Travolta wore in the film as Tony Manero, dancing—lithely, defiantly—across the underlit dance floor of Odyssey 2001, the popular disco in Tony’s Bay Ridge neighborhood. Both critics and admirers of *Saturday Night Fever* consider it one of the iconic films of the ‘70s. For some, the film maintains a reputation as merely a “disco movie,” a lurid recounting of ethnic inner city post-teen angst set to the beat of dated club music. Others regard it as the inadvertent, though definitive, beginning of disco’s demise; the popularity of the movie, they believe, shifted the emphasis of disco’s triumphant unifying project, what I’ve described elsewhere as the “the pleasure of marginalized bodies, female, gay, trans, black, Latino—and the mainstream that followed its cultural lead—who indulged, and felt indulged by, the universalist trappings of disco, the way in which society could be remixed to mirror the complex and multi-valenced social dynamics at play on the dance floor.”<sup>11</sup> These critics argue that *Saturday Night Fever*’s success, perhaps inevitably, crossed disco over to the mainstream, thus divesting the music and the culture that surrounded it of its edgy urban (black-Latin-queer) populism and investing it with the mundane elitism of suburban

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<sup>10</sup> Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Scott Poulson-Bryant, “‘Put Some Bass in Your Walk’: Notes on Queerness, Hip Hop, and the Spectacle of the Undoable,” *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 2, no. 2 (2013): 216.

(white) middle-class respectability. Learning to hustle to the strains of “Disco Duck” in a strip mall dance studio was not exactly considered cutting edge.

Dancing sequences are not the only thing *Saturday Night Fever* had to offer. In one of the quieter moments of the film, after Tony has helped his dance partner Stephanie move into a Manhattan apartment, the couple settles on a bench overlooking the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, which connects their native Brooklyn to the borough of Staten Island, and Tony impresses Stephanie with his detailed, encyclopedic knowledge of the bridge’s history, trivia and dimensions. Prior to this moment, Tony has not exhibited interest in much beyond fashion, women and disco dancing. Like Stephanie, the viewer appreciates this other aspect of Tony, a surprisingly grounded one compared to the arrogance of the local superstar for whom, as his ex-clergyman brother tells him, walking into the disco as people stand aside in awe is like “the parting of the Red Sea.” Similarly to the film’s gritty opening shots of grimy New York subways and the Verrazano and Brooklyn Bridges—pathways out of Brooklyn—this scene evokes and foreshadows Tony’s core tension: his ambivalent relationship to the disco-dancing stardom he has achieved in his cloistered, Italian neighborhood and his awakening to life beyond it. “Fuck the future!” Tony tells his boss at the paint store, where he works a dead-end job to make just enough money to shop for clothes and buy drinks at the club. “You can’t fuck the future,” his boss screams back, “or the future will fuck you!” But Tony does not believe that. Chronologically the future may be decades away from 1977, but for nineteen-year-old Tony, the future is right in his neighborhood, at 2001.

2001 is the central site of becoming for Tony, the place where he performs the best version of himself, where through the physical, performative interchange of dance he

can most fully articulate the dreams he has beyond the Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, neighborhood where he's lived his whole life. The judge of a dance contest he wins calls him "the Fred Astaire of Brooklyn." His friends and fans at the disco shower him with compliments. He's asked "Are you as good in bed as you are on the dance floor?" After receiving a begged-for kiss from him, another woman mock faints and tells everyone "I just got kissed by Al Pacino!" Tony is the star, "the King," his friends shout to him "out there" on the strobe-lit dance floor. In the disco, Tony is far removed from his family's constant criticism, from the drudgery of the dead-end job, from what historian Jefferson Cowie describes as the "fixed values and social limits" of the working class ethnic enclave which defines his existence.<sup>12</sup> However, as liberating as the nightclub is for Tony, it also exists as a site of conflict and ultimately self-awareness, particularly around issues of race, ethnicity and culture. Increasingly, Tony feels compelled by the tug of community connection. Yet, the allure of individual ambition, which threatens community belonging even as it questions its insularity, motivates him as well. As he tells Stefanie after their first dance rehearsal together, he "would like to get that high somewhere else in my life."

According to Cowie, who writes about the film as evocative of "the last days of the working class" in 1970s U.S. culture, the urgency in Tony's plight, whether to remain in his hood or escape its confines, makes *Saturday Night Fever* more than "just a dance flick"; to Cowie, the film is "both symptom and exploration of the most important breaking points in the nation's white male, working class identity."<sup>13</sup> But the film *is* a

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<sup>12</sup> Jefferson R. Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (The New Press, 2013), 315.

<sup>13</sup> Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 314.

dance flick, very importantly *about* and most resonantly originated *in* the cross-racial sharing of disco, about a white Italian guy who dances to the black and Latin-tinged music while also casually referring to black people as “niggers” and Puerto Ricans as “spics,” an Italian guy who locates a sense of self in his ability to “look as sharp as [he can], without turning into a nigger.” Blackness embodies rituals of glamour and style for Tony and his friends, and Tony’s ability to perform the blackness of that racially-coded glamour and style in, with, and through his white body is one of the ways in which the film enacts, as a text and as a historical document, how the “whiteness” of urban ethnic male identity became, in the 1970s, intimately connected to, influenced by, and in many ways defined in opposition to “blackness.”

In the thirty-eight years since its release, *Saturday Night Fever* has become a widely analyzed text for cultural historians of class, gender and sexuality. I’ve found, however, that the film’s treatment of race as well as its own racism, intertextually and extratextually, has received less scholarly attention. Race adheres in studies of the film more as an optic onto the Italian-ness of the lead and supporting characters; the blackness (or lack thereof, which will be considered later in this chapter) at work within the film, through music and character interaction, receives scant attention. In a majority of the chapters and essays about *Saturday Night Fever*, the characters’ racism is either rarely acknowledged or literally parenthesized in the text, as if the behavior and language of these young working class Italian men is expected, representative, merely decorative rather than deeply problematic and thus generative of consideration. My work in this chapter aims to de-parenthesize the racialized and racializing patterns in the film, through both the character of Tony Manero and the performance of John Travolta, exploring how

*Saturday Night Fever* stages larger conversations about race, popular culture and the performance of cultural citizenship in the 1970s. To build off Cowie, I also look at *Saturday Night Fever* as a symptom and exploration: of how both Tony's embodied migrations across the filmic urban space and Travolta's mobility within the Hollywood star system—particularly as they occur in the 1970s, a period of intense cross-racial enmity played out in political and social spheres which is also a vibrant period of cross-racial cultural sharing—complicate the affirmations of white identity that result from interactions with and through a racialized Other.

### **KISS ME, I'M ITALIAN**

*Saturday Night Fever's* opening scene, after the montage of subways and bridges portraying the various means of entrance to and escape from the streets of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, introduces the film's, and its lead character's, connection to his neighborhood. Starting with shots of Tony's platform-heeled shoes and eventually panning up and out to exhibit the rhythmic gyrations of his walk, the camera invites us to admire Tony as he stops to compare his shoes to a shiny new pair in a store window, as he stops and stares and flirts with passing women, as he grabs two slices of greasy pizza and eats them both at once, layered upon each other. This opening immediately tethers Tony, and our expectations about him, about the film, to the streets of his neighborhood, to the pavement of a city which just two years prior had been told by President Gerald Ford, in so many words, to "Drop Dead" rather than expect any handouts from the federal



government to save the city from financial ruin.<sup>14</sup> When he reaches his destination, the hardware store where he clerks, one can see the effect of the city's—the nation's—financial problems: His boss, Mr. Fusco, has sent Tony to another paint store to get the brand his customer needs, so as not to lose that customer to the other paint store.

This is, as described earlier by historian Michael Novak, the “decade of the ethnics.” Historians call this moment in the 1970s the “ethnic revival”, when, as Matthew Jacobson writes, “after decades of striving to conform to the Anglo-Saxon standard, descendants of earlier European immigrants quit the melting pot”<sup>15</sup> and began to represent themselves through a “vision of ‘ethnic heritage’ that had vast implications not only for individuals and families but for the nation itself and for reigning notions of ‘Americanness’.”<sup>16</sup> This idea of “quitting” the melting pot, of “deassimilating,”<sup>17</sup> mobilized hyphenated Americans to stress the ethnic emphasis of their hyphens instead of holding fast to an identity which ignored personal history in aspiration toward a WASP ideal. This resulted in what Jacobson calls “the emergence of a wholly new syntax of nationality and belonging.”<sup>18</sup> It was a syntax spoken in newly-found and -expressed native tongues. The 1970s saw a rise in ethnically-oriented social clubs and institutions and parades; ethnic merchandising (“Kiss Me, I’m Irish/Italian/Greek/Polish” pens and caps and t-shirts) and reforms in academia devoted to the study of ethnic histories grew

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<sup>14</sup> Based on later reportage, despite the New York *Daily News*' headline to this effect, Gerald Ford never actually spoke those exact words; he just implied them. For more about that, please see Sam Roberts, “Infamous ‘Drop Dead’ Was Never Said by Ford,” *The New York Times*, December 28, 2006, sec. New York Region, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/28/nyregion/28veto.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Schulman, *The Seventies*, 83.

<sup>18</sup> Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 6.

more popular. Americans whose forebears had worked hard to sew themselves into the fabric of American society by changing “foreign-sounding” names and moving into lily-white suburbs now saw their next generation reaching back to the “old homeland” for inspiration and pride and stitching themselves into a new mosaic of ethnic identities.<sup>19</sup>

Creators of popular visual culture in the 1970s tapped into this cultural shift and engaged in what critic Todd Gitlin calls a “turn toward relevance.”<sup>20</sup> Television exhibited markedly more diverse tendencies as audiences seemed hungry for characters who reflected the ethnic diversity of the nation and controversial subject matter that engaged with race and ethnicity. Historically underrepresented characters—*The Jeffersons*, *Sanford and Son*, *Chico and the Man*—headlined sitcoms. Multiethnic workplace shows like *Taxi*, *Barney Miller* and *WKRP in Cincinnati* dominated network schedules. Narratives of heritage and history like *Roots* and *Holocaust* broke ratings records. In other words, according to Stephen Vider, “the all-WASP world of *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* was gone.”<sup>21</sup>

Movie theaters featured what sociologist Miriam Greenberg calls “asphalt jungle” films, works inflected by a thematic, narrative and visual grittiness representative of a strand of independent-oriented 1970s cinema that sought to deepen the usual Hollywood narratives and provide a more realistic portrayal of urban life experience. Many of them took advantage of New York’s racial, financial and cultural image as the “capital of

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<sup>19</sup> For more about the ethnic revival see: Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*; Novak; Richard Gambino, *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-Americans* (Guernica Editions, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (Routledge, 2005), 203-11.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Vider, “Sanford Versus Steinberg,” *Transition*, no. 105 (May 1, 2011): 21–29, doi:10.2979/transition.105.21.

urban crisis” to provide an added layer of gritty realism to their films.<sup>22</sup> Jefferson Cowie points to the “exaggerated pathologies of angry white men” in television and films who received the bulk of popular culture attention in the 1970s.<sup>23</sup> Though one critic called Francis Coppola’s crime family saga *The Godfather* a tale of “failed assimilation...the new immigrant counternarrative of the ethnic revival,”<sup>24</sup> it is still considered by many historians and scholars to be the originator of the boom in ethnic-based storytelling that entranced audiences with intimate and detailed evocations of ethnic life. Enmeshed as it was in the “sentimentality that caught the mood of the rising interest in ethnicity” as it presented a story about family unity, honor, and old-world affirmation, the anti-hero ideologies of the main characters, a family of gangsters, nonetheless expressed a certain edge, or sexiness, that movie audiences were drawn to. Into this tradition stepped Tony Manero.

Tony’s walk through the streets of Brooklyn which opens the film is scored to The Bee Gees’ “Stayin’ Alive,” which essentially operates as the movie’s theme song, articulating the emotions of Tony’s character from the start: “You can tell by the way I use my walk I’m a woman’s man, no time for talk/Music loud and women warm, I’ve been kicked around since I was born.” It is an ode to the cliché of the “urban jungle” which details the thoughts of the young lion who prowls it. The rhythms of Tony’s walk, edited to emphasize the song’s applicability to Tony’s strut through life as well as his

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<sup>22</sup> In 1975, according to Greenberg in her book *Branding New York: How a City in Crisis Was Sold to the World* (New York: Routledge, 2008), even in the midst of financial instability at the height of the fiscal crisis under the administration of Mayor Beame, forty-six movies were shot in New York and Brooklyn, many of them “asphalt jungle” films. .

<sup>23</sup> Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Will Kaufman, *American Culture in the 1970s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 97.

“performance” of it, foreshadows both the leonine grace of his dancing later in the film and the ways in which he derives power from his physical articulations of that grace. (A few scenes after this a female character named Annette who is obsessed with getting Tony’s attention, waits for him outside a dance studio, and tells him she did so because she “wanted to watch him come down the street.” She “likes the way he walks.” One gets the impression watching the opening scene that Tony does as well.)

Writing about Frank Sinatra, another film star of Italian heritage, historian Robert Ferraro describes him as someone who “made ethnic self-actualization—defiantly seductive, seductively defiant—into an art.”<sup>25</sup> The film structures Tony’s embodied self-appreciation as constitutive of this kind of self-actualization. Despite being “kicked around,” this is a character who’s “got the wings of heaven on [his] shoes/[he’s] a dancin’ man and [he] just can’t lose.”<sup>26</sup> Throughout *Saturday Night Fever*, we will not only, like Annette, watch Tony, but we will also watch Tony *watch himself* as well: in mirrors as he preps to head to the disco and as he rehearses in the dance studio, as he sees himself reflected in the eyes of the fans who worship him at the club, and ultimately as he also sees himself, judged against his best friends, performing ethnicity through violence in a way that he must resist. Indeed, throughout the film, Tony is the vain, “high-powered fusion of sexuality [and] street jive” that Pauline Kael describes him as in her review of the film.<sup>27</sup> Style guides Tony’s choices, but it is style borne of observation and practice, a kind of labor through which he derives pleasure. (At one point after being complimented

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas J. Ferraro, *Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America* (NYU Press, 2005), 92.

<sup>26</sup> The Bee Gees. *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack. Polydor/RSO Records. Recorded 1976.

<sup>27</sup> Marsha Kinder, “Saturday Night Fever Review,” *Film Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (Spring 1978).

in the disco Tony tells a friend that he could be a great dancer too, “if he practiced more.”) Once he’s back at the hardware store one can also see that as a working man, Tony seems to enjoy his job as a salesman yet does not seem much concerned with work; he’s just turned what was supposed to be a quick errand into a lunch break/flirting session/personal fashion show: a performance, or practice for a performance, that gives his body meaning in a way rotely standardized, expected forms of labor do not. Writing about the material frameworks for the ways in which bodies of the black diaspora have used music to structure their cultural life, Stuart Hall wrote, “Think of how these cultures have used the body—as if it was, and it often was, the only cultural capital we had. We have worked on ourselves as the canvases of representation.”<sup>28</sup> As a working class kid potentially destined for the kind of marginalized, and marginalizing, work that his own father has lost access to in an economically unstable time, Tony Manero locates pleasure, and self-actualization, in a context wherein “identity and practice are linked to material conditions of existence.”<sup>29</sup> He is his own project.

Tony’s project is the creation and marketing of Tony Manero, and as evocative of the “asphalt jungle film” in “the decade of the ethnic,” his Italian-ness in this Bay Ridge neighborhood would manifest itself as currency. In a similar way, Robert Stigwood’s project as producer of the film is the creation and marketing of John Travolta. Reportedly the only actor Stigwood had in mind for the part of Tony Manero, Travolta was a twenty-three year old TV star, appearing as Vinnie Barbarino on *Welcome Back, Kotter*, a TV sitcom firmly representative of the “new ethnic” that was steering popular culture toward

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<sup>28</sup> Hall, *Black Popular Culture*, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Black Hawk Hancock, “Steppin’ Out of Whiteness,” *Ethnography* 6 (December 2005): 427–61.

it's "turn to relevance." Along with (Jewish) Horshack, (black) Washington and (Puerto Rican Jew) Epstein, Barbarino was a member of the "Sweathogs," the unruly bunch of high school seniors under the guidance of Gabe Kotter, a Brooklyn Jewish guy returned to teach at his old high school. Travolta's performance on the hit show trafficked in well-worn stereotypes of the dumb, sexy Brooklyn Italian alpha man, yet arrived not without a significant amount of streetwise charm. The "Sweathog" crew from which Stigwood chose his leading man spoke directly to the kind of performances of inner-city ethnicity that had begun to define American whites who felt further removed from the national narrative of achievement and success symbolized by WASP ideals. Writing at the time, Michael Novak saw the ethnic revival—what he also called "ethnic consciousness"—as being due to "disillusionment with the universalist, too thinly rational culture of professional elites."<sup>30</sup> The specificity of ethnic experience meant a thorough re-examination of how history had treated various white ethnic communities was called for. In 1972, for example, in order to "legitimize ethnicity and pluralism in America," Congress passed the Ethnic Heritage Studies Act.<sup>31</sup> From schools to social clubs, from parades to TV mini-series, a new pluralism enveloped the national consciousness. And as stated earlier, much of the grassroots work to accomplish the institutionalization of this new consciousness originated in neighborhoods: as this new pluralism spread throughout the culture (and across the ocean as white ethnics returned to those "old homelands" to investigate their ancestries), it seemed as if, as Jacobson quotes *The Nation* writer Marcus Klein, "Everybody want[ed] a ghetto to look back to."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Novak, *Unmeltable Ethnics*, 37.

<sup>31</sup> Carroll, *It Seemed like Nothing Happened*, 68.

<sup>32</sup> Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 18.

Of course in the use of the word ghetto, Klein is referring to the segregated spaces in urban communities, dating back to the experiences of those ethnic forebears in the “old world,” inhabited by ethnic or racial groups marginalized for political, social or economic reasons. However, it resonates beyond Klein’s statement about the white ethnic revival and its old world relationship. Jacobson, Schulman and other historians all find the seeds of the 1960s-70s ethnic revival in the rapidly growing feelings of cultural nationalism that resounded throughout the ghettos (and beyond) of the black community in post-Civil Rights America. Black Power radicals may have trafficked in a discourse of separatism to influence black mobility and societal change, but its message of black pride struck a chord with white ethnic groups who were searching for their own narratives of identity and change. Just as integration was seen by black nationalists as a hindrance to racial equality due to the unequal distributions of power even after political and social strides had been made by Civil Rights work, white ethnics began to view the cultural assimilation of the “melting pot” as identity-destroying rather than identity-enhancing, a site of ethnic shame rather than ethnic pride, and influenced by the outspoken, take-it-to-the-streets, group-based identity maneuvers of the black nationalist movement, they sought their right to “a separate identity within the larger framework of a pluralist, multi-cultural nation.”<sup>33</sup> “If there was a such thing as Black Power, asked the *Ukranian Weekly* in 1970, then why not ‘Ukranian Power’?”<sup>34</sup>

The irony in this era’s celebration of white ethnicity, in this newly devout desire for white ethnics looking to “de-assimilate” by locating inspiration from black nationalists, is not just in how it overlapped with the civil rights strides made by African

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<sup>33</sup> Schulman, *The Seventies*, 81.

<sup>34</sup> Sandbrook, *Mad as Hell*, 59.

Americans in the prior decade, but how it also overlapped simultaneously with increasing racial tensions around the country, due, some historians believe to white ethnic backlash to those strides. Though this was a time of celebrating white ethnic heritage, the “decade of the ethnics” was not solely marked by joyful parades and heritage events. The aforementioned violent protests to the busing laws meant to integrate Boston school systems, for example, occurred alongside contested expansions of affirmative action statutes. In the same autumn that saw the release of *Saturday Night Fever*, the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments, after three years in the California court system, in *Bakke v. Regents of the University of California*, in which James Bakke argued that he was denied entry to UC Davis Medical School because he was white. The court found UC Davis’s affirmative action program to be unconstitutional, and Bakke “became a poster boy for white backlash.”<sup>35</sup> Many white working and middle class communities interpreted governmental concern for African-Americans and racial minorities as a request from them to “bear the cost of programmes of relief and redress for these groups,” which encouraged “ethnic anger, alienation and a feeling of being forgotten.”<sup>36</sup> “The Ethnic American,” Baltimore councilwoman (and future Senator) Barbara Mikulski told the *New York Times* in 1970, “is forgotten and forlorn.”<sup>37</sup>

Some of this ethnic pride may have been, for some, simply a matter of a performance, what sociologist Herbet Gans calls “symbolic ethnicity,” but even that symbolism achieved impact when it emphasized an “ethnic exclusivity” that denied rights

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<sup>35</sup> Jeffrey Louis Decker, “Beyond White Ethnicity,” *American Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (December 2006): 1241.

<sup>36</sup> Joe Merton, “Rethinking the Politics of White Ehtnicity in 1970s America,” *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 03 (September 2012): 738.

<sup>37</sup> Carroll, *It Seemed like Nothing Happened*, 67.



to some groups—in this case African Americans and Latinos—while maintaining a narrative of heritage hardship, sacrifice and struggle.<sup>38</sup> Father Andrew Greeley, a University of Chicago professor who also wrote a syndicated daily column about ethnicity and religion, wrote in 1971: “Those social classes which seem so committed to expiating guilt for injustices done to blacks are quite unconvinced about injustices and exploitations worked upon white ethnics and upon their ancestors.”<sup>39</sup> Seven years later, Albert Maise filed an affirmative action suit against the University of Colorado Law School. According to Deslippe, Maise argued that as an Italian he deserved the same consideration as black, Native American and Mexican American applicants.<sup>40</sup> In 1978, Philip DiLeo sued the same law school, arguing that because he was “of Italian-American heritage and a product of slum schools, and was educationally, socially, and economically disadvantaged” he deserved status as a “minority applicant” in the school’s “Special Academic Assistance Program.”<sup>41</sup> Even as African Americans suffered under the same economic downturn that had affected whites in the U.S. during much of the 1970s, many whites interpreted the black community as outpacing whites by “movin’ on up” too quickly—to quote the theme song of a popular 1970s TV show about black upward mobility—or as relying too much on government handouts they didn’t deserve. The blunt words of Joe Curran, the lead character of *JOE*, a popular 1970 film about a factory worker (and perhaps the most vivid example of Cowie’s “angry white man”), received reported cheers of support from audience members around the country, and

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<sup>38</sup> Sandbrook, *Mad as Hell*, 62.

<sup>39</sup> Dennis Deslippe, *Protesting Affirmative Action: The Struggle Over Equality After the Civil Rights Revolution* (Baltimore, Md.: JHU Press, 2012), 91-93.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

summed up a growing sentiment: “The niggers,” he seethed. “The niggers are gettin' all da money. Why work, tell me, why the fuck work, when you can screw, have babies, an' get paid for it?”<sup>42</sup>

White ethnic community leaders in the 1970s seeking to dissipate the burgeoning cross-racial articulations of injustice grappled with how to manage expressions of anger, either the active, racist community-based rejections of actual black people as in Boston or simply the vocal resistance to the nation’s stated goals to anoint African-Americans as recognized citizens with access to the same social, political and legal standing as white Americans. In the midst of this contentious wave of racially disparate hypothesizing about difference, there was also a “poster boy” for ethnic reconciliation at this very fraught time. Geno Baroni was a Catholic priest who, in the 1960s, marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. and helped coordinate the March on Washington, and was active in the 1970s in maintaining the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs as well as a number of cross-racial, cross-ethnic coalitions advocating for urban neighborhood renewal. Baroni sought to “bring urban ethnics together,” looking to blacks as role models for change rather than rivals for government attention. With representatives from Baltimore, Newark and other urban enclaves, Baroni was called one of the “new faces” of “Ethnic Power” by *Newsweek* magazine in 1970.<sup>43</sup>

The complicated machinations of the white ethnic socio-cultural balancing act of resistance to African American uplift and embracing of cross-racial affiliation is an apt metaphor for how disco music is deployed in the film *Saturday Night Fever* (as well as

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<sup>42</sup> Thomas W. Benson, “Joe: An Essay in the Rhetorical Criticism of Film,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* VIII, 3 (1974): 610–18.

<sup>43</sup> Merton, “Rethinking the Politics of White Ethnicity in 1970s America,” 734.

on its soundtrack) and how it propels the movie's narrative, and informs the pleasures and ambitions of its lead character. Disco was "a new form of collective sociality,"<sup>44</sup> it "signaled more than the arrival of dancing, it fostered the gathering of a community."<sup>45</sup> Celebrated for the way it brought together—in a way, arguably, that the white masculinist impulses of "rock and roll" that claimed to speak to and for the white ethnic male in American society did not—different races and genders and sexualities, to find in social dance not just joy and leisure but also, according to some historians of the scene, liberation and belonging. Disco's sonic roots braid together African American funk, soul, and r&b stylings with Latin rhythms and European-style classical instrumentation to produce a cross-cultural, cross-racial genre. One would not find in the disco space any soiling of Old Glory; *Saturday Night Fever* uses the inclusivity of disco—the way in which, to paraphrase Richard Dyer, it "felt good when little else did" in the financially unstable, racially intense '70s—to do two things: first, it allows Tony Manero, nineteen-year-old Brooklyn Italian kid, to dream beyond the strictures of his ethnic enclave, and second, it provides a viable sonic background against which to highlight the slippages in that dream and those strictures. *Saturday Night Fever* has a complicated relationship to disco because it has, like the white ethnics of its time, like the white ethnic at its narrative center, a complicated relationship to blackness.

To consider these complications, it is first important to think about "Italian-ness" in a U.S. context in relation to "blackness". In an essay recounting the historic trajectory of Italians in American cinema, Carlos Cortes points out that Italians, along with blacks

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<sup>44</sup> Tim Lawrence, "Disco and the Queering of the Dance Floor," *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 2 (March 2011): 234.

<sup>45</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift In American Culture, Society, And Politics* (Da Capo Press, 2002), 73.

(and to a lesser extent, Jews), “headed the ethnic screen parade” of the 1970s. The linkage between Italian-Americans and African-Americans has historical resonance pre-dating the 1970s ethnic revival and the post-Civil Rights struggles between blacks and white ethnics.

### **IN-BETWEEN**

Historians have noted the complications which, dating back to the turn of the twentieth century, attended the Italian immigrant experience in the U.S. In her essay detailing what she calls “the very discursive and historical violence that allows citizens of the United States to call themselves Americans,” Francesca Canade Sautman looks at how race and racism impacted the establishment of Italian-American as a structure of identity in the U.S.<sup>46</sup> Referencing the “suspicion of blackness” imprinted upon Italian immigrants upon their arrival to the U.S. in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a result, as Jonathan Rieder describes, of “the Saracen blood [which] gave the Southern Italians a dark complexion that sometimes resembles African more than Caucasian hues,”<sup>47</sup> Sautman posits that Italian immigrants performed an “adamant, sometimes violent, rejection of the ‘taint of blackness’.” This rejection performed by “swarthy, kinky-haired” immigrants, who were settling in American cities alongside migrating African Americans, earned Italians “a predictable enmity from African Americans” who found themselves competing with these new immigrants for jobs, housing, and what Robert Orsi calls “neighborhood power and presence.” During this time, Italians, like other immigrants

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<sup>46</sup> Francesca Canadé Sautman, "The Creolization of Lack," *The Status of Interpretation in Italian American Studies*, ed. Jerome Kruse, 2011, 133.

<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism*, Reprint edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 92.

from Europe, discovered that the route to success in the New World meant a definite differentiation from African Americans. As Orsi writes, Italians learned, and taught their children and newly arriving relatives from Italy to “look with loathing upon everything the native whites loathed.” Orsi calls Italian-Americans “the In-Between People.” To bring this back to *Saturday Night Fever*, the “in-between-ness” of Italian immigrants—and ultimately, newly-minted Italian-Americans—defined not just their standing as Americans but their standing in relation to other Americans as well, particularly in the realm of popular culture. Jonathan Freedman notes this “in-between-ness” in an essay on Italians in the popular arts, stating that Italian-Americans quickly grew to understand “their own multifarious possibilities and their ironic connections and disconnections from the many cultures of America—high and low, white and black.” Earlier in this chapter I referred to what I call the “ethnic emphasis of their hyphens” to mobilize a shift away from an imagined WASP ideal. Film critic Margherita Heyer-Caput cites the metaphor of the bridge in *Saturday Night Fever* as a version of a hyphen, which “emphasizes the in-betweeness” not just of Tony Manero and his ethnic Italian identity, but also the “liberating and empowering value of knowledge and artistic self-expression.”<sup>48</sup> Though resonant as an example of Tony’s transition from dancing Bay Ridge street thug to a man considering the limitations of that identity, this “self-expression” is only possible in the “in-between-ness” of Tony’s Italian-ness in relation to blackness, within the text of the film itself but also in the creation and realizing of *Saturday Night Fever* within the larger context of American cinema.

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<sup>48</sup> Margherita Heyer-Caput, “Italian-American Urban Hyphens in *Saturday Night Fever*,” *Italian Americana* 29, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 46.

The notion of “in-between-ness” is embedded in *Saturday Night Fever*. The film is generally regarded as one of the first true “blockbusters,” a term that gained most traction as a descriptor of a film’s box-office performance the 1970s. There had always been hit films that made many millions for the Hollywood studios but the “blockbuster,” many film historians believe, began in the summer of 1975 with the release of Spielberg’s killer shark thriller *Jaws* and solidified itself as a genre unto itself two years later with *Star Wars* and the rise of the special effects melodramas of George Lucas. Budgeted at just under four millions dollars by Paramount Pictures, *Saturday Night Fever* went on to gross over 175 million dollars, at one point in the first two weeks of release grossing over one million dollars a day at box offices around the country. But unlike the mechanical sharks and blazing light sabres of contemporary “blockbuster” films, *Saturday Night Fever* had no special effects to speak of, other than the extra thirty thousand dollars spent to create the iconic under lit disco dance floor which frames and displays so many of the film’s dance numbers. What made a “blockbuster,” above and beyond the magical cinematic effects and the eight digit box office returns, was the way in which the film became a conversation piece, the kind of popular culture artifact which generated multiple viewings and cultural impact beyond just the movie theater. Referred to as “Stigwood’s little disco movie” around Paramount and Hollywood, it broke many rules, in conception, in production, and in reception. Upon release, the *New York Times* described it as “owing more to *West Side Story* than it does to *Mean Streets*,” pointing to the film’s “violent energy” as well as its “fluid...militaristically choreographed” dancing.<sup>49</sup> Robert Cumbow

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<sup>49</sup> Janet Maslin, “Saturday Night Fever Review,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 1977,

of *Movietone News* wrote, “In intent and intensity, *Saturday Night Fever* falls somewhere between *West Side Story* and *Mean Streets*.” At the film’s 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Judy Weightman cited the same two films in her review, placing the film in context to both the “asphalt jungle” films of Scorsese and Sidney Lumet and New York-set and –filmed musicals such as *On the Town* and *All That Jazz*. Much more than just a “blockbuster,” *Saturday Night Fever* resides in alternative generic spaces, a kind of “in-between” in terms of narrative thrust and thematic structure: it is what critic Todd Berliner calls a “genre-bender.”

Berliner conceives of a “genre-bender” as films which “rely on viewer’s habitual responses to generic codes, misleading audiences into expecting conventional outcomes.” Differentiating “genre-benders” from “genre-breakers”—which are films, he argues, which “loudly broadcast [their] violation of tradition, inviting the audience to join in the film’s efforts to expose genre conventions”—Berliner analyzes “genre-bending” as a 1970s phenomenon, possible through the shifts in filmic representations possible at the time due to changes in the ways films were rated and distributed.<sup>50</sup> According to cinema historian Lester Friedman, American popular film in the 1970s was marked by a group of similar traits. These films—and he cites such iconoclastic works as *Klute*, *Chinatown*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Carnal Knowledge*, *The Godfather*, *Hester Street* and *Shampoo*—trafficked in the following ideas: they were critical of American society, they were dominated by anti-heroes, hostile toward authority figures, dealt with race and ethnicity, engaged with

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<http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=EE05E7DF173EA52CA5494CC2B7799B8C6896>.

<sup>50</sup> Todd Berliner, “The Genre Film as Booby Trap: 1970s Genre Bending and ‘The French Connection,’” *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 3 (April 1, 2001): 26.

popular music, and showcased palpable violence.<sup>51</sup> It was a decade, writes Shelton Waldrep, that “valued internal contradiction in the artistic forms it produced.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, movies of the 1970s—“genre-benders” being a main example of them—were now set free from the restrictions of the Hays Code, which kept a firm hand on representations of sex and violence in Hollywood releases, and were thus allowed to push the narrative and thematic edges of what could and could not be seen in theaters.

*Saturday Night Fever* does follow the 1970s model of the violent, (vaguely) anti-heroic, musically robust, ethnic-driven popular film. Written by Norman Wexler, who also wrote *Joe*, *Serpico* and *Mandingo* and originally meant to be directed by John Avildsen, who directed *Joe* and *Rocky*, two popular films which tapped directly into the new freedoms allowed as well as the new ethnic presence, *Saturday Night Fever* is deeply rooted in two 1970s film formations: the ability of film producers to challenge expected norms for film narratives and the emphasis on white ethnic representations that also took place in the decade. And as one can see from the ways critics described it, as a cross between *Mean Streets*, a popular gangster film of the time, and *West Side Story*, a classic Hollywood musical that challenged narrative, production, and thematic norms, *Saturday Night Fever* occupied a sort of “in-between” space in terms of film genre. That “in-between-ness,” however is marked by the film’s relationship to another filmic phenomenon of the 1970s, which, interestingly, rarely shares analytic space with the films analyzed by Berliner, Friedman, Waldrep, and other film historians of the era.

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<sup>51</sup> Lester Friedman, "Introduction," *American Cinema of the 1970s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Lester Friedman (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 21.

<sup>52</sup> Shelton Waldrep, ed., *The Seventies: The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture*, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 1999), 3.



*Saturday Night Fever*, I'd argue, is as influenced by blaxploitation cinema of the 1970s as it is by any other genre, and blaxploitation's marginalized position in, if not outright erasure from, larger film history of the 1970s mirrors the ways in which blackness and race informs *Saturday Night Fever*'s origins and cultural impact as well as the narrative and thematic nuances of the film itself.

Perhaps no group of films with the 1970s notion of community, tribalism and the "new localism" of the "decade of the neighborhood" more than the blaxploitation genre. Historians, sociologists and cultural theorists have analyzed and critiqued the rise, maintenance and ultimate fall of this genre of 1970s cinema; the moral, economic, and cultural aspects of the genre, particularly as it relates to black mobility in popular culture and the white society during what critic Thomas Cripps refers to as the "neo-nationalism" of the early post-Civil Rights era. Cripps reads blaxploitation as a form of "heroic epic," interpreting the genre as a kind of "picaresque narrative" which follows a rogue or knave whose adventures through "outlawry" manifest themselves as heroic, providing "fantasy motifs" of revenge against "the social system laid down by whites."<sup>53</sup> Kevern Verney sees a curious irony in the ways in which these fantasy motifs provided "strong leading roles" for African American actors marginalized by mainstream Hollywood, playing characters "more than capable of triumphing over white adversaries" in movies that he reads as "crude attempts by white directors and producers to appeal to black audiences."<sup>54</sup> Melvin Van Peebles, given credit for establishing the thematic parameters of the genre with his groundbreaking film *Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song*, sought to

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas Cripps, *Black Film as Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 128.

<sup>54</sup> Kevern Verney, *African Americans and US Popular Culture* (Routledge, 2003), 84.

wield black-cast cinema that motivated political thinking in the community, to “reclaim black spirit” from “the white power structure.” The impact of that power structure upon the material reality of life in black communities around the country, often urban enclaves struck by the economic downturn of the decade as well as the overall willful ignorance to the plight of members of those communities, drove the box office success of the blaxploitation genre, according to critic Paula Massood. Massood locates the genre’s popularity in the depiction of black ghetto communities on the evening news; she sees blaxploitation films as partly a matter of inner-city audiences appreciating the idea of “neighborhood” as something to be heroically protected in the wake of the “waning attention to poverty in the cities on the part of national white politicians.” My project here, however, is not to argue the moral or aesthetic value of the blaxploitation genre. Instead, I am interested in what I see as qualities interrelated to the blaxploitation genre that *Fever* possesses, enacts and re-produces, even as the film is privileged to operate as a mainstream Hollywood film seemingly outside of the urban-centric qualities in which it, like blaxploitation, traffics. I am interested in the ways in which in aspects of the blaxploitation genre get simultaneously evoked and marginalized in *Saturday Night Fever*, and within Hollywood films more broadly.

### **CATCHING THE *FEVER***

Producer Robert Stigwood optioned the rights to the magazine article “Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night” for ninety thousand dollars, hoping to capitalize on the success of the film *Rocky*, which was also a low-budget film about white ethnic masculinity in an urban location. From the very beginning, Stigwood was, according to many associated

with the film, interested primarily in two things: “realism” and music. As a music manager and label owner, Stigwood’s vision for the movie’s success “relie[d] on the synergy created by successively hyping the music and the movie” simultaneously, setting up the release of the movie to coincide, he hoped, with the rising public interest in the soundtrack.<sup>55</sup> *Saturday Night Fever* was much applauded at the time of its release, as well as later in anniversary essays and tributes, for the way in which Stigwood marketed his movie through music. Earlier in this chapter, I noted *Fever*’s reputation in terms of its relationship to disco music. *Saturday Night Fever* did, in many ways, retrieve disco from its potential demise. In urban nightclubs, by 1976, the “disco sound” had found its way into various forms of music, inflecting everything from pop to rock and roll. More importantly, its sound had already found its way into American films through the soundtracks of blaxploitation films.

Years before Stigwood “revolutionized” the way that Hollywood imagined music as a marketing component to the films it released, blaxploitation cinema had used music, as Stigwood did for *Saturday Night Fever*, to create interest in upcoming films as well as drive narrative, evoke setting, and develop character. Black music labels, including major players such as Stax to Motown, had already driven mainstream music labels to become involved with the production and marketing of black-oriented films. Isaac Hayes’ *Shaft* theme song won an Academy Award. Curtis Mayfield’s funk-driven rhythm and blues created helped created the menacing milieu of *Superfly*. Marvin Gaye’s lush ballads and observant political touch scored *Trouble Man*. All of these soundtracks were big sellers; all of them were released prior to the films they scored as marketing items to drive

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<sup>55</sup> Sam Kashner, “Fever Pitch,” *Vanity Fair*, December 2007, 182.

interest in the film. According to the entertainment magazine *Variety*, between 1969 and 1971, 74 percent of American moviegoers were under thirty years of age. The youth audience was an important demographic as Hollywood saw its box office numbers dwindle, and black action films, driven by popular music, put bodies in seats in the primarily urban areas in which Hollywood studios and producers expected big box office returns, and music was a way to attract them. “Music,” writes Richard Dyer, “belongs in the spaces through which the blaxploitation protagonist moves.”<sup>56</sup> In his chapter on blaxploitation music, Dyer compares how action films of the same period, roughly 1971 through 1975, relied on the traditional symphonic or jazz-inflected sounds to underscore scenes. However, he argues, through the use of the urban location shooting indicative of blaxploitation films, geographical space, and the ways in which the bodies of black men and women transformed them, took on a political tint for which black music provided a sonic representation.

Not only did *Saturday Night Fever* borrow the structure of music soundtrack usage as exhibited by blaxploitation films, its iconic credit sequence adopts visual and sonic elements of one of the genre’s most iconic scenes. *Saturday Night Fever* and Gordon Parks’ *Shaft* (1971) have almost identical openings. We observe Shaft as he traverses New York’s Times Square neighborhood, learning much about the detective in his posture, his stride, the way in which he negotiates the city streets, edited to the rhythms of Isaac Hayes’ title song. Very similar to the way in which Parks shoots Richard Roundtree, *Fever*’s director John Badham films Travolta to the beat of the Bee Gees, telling an entire story about urban masculinity in five choreographed minutes. Dyer

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<sup>56</sup> Richard Dyer, *In The Space Of A Song: The Uses of Song in Film*, (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2011), 157.

calls the *Shaft* sequence “perhaps the most widely familiar” of the street scenes of American black cinema of the 1970s; this sequence, he writes, “[claims] this space for black men, [gaining] further resonance in the period not just because it reworks a film-generic white space for African Americans but because it proudly affirms what had long been fixed in the geographical imagination, that the city had already become an African American space.” Black bodies in sequences like the *Shaft* opening “own, embrace, celebrate, and sometimes interrogate” the notions of the “urban” space as being a site of black life, particularly in the wake of “white flight” and the suburbanization that occurred in post WWII U.S.<sup>57</sup> In Badham’s hands, Tony Manero symbolically reclaims an urban geographical space which had once been—before the influx first of African Americans during the Great Migration into the 1960s then of immigrants of color from Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia—the domain of white ethnics. And as shown in white ethnic-focused films earlier in the decade, such as *The Godfather* saga and *Mean Streets*, Italians in particular were feeling the end of an era; the nostalgia for ideal ethnic community increased, it seemed, with the growing dissolution of urban ethnic neighborhoods. *Saturday Night Fever*, however, with its Italian characters instigating fights with Puerto Ricans to protect their neighborhood and openly attempting to sabotage the disco-contest success of colored contestants, attempts to address this cultural history of cross-racial struggle in a way those earlier films did not.

Through the redemption of the main character Tony, who eventually comes to realize the limitations of this mindset, who ultimately rejects the racialized barriers which prohibit his own growth as much as it does the development and mobility of the colored

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<sup>57</sup> Richard Dyer, *In The Space Of A Song: The Uses of Song in Film*, (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2011), 158.

victims of his friends' and community's racism, *Saturday Night Fever* wants to be progressive about race relations yet also remains fairly racist in its depiction of that redemption and the events leading up to it. As Peter Steven observes in *Jump Cut*, *Saturday Night Fever* "attempts to show the stupidity and dead of racial violence...yet often retreats back into racist treatments of the situation."<sup>58</sup> For example, *Saturday Night Fever*'s transposition of this credit sequence—Manero notices himself in store windows just as Shaft does; his stride to the beat of the r&b music takes ownership of the asphalt, just as Shaft does; the credits burst on screen as neon embodiments, similar to the architectural neon of Times Square that greets John Shaft—posits Tony's white body as mastering the inner-city masculine terrain now controlled by black and Latino men. "Street's all his," writes *Time* magazine about the opening sequence, in a profile of Travolta at the time of the film's release. "And more, if he wants. Could be he might step off that concrete. Just start flying away...Just took a stroll down the Brooklyn asphalt, and mid-block he had the street tucked neatly under his arm."<sup>59</sup> The origins of this walk, this style, however, has a racial tinge. In a 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary interview with *Vanity Fair* about the film, Travolta tells Sam Kashner that his walk which opens the film is completely black in origin. "It was the walk of coolness," the New Jersey native said. "I went to a high school that was 50 percent black, and that's how the black kids walked through the hall."<sup>60</sup> The influence of "blackness" as a structuring performative mode for a white body, of course, is not a new thing in American popular culture. In the case of *Saturday Night Fever*, however, parsing the moments where "blackness" erupts through

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<sup>58</sup> Peter Steven, "Saturday Night Fever Just Dancing," *Jump Cut*, no. 23 (October 1980), 15.

<sup>59</sup> "High Steppin' to Stardom," *Time*, April 3, 1978.

<sup>60</sup> Kashner, "Fever Pitch", 185.

the performative movements of white bodies helps to show the ways in which the film celebrates blackness at a time of cross-racial enmity while also deploying tactics of erasure to privilege whiteness as a hegemonic cultural position.

*“Looking sharp, eh?”*

*“Sharp as I can look without turning into a nigger!”*

*“Or a Spic!”*

*“Spic Spic, would you put your dick in a spic? Does it get bigger in a nigger?”<sup>61</sup>*

The above dialogue is how the audience is introduced to Tony Manero’s friends in *Saturday Night Fever*. That is their conversation as they head into 2001 Odyssey, the disco where they spend their Saturday nights. Their language here, as dissonant as it seems heard against the background of thick r&b-tinged disco music that wafts from the nightclub, which will then envelops them as Tony dances and they sip drinks and watch him on the dance floor, establishes them as the casual racists that they are, denizens of a cloistered urban white ethnic neighborhood that they well eventually also defend as “turf” from a gang of “spics” who beat up their friend. The racism seems to register as part of the characters’ style, as a mode of performing their ethnic-ness, their whiteness, as if the ability to “almost” be a nigger endows them with natural flair. As Tony is posited as, performs as, the best dancer in the disco, the we are asked to separate Tony from his pack of friends through appreciation of this *other* side of his performance of style, this other side which assumes a racialized connection between dancing ability and black bodies. As Marsha Kinder points out in her review of the film in *Film Quarterly*, “this kind of stylized movement is frequently identified with certain racial groups, particularly blacks...you can find this kind of ‘polyrhythmic plasticity’ [as she quotes jazz critic

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<sup>61</sup> John Badham, *Saturday Night Fever* (Paramount, 2002).

Stanley Crouch] not only on the dance floor but on the jazz stand, the basketball court, in the boxing ring, on the street.”<sup>62</sup> Even in her brief tour through essentialized thinking about black bodies, Kinder does reach for a bigger point: the performance of dance style we witness on Tony Manero’s body is, at least in cinematic terms, “not white,” there isn’t a repertoire of white bodies achieving the level of mastery Manero/Travolta’s attains in *Saturday Night Fever*. In some ways, introducing Tony’s mastery of black form at this early moment in the film allows the film to do two things: it invests in Tony’s ultimate redemption through cross-racial sharing—this white man’s ability to engage in disco’s utopic space of communal belonging—while at the same time confirming the mastery of this white body, its ability to contain the imagined threat of racialized violence which hovers throughout the film and the society in which the film exists. One could almost suppose that if *Saturday Night Fever* had been made in an earlier time—even a year earlier, if one considers the success of *Rocky*—Tony’s character would have been a boxer or gangster instead of a dancer.

When *Saturday Night Fever* was released to theaters, many press articles detailed the long hours of rehearsal Travolta suffered through to obtain Tony Manero’s King of the Disco dance ability. Much of that press gave praise to choreographer Lester Wilson, a Broadway dancer and choreographer who was hired, after Alvin Ailey star Judith Jamison and New York City Ballet principal Jacques D’Ambroise were considered, to put Travolta through his paces, to teach him how to “breathe life” into the dance sequences. Wilson taught Travolta “hang time”—the ability to locate rhythms beyond just the basic four-four of disco music to give a step more flair—and infused his dancing,

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<sup>62</sup> Marsha Kinder, “Saturday Night Fever Review,” *Film Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (Spring 1978), 39.



Travolta remembered to *Vanity Fair*, “with African-American rhythm.”<sup>63</sup> In an interview with *Time* magazine, however, Travolta confesses to a much earlier introduction to blackness as a discursive element of dancing. He was taught to dance “by the blacks,” his best friend tells the reporter, and Travolta adds: “Whatever new dance came to school, I learned it. I think the blacks accepted me because I cared about them accepting me. They seemed to have a better sense of humor, a looser style. I wanted to be like that.”<sup>64</sup> Also in the article he tells this story:

One day, coming back on the school bus from a football game, some of the team started singing a James Brown song with the chorus, "Say it loud/ I'm black and I'm proud!" Travolta waited for his moment, then retaliated with "Say it light/I'm white and outasight!"<sup>65</sup>

It is fascinating to read that Travolta brought to his performance in the film a very traditional American trope: the use of blackness to inform the cool pose of whiteness. The appropriation of black cultural forms as a means of establishing and enacting white identity has been considered by many scholars, particularly through the analysis of minstrelsy, the “blacking up” of (usually) white performers as a way to use black musical and performative modes to deploy stereotypes of African Americans while “expropriating,” as Michael Rogin calls American mass entertainment from its “black roots.” The white ethnic, Rogin argues, using the Jewish immigrant performer of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, “Americanize[d] himself by appearing in blackface,” locating an

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<sup>63</sup> Sam Kashner, “Fever Pitch,” *Vanity Fair*, December 2007, 182.

<sup>64</sup> “High Steppin’ to Stardom.”

<sup>65</sup> “High Steppin’ to Stardom,” *Time*, April 3, 1978, 8.

American past through the exploitation of performed blackness.<sup>66</sup> In *Fever*, John Travolta as Tony Manero dons blackness, embodies it, through the choreographic use of his body as opposed to covering his face in burnt cork, but I'm not arguing that he behaves as a minstrel in this case. In an essay about the character Anita in *West Side Story*, Deborah Paredez argues that Anita "sings of assimilation while dancing its undoing," by which Paredez means that Anita's dancing performs a version of resistance against the potential containment at work upon her Latina body within the context of potentially problematic narrative and thematic devices at work in the musical.<sup>67</sup> Building from Paredez, I am suggesting that Travolta/Manero's version of white ethnic adaptation of black form, while similar to the historical blackface performances of which Rogin, Lott, and other scholars speak of as an attainment of Americanization, actually seeks modernization, adorning himself in blackness as a means of resisting the continued subjugations of black and Latino bodies which occur in his midst. Problematically, however, the film does not always allow Tony's redemption, his attempt at modernization, to reach its full potential. Though Tony dances black as a way to transcend ethnic limitations, the film itself, created and endorsed within Hollywood system built upon the continued subjugation and exploitation of blackness, does not allow for a full recognition of blackness through which it could be actually transformative.

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<sup>66</sup> Michael Rogin, "Making America Home: Racial Masquerade and Ethnic Assimilation in the Transition to Talking Pictures," *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 3 (December 1, 1992): 1056.

<sup>67</sup> Deborah Paredez, "'Queer for Uncle Sam': Anita's Latina Diva Citizenship in *West Side Story*," *Latino Studies* 12, no. 3 (September 2014): 334.

In the major turning point of *Saturday Night Fever*, Tony and his dance partner Stephanie compete in a dance contest at the 2001 Odyssey. After an acrobatic performance by a black couple and a masterful hustle by a Latino couple, Tony and Stephanie win the contest. However, it is clear to Tony, for whom dance mastery is a guiding principle, resists the attempts by his friends and community to award him and his partner the first place prize. To Tony, bathed in the adoration of his white Italian community, the Puerto Rican couple were nonetheless the best dancers in the competition. The racial issue, as Kinder observes, “has distorted aesthetic judgment, which [Tony] believes should be kept pure.”<sup>68</sup> Tony gives the prize money and trophy to the Puerto Rican couple, who seem at first, fine with their second place finish. It is never established whether the Puerto Rican couple felt robbed by the judge’s biased decision, or whether they’d been privy to Tony’s friends slurs (“Wrong neighbor, huh?” “Look at them, greasin’ up the floor!”) and, as importantly, the African American couple do not even place in the Top 3 winners; the 3<sup>rd</sup> place prize goes to a white that we, the film audience, has even seen dance. Nor do we see the black couple again. They are literally erased from the narrative. The film which has used disco music as well as disco’s “everybody (with talent) is a star” ethos as a vehicle to establish white ethnic cultural superiority erases Latinos from the space narratively then erases blacks, who’d been outright booed by the disco crowd, from the space literally, yet aims to prove the lead character’s dismissal of racism through his attention to dance’s ability to render cultural differences obsolete.

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<sup>68</sup> Marsha Kinder, “Saturday Night Fever Review,” *Film Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (Spring 1978), 40.

This all occurs in the film after Tony realizes that the Puerto Rican men he and his friends attacked earlier in the film as a way to protect their friend and the turf they call their neighborhood was actually another example of his friends' racism. He'd never been attacked by Puerto Ricans; "I had to say *something*," he tells them. "We had to light *somebody* up!" After the contest, Tony shouts to Stephanie his philosophy of the racial and societal hierarchies which define his world: "It was rigged, Stephanie. They can't give it to no Spics or no strangers. Everybody's gotta dump on somebody. Can't do it straight. My pa goes to work and gets dumped on so he comes home and dumps on my Ma. The Spics dump on us so we gotta dump on them. Everybody's dumping on everybody." Tony reads the racism of his friends and community within the same contexts of gender and class stratification, seeing linkages between the ways in which community operates as a haven of safety and support while yet being influenced by the overriding coldness of a world which ultimately crowds down everyone. During this speech, which occurs after both the contest and the revelation about attack on his friend, Tony Manero wears the famous white leisure suit which so iconically represents the character in the marketing materials which accompanied *Saturday Night Fever*. As memorable as the suit is, it is seldom remembered that Travolta wears it for very little screen time. Up to this point, Tony is adorned in reds and blacks. But for the film's last act, he is pristine in white, which gets sullied during his attempts to save a friend from suicide (on the bridge he so adores) and during a long dark night of the soul as he takes a long subway ride from Brooklyn to Stephanie's apartment on the Upper East Side, riding through the bowels of New York City in the middle of the night like an escapee from his own life. The white suit is symbolic. The arc of Tony's redemption begins when he steps

into the club wearing it, and ends the tortured night in Stephanie's apartment begging for forgiveness and her aid to help him get out of Bay Ridge.

When Stephanie answers the door upon Tony's arrival, on the wall over her shoulder can be seen a print from Matisse's blue nudes from his late period "cut-out" series. In this series of work, Matisse produced with stencils and colored paper, as if to emulate the bold yet simple cutouts of a child's art project. Some of these cut-outs were used to illustrate a book about jazz, as the improvisational appearance of the art pieces spoke to the jagged yet organized randomness of music. When asked why he turned to this new mode of artistic production at the time, Matisse told an interviewer that he wanted to "cut into color" to find a new way of expressing himself artistically as advanced age rendered him unable to use his more traditional forms of art-making.

The white suit was the choice of the movie's costume designer and has become as iconic as the dance moves Travolta executes while wearing it. The white suit never exists in the article Nik Cohn wrote for *New York Magazine*. In fact, Tony Manero doesn't exist either. Well, not really. In the original story his name is Vincent—but Travolta couldn't play another Vincent so soon after finding fame as Vinnie Barbarino, a horny, sexy Italian teen from Brooklyn. In fact, Vincent doesn't exist. Many years after the success of the film, Nik Cohn—British journalist—revealed in an interview that he made up the story, that he filled in details from his imagination, from the ways he *imagined* American youth in Brooklyn might behave. Which brings me back to my re-working of Stuart Hall's beautiful question: "What is this 'black' in American popular culture?" It isn't just the "social construction" the anti-essentialists demand that it is, it is also, like "Italian-ness," an "aesthetic" construction, pieced together from John Travolta's embodied

experiences of cross-racial sharing, from Donna Summer moans remixed over Giorgio Moroder keyboards, from the over-active imagination of a British journalist, from the unruly delights they inspire, influence and define. It's mutable and it's tribal and it's usable, particularly in the 1970s, when demands for Ukrainian power rivaled calls for Black Power.

I close this chapter with a bit from James Baldwin's 1975 novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*, that just might sum this all up. It's narrated by 19-year-old Tish, a black Harlem woman discovering the many levels of embodied racial performance as she walks the streets of New York outside her neighborhood.

"We got off the train at Sheridan Square, in the Village. We walked east along West Fourth Street. Since it was Saturday, the streets were crowded, unbalanced with the weight of people. Most of them were young, they had to be young, you could see that: but they didn't seem young to me. They frightened me, I could not, then, have said why. I thought it was because they knew so much more than me. And they did. But, in another way, which I'm only beginning to understand now, they didn't. They had it all together: the walk, the sound, the laughter, the untidy clothes – clothes which were copies of a poverty as unimaginable for them as theirs was inexpressibly remote from me. There were many blacks and whites together: it was hard to tell which was the imitation. They were so free that they believed in nothing; and didn't realize that this illusion was their only truth and that they were doing exactly as they had been told."<sup>69</sup>

I consider this as I close this chapter about *Saturday Night Fever* and its complicated relationship to the jagged condition of racial relations in the U.S. in the 1970s. In many ways the film, and its lead character, "cuts into color" as a way to locate a more modern relationship to race and ethnicity beyond the limited expectations of a nation built upon, and in many ways trying to maintain, inequity and imbalance.

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<sup>69</sup> James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2013), 53.

## CONCLUSION

In a 1994 essay in *Time* magazine heralding a rich new moment of African American cultural production, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. contextualized that current moment by placing it in the historical context of other black artistic “renaissances.” He argued that the era of cultural production known as the Black Arts Movement—which he described as “the artistic wing of the Black Power Movement...[E]rected on a shifting foundation of revolutionary politics”—was pretty much dead by 1975. Black culture, he wrote, “seemed to be undergoing a profound identity crisis.”<sup>1</sup> There are varied theories as to the Black Arts Movement’s “time of death,” but Gates’ positing of black cultural production in the mid-1970s as a time of crisis encapsulates the terms of my argument in “Everybody is a Star!” In the dissertation, I argue that the “black” in 1970s American popular culture is marked not just by the shifting terrain caused by social and legislative gains for African Americans in the 1960s but also by the ability of cultural workers to imagine “blackness” itself as usable, as a commodity of sorts which signaled “difference” from the mainstream while it also acted as an important marker of identity in an increasingly multicultural nation.

In the wake of black-centric artistic cultural production meant to encourage African Americans to think of themselves as a nation within a nation, to re-center their racial and national subjectivity within the United States (and, in many ways, globally), how did black cultural workers in the 1970s looking to operate in more mainstream spaces build upon Black Arts (and, by extension, Black Power) thinking?

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Black Creativity: On the Cutting Edge,” *Time* 144, no. 15 (October 10, 1994): 74.

“Art,” writes Simon Gikandi in a discussion of the “black aesthetic” which defined the Black Arts Movement, “would become a vehicle for galvanizing a community and educating black subjects into new forms of citizenship.”<sup>2</sup> In Gikandi’s view, the Black Arts Movement—defined by its goals to posit “nation” as a tenet of black unity and community building—did not result in “the production of new racial subjects.” Instead, the Movement succeeded in “imagin[ing] communities outside the domains of the state and propos[ing] the production of subjects who could function in alternative communities.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the Black Aesthetic that grew out of Black Power thinking in the 1960s was not about the “white gaze” or white approval. Artists and writers like Addison Gayle Jr. and Larry Neal, for instance, were seeking to make over black consciousness, seeking the “destruction of the double consciousness” they saw as indicative of living in a racist society.<sup>4</sup>

“Everybody Is a Star!” understands such thinking as the bedrock of popular cultural production in the 1970s, but also considers the “new forms of citizenship”—of consciousness, even—that were now possible, that could be imagined, following the gains of the Civil Rights Movement.

By arguing that many sites of black cultural production in the mid-1970s were aimed at re-imagining how “blackness” itself circulated outside of only black-centered spaces, “Everybody is a Star!” is concerned with the uses of racial identity as a means of

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<sup>2</sup> Simon Gikandi, “Editor’s Column—Looking Back on the Black Aesthetic,” *PMLA* 131, no. 1 (January 1, 2016): 17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, eds., *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (Princeton, N.J.: Black Classic Press, 2007), 467.



building not just upon a “black aesthetic” but also upon the opportunities made possible through the civic and legal gains which occurred in the decade before it.

The crisis of identity to which Gates’ alluded, I believe, was a crisis informed by the tensions inherent in the balancing of performing both the “racial” and the “national.” By concentrating on mainstream performances enacted on the Broadway stage, in Hollywood studios, and on the pop charts, this dissertation aimed to reveal ways in which black cultural production in the 1970s did not always adhere to the expected racialized parameters often erected in support of black artistic work. Moving from the uses of black history as a commercially viable archive on Broadway, to the crossover ethos of a record label long critiqued for “watering down” blackness to achieve commercial viability, to an examination of what white cultural appropriation of black cultural forms might be able tell us about race relations and cross-racial sharing in the 1970s, “Everybody Is a Star!” ultimately thinks about black musicality as both a means of further embedding blackness into the cultural firmament of the U.S. and a weapon against post-Civil Rights political setbacks which.

In an age during which the United States found itself moving closer toward being defined as a multicultural nation, different from the “melting pot” mentality which had so long described it, blacks and white ethnics both found themselves wondering a similar question: Now that they had, over time, acquired *access* to this thing called America—through legal or social or civic means—how did they now insure and maintain the kind of *inclusion* which did not ask them to relinquish the signifiers of “difference” they had now embraced as markers of identity? One of the ways was to use culture as the means of

staking a claim on citizenship, on belonging. The cultural citizen mapped new terrain of belonging, ultimately using art as the common language of association and kinship.

In Scene 3, Act II of the Broadway musical *The Wiz*, Dorothy has set free Evilene's enslaved Winkies. Joyous in their freedom, the chorus of workers sings a song called "Brand New Day." "Every be glad/Because the sun is shining just for us/Everybody wake up/Into the morning, into happiness." Those lyrics culminate in melodic, harmonic shouts of "Can you feel a brand new day?"<sup>5</sup> It was, in fact, a "new day" for African American popular cultural workers in the mid-1970s—black ownership of record labels, film divisions and theatrical properties, for instance—and despite there still being political and social work to be done, the voices of black performers rang through the decade as if newly released.

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<sup>5</sup> Charlie Smalls and William F. Brown, *The Wiz*, Revised ed. edition (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1979), 65.