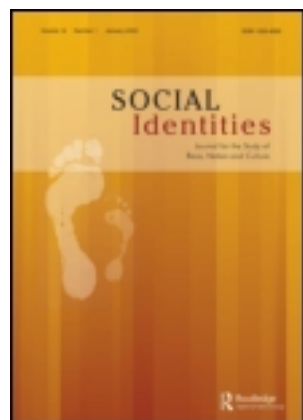


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### Come get these memories: gender, history and racial uplift in Bill Condon's Dreamgirls

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## Come get these memories: gender, history and racial uplift in Bill Condon's *Dreamgirls*

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On the release of the screen adaptation of *Dreamgirls* (2006), ex-Motown songwriter William 'Smokey' Robinson fielded speculations about corruption at America's most successful black-owned business. In the broader context of racial inequalities in media ownership and distribution, this article asks how spectacles of hard-won individual success, juxtaposed sharply against sexually and financially corrupt 'music moguls', continue to shape popular mythologies of the US music industry. In particular, the article focuses on the ways that sexual combat, corrupt masculinities and the politics of respectability inform *Dreamgirls'* dramatization of the shift from pre-integration to post-Civil Rights America. Finally, the notion of post-racial discourse is used to make sense of the competing historical interpretations at work in the film and its critical reception, especially with regard to the use of past entertainment icons to make sense of Beyoncé Knowles' and Jennifer Hudson's own success stories. Throughout, the article argues that myths of meritocracy cannot be separated from the racialized and gendered cultures of production that continue to shape the contemporary repackaging of popular histories and musical genres.

**Keywords:** race; gender; Motown; post-racial; film; uplift

### Smokin'

In January 2007, scenes from Bill Condon's *Dreamgirls* (2006) prompted minor controversy after William 'Smokey' Robinson, Motown singer, songwriter, and executive, protested against implicit connections made between Motown and the corrupt 'Rainbow Records' of the film: 'I really am quite upset about it, because there's a lot of false information in there, and millions of people are seeing it every day' (Blair, 2007). On the striking parallels between the film's record boss Curtis Taylor Jr. and the motor city's Berry Gordy Jr., Robinson insisted that 'Nobody was paying us. So he borrowed \$800 from his family's fund and started Motown, so that we could be paid. . . . And for him to be maligned and made out like this villainous character is very, very, very offensive to me'. A broader question lingered as to whether firm distinctions between corruption and merit, breaking the law and breaking into the Top Ten, are really appropriate in historical contexts shaped by systemic racial and gender inequalities in access to monetary and social capital.

This article draws on the example of *Dreamgirls*, Condon's film adaptation of a 1981 musical written by Henry Krieger and Tom Eyen, to discuss the relationship

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between race, gender, and the narration of entertainment industry histories. I begin by examining sexual politics in the story of Rainbow Records, before considering issues around criminality and equal opportunity in the film and music industries. The article then considers popular iterations of personal achievement narratives in 'post-racial' frameworks, especially in the desires of *Dreamgirls*' reviewers for a color-blind Hollywood. Finally, the article reflects on the inter-play of personal self-development, historical narrative and notions of 'racial progress', paying close attention to the ways that 'older' values, especially Civil Rights virtues of (color-blind) legal equality, can be mobilized to reframe contemporary political debates. I argue that history does not just offer a discreet site of nostalgic pleasures, but is in fact swept up in popular representations of, and desires for, a post-racial present. My concern is less whether *Dreamgirls* gets the history wrong, than how economic and cultural investments in historical icons shape the possible meanings of racial difference and equal opportunity. While Smokey Robinson may be right, that Motown continues to matter because 'Motown is Beyoncé's heritage. Motown is Jamie Foxx's heritage. Motown is Eddie Murphy's heritage', we also need to think through the consequences of Motown having become white Americans' heritage too, what this means politically, and how this might have reshaped the 'dream' that Motown represents.

### Scrutinizing representations

The social meanings attached to films featuring black actors and communities need to be understood in the context of black cinema's precarious position in the Hollywood film industry. Market research has consistently demonstrated the existence of a disproportionately large black movie-going public, but as Ed Guerrero (1993) argues, Hollywood is unlikely to reach out specifically to these viewers except in times of financial hardship. Furthermore, the under-representation of minorities in executive positions, producers' chairs and rank-and-file jobs means that, like *Dreamgirls* and *Ray* (2004), the films chosen to include black casts will be those 'with themes and formulas dealing with black issues and characters that are reassuring to the sensibilities and expectations of an uneasy white audience' (Guerrero, 1993, p. 163).

When one formula finds success – the blaxploitation thriller or the 'ghetto' realist cinema of the early 1990s – the 'burden of representation' is such that these films will not only subsume many other viable forms of black cinematic expression in Hollywood, but will also be subject to high levels of scrutiny from academics and non-academics alike. There is a potentially dangerous complicity between the political imperative to 'tell it like it is', perhaps best exemplified by representations of domestic dramas, gang violence, and drug addiction, and sociologies of so-called ghetto lifestyles, which have frequently indexed positive and negative outcomes for black communities to the predominance of popular typologies: the single mother, the crack dealer, the pimp, the militant, the gangbanger, the overbearing mother, the sports jock, and so on.<sup>1</sup> As Alexander Weheliye argues, treating new black cinema as an exercise in sociological representation 'risks reducing black cultural production to the social and political forces it, at least partially, speaks out against', rendering 'black cultural production as nothing more than sociological occurrences' working with the same problems as the social scientist – that is, how to represent, manage,

instruct, or critique 'black youth' (Weheliye, 2001, p. 295). Thus the critical media perspectives of Weheliye and more recently, Herman Gray (2005) push towards a more holistic understanding of the material, institutional and economic relationships that characterize those 'culture-media-entertainment-information-based global corporations' which parallel 'the cultural and political relations of presentation' (p. 21). Understanding the circuits and circumstances of production can enable a more historical and nuanced understanding of how images and ideas are put to work in politically contested contexts (p. 15).

Bill Condon's *Dreamgirls*, like the reality TV program *American Idol* from which co-star Jennifer Hudson was plucked, contains both representations of black masculine and feminine 'types' familiar to Hollywood audiences, and tells its own story about the relationships between entertainment industries, racial discrimination, and equal opportunity. While by no means a 'black cultural production' in the sense intended by Gray – its writers, director, producer and copyright owner are all white, or ethnically white, Americans – similar questions about the relevancy of social realism may be posed: to what extent is factual accuracy an important feature of the film's semiotic organization or popular reception?

Smokey Robinson's heated response suggests that, insofar as it infringes on the symbolic currency of Motown, some historical details are certainly worth debating. But while Robinson pleads for an even 'dreamier' rendition of Motown, 1960s nostalgia has its own trappings, especially when pop culture returns 'not to the horrors of a racial past that still remain with us, but to a distant and reconfigured imaginary past' (Gray, 2005, p. 167). Whether it be in a musical, a sci-fi adventure, or a frat-house comedy, cinema can shape not only how historical 'facts' are interpreted, but also play its part in determining which *facts we should remember*, and to what political ends. Perhaps a better question for *Dreamgirls* would be not whether there are gaps between its cinematic fictions and the historical facts but rather, what *sorts* of historical truths are deemed morally salient in its narrative construction of personal and collective emancipation?

This article argues that *Dreamgirls* constructs an historical allegory for the gains and failures of Civil Rights values through its gender politics, especially through the relationships between Curtis Taylor Jr. (Jamie Foxx), Deena Jones (Beyoncé Knowles), and Effie White (Jennifer Hudson). In *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, Patricia Hill Collins argues that hegemonic gender ideologies both within and outside black American communities continue to shape, but also often stifle serious debate about, the contours of anti-racist politics in the post-Civil Rights era (Collins, 2005, p. 9). Collins highlights the need to engage with familial ideologies, gender norms and black sexual politics not as private affairs for individual black men and women, but as a set of socially mediated patterns, stereotypes, and structures of stratification that extend into, and are inseparable from, political debates about the struggle for racial equality and self-determination pp. 48–50; see also Collins, 1990, pp. 163–167, 186–189). This article contends that *Dreamgirls* provides a lucid case study of intersecting race, gender and class differences in the reproduction of social inequalities, albeit perhaps despite – rather than because of – its extant political agendas.

### Dream a little dream

In a barely veiled homage to Motown Records' Supremes, *Dreamgirls* addresses issues of discrimination and equal opportunity through sexual antagonisms between black women and black men. In the opening scenes of the film, the Dreamettes – Effie (Jennifer Hudson), Deena (Beyoncé Knowles) and Lorell (Anika Noni Rose) – are seen performing at a local Detroit 'Chitlin' Circuit' show. Effie's stunning voice and energized live performance, including the liberal wobbling of bosoms as she breaks from the group choreography, captures the attention of Curtis Taylor, Jr. (Jamie Foxx), who recruits the group to sing behind Jimmy Early (Eddie Murphy). Early's preoccupation early in these scenes with soul, seduction and sandwiches is modified only slightly during the film, when drugs substitute for sandwiches, public exhibitionism replaces sex, and – with strong allusions to Marvin Gaye – pro-love becomes pro-peace.

Realizing that DJs are reluctant to play African American artists, and that Pat Boone-esque performers can steal black r&b material for the (implicitly white) *Billboard* pop charts, Taylor resorts to payola<sup>2</sup> through his used-car business, a development soundtracked by Jimmy Early and the Dreamettes' song, 'Steppin' to the Bad Side'. The group shoot to fame, and having cast out the sexually degenerate Early, the Dreamettes (now 'the Dreams') play top venues in Miami, the Copacabana and American Bandstand – that is, the jewels of the white entertainment industry. Despite her weaker voice, Curtis brings his new love-interest Deena centre-stage as lead for her 'crossover' appeal, while ending his budding sexual liaison with Effie White (in the words of the song, the Dreamettes' original lead was getting too 'Heavy'). While Curtis' personal behaviour and financial dealings become increasingly suspect, Deena's motives remain apparently sound: after their marriage, the couple's only intimate scene climaxes with Deena's restatement of the reproductive intent behind her sexual desire: 'Please Curtis, let me have your child'. Unbeknownst to both Deena and Curtis, the now estranged Effie raises Curtis's secret first child Magic on welfare, while also struggling with alcoholism. In the final act, Effie gets back on track with the help of elderly ex-manager Marty (Danny Glover), securing enough confidence to sue Curtis for his spurious business practices – with the assistance, notably, of a benevolent white lawyer.

Curtis's credibility, and later fallibility, is established through a coupling of his business and sexual practices. His financial dealings with Deena are relayed through their sexual combat, while Effie's doomed trajectory in the Dreamettes is shaped by her own precarious liaison with her boss. The convergence between sexual and financial infidelity in Curtis Taylor's character draws attention to the moral slipperiness of what counts as corruption. While Taylor's DJ payoffs are initially forgivable, his payola network ends up suppressing one of Effie's solo singles when she tries her luck at a comeback. This twist hinges on a syntactic separation between pre- and post-Civil Rights moral universes: having 'stepped to the bad side' in an unjust, pre-integration America, Curtis' use of payola ceases to be defensible by the 1970s, skewing the level playing field upon which Effie would otherwise have scored a first hit. The main social barriers facing the Dreams (and ex-Dreams) shift from racial discrimination to Curtis Taylor Jr. himself; as he puts it to Deena, 'You can't even take a shit and wipe your own ass unless I say it's ok'. The only viable escape routes offered from the increasingly tyrannical and nepotistic Rainbow Records are

the two white characters introduced later in the film – an open-minded movie producer Jerry, who courts Deena, and then Effie's litigation lawyer. The final scenes balance the scales of justice through legal intervention, which curtails the morally and sexually bankrupt world of Rainbow Records.

### Men, money, and monopoly

*Dreamgirls* ventures an important critique of black macho leadership in the 1960s, which in many instances marginalized black women's political visibility and participation within both Civil Rights and Black Power activist movements. Curtis' excessive controlling of the Dreamettes reads as an allegorical lesson about the dangers of privileging racial struggle over inter-personal responsibilities, with Deena and Effie's respective triumphs validating their individual autonomy. Ambitious Curtis spins rhetoric about self-empowerment, racial pride, breaking through at whatever costs, but displays a fundamental hypocrisy in his own careless treatment of women. Echoing affirmative action debates, while race-based decision making may have seemed justifiable in the past, Curtis' refusal to acknowledge changed historical circumstances transforms his agenda from racial uplift to zealous racial protectionism.

This narrative shift is most clear when Curtis forces Deena to play lead in that 'crazy *Black Cleopatra* he's trying to make' (in the words of Jerry), a rather unsubtle cipher for Afrocentric cultural production. Instead, Deena would much prefer Jerry's film:

Jerry: This movie's about three drifters heading to Vegas about one, final score.  
When Dawn goes down on that truckdriver ... you've gotta *smell*  
the desperation.

Deena: I know that, that's what I love about her, there's no pretence, no fuckin'  
bullshit.

Deena's only concern is that no-one she ever knew was named Dawn. Otherwise the white male screenwriter is presented as a much more apt fit to describing her experiences than Curtis Taylor Jr. or his 'crazy' black movie.

This sequence is less a fable about the exploitation of female labour than a lesson about opening new markets for entrepreneurs, a point made more explicit when Curtis is sued for his spurious cash-in-hand dealings. The payola investigations of the mid-1970s referenced in *Dreamgirls* did actually involve black radio DJs; in fact, it conspicuously targeted them (Sanjek, 1996, pp. 549–557). By cracking down on payola, the Justice Department forced major labels to outsource their promotional efforts to third party syndicates. This squeezed local artists and independent labels – the Effies, if you will – out of an escalating promotional bidding war, while ensuring that major labels were legally untouchable (see Sidak & Kronemyer, 1981). The legal regulation of the market actually curbed access to the market: payola is illegal, but media oligopolies are often not.<sup>3</sup> While Curtis Taylor may be morally reprehensible for manipulating Effie's success, there is little evidence that heightened industry regulation would actually benefit artists like Effie. Florence Ballard, the original Supreme kicked out of the group in questionable circumstances, also sued Motown for lost royalties and unscrupulous book-keeping. Ballard later found that her own

lawyer had misappropriated her funds – he was later disbarred – and she died without health care in the mid-1970s (see Garr, 1992, p. 82).

Instead of recognizing Curtis Taylor Jr.'s monopoly as the outcome of cultural industries predicated on capital accumulation, market protectionism and horizontal integration, *Dreamgirls* indexes the black businessman's inadequacies to his failings as a boyfriend, father, and then husband. Only once Curtis starts to monopolize black women's labour, making it unavailable to Deena's white Hollywood suitors – 'I don't want those men handling you' Curtis insists, 'because they don't know how' – does his media monopoly become a problem. Effie and Deena are victims of corruption, both sexual and financial, while legal discourses around black male criminality continue to render Curtis' decisions in the studio, at the car dealership, and his relationships, constantly suspect (see Gray, 2005, p. 22). Effie in particular becomes a familiar symbol of working-classes oppressed by a righteous black bourgeoisie, in striking parallel with *8 Mile* (2002) and more recently, *Notorious* (2009). But this is not the businessman's fault alone. Early in the film, Deena and Effie interrogate Curtis' marital status and enquire as to the kinds of women he might enjoy – demure like Deena, or raucous like Effie. The issue, in this case, is whether the black man can *resist* the temptation towards sexual domination provoked by black women themselves.

While recognizing the shortcomings of masculinist political bravado that marginalises women or blames the failure of anti-racist struggles on the 'divisive' criticisms of black women, Patricia Hill Collins cautions against ranking oppressions in such a way that black women's gains come at the expense of nuanced discussions about the stakes of different black masculinities, and how they might shape both men and women's lives. In particular, Collins argues that the disempowerment and public vilification of black single mothers works in consort with, or at the intersection of, gender-specific forms of oppression affecting black men, including highly disproportionate incarceration rates coextensive with discursive constructions of black male criminality (2005, p. 85). In the sexual combat between Curtis and Deena, it becomes clear that the racialized dimension of their quite different experiences in the music industry becomes gendered in such a way that white masculinity ceases to be politically visible. Or rather, Jerry's movie provides the *way out* of the 'identity politics' so poorly practiced by Curtis, insofar as motivated self-interest practiced by those in power is not recognized as being 'about' identities (see Kelley, 1997, pp. 103–124).

In this context, consider Bill Condon's response to suggestions that his white identity influenced his position as director of *Dreamgirls*:

[It] wasn't as though the film producers were thinking about this project for a long time and had a list of black and white directors. It didn't happen that way at all. After *Chicago*, I was at a party and ran into producer Laurence Mark, who asked me what I wanted to do next, and I said *Dreamgirls*. He said, 'Okay, let me check with David Geffen', who also said okay, and that's how it happened. Most of my career has been like that. (quoted in Horwitz, 2007)

Such theatre directors and record label owners have strong ties to David Geffen partly because these industries are dominated by well-educated, white American men, much like Bill Condon and Laurence Mark. Geffen, whose initial fortune was

made from owning the publishing rights to Laura Nyro's oft-covered 1960s recordings, had previously been reluctant to release the rights to *Dreamgirls* is because he was anxious about preserving the reputation of his musical and its original choreographer/director, Michael Bennett: 'So often, the movie version of a stage musical gets screwed up, and that somehow tarnishes both the reputation of the musical itself and the creator. David didn't want to run that risk' (quoted in Vilkomerson, 2006). Geffen's sensitivities were not nearly so aroused by Condon's inclusion of potentially disparaging allusions to the United States' most successful black businessman, Berry Gordy Jr. This included Rainbow Records' location in Motown's own Detroit, the initial early 1960s time-period of the film, shot-for-shot reproductions of the Supremes' LPs *Let the Sunshine In*, *Cream of the Crop*, *Touch, More Hits by the Supremes*, and *The Supremes A-Go-Go* as 'Dreamettes' releases, photo-shoots for Deena exactly resembling promotional photos for Diana Ross circa 1970, and Rainbow Records' live recording of Martin Luther King Jr. bearing the same title as Motown's original, *The Great March to Freedom* (originally, 1963; see Smith, 1999).

My intention is not to blame white directors for having white friends, or to suggest that 'white' biases will automatically skew all Hollywood representations of black Americans. Rather, it is more useful to see 'whiteness' as a collective investment into forms of privileged visibility, but also strategic *invisibilities*, that enable entertainment industries to be upheld as color-blind meritocracies in which hard work produces heady rewards. The social milieu occupied by Condon, for example, was not part of the dominant narrative about *Dreamgirls*' success. According to many reviewers, Condon makes films about 'outsiders looking in': 'I believe the [*Dreamgirls*] story is universal . . . Everyone knows what it feels like to be rejected, to be an outsider' (quoted in Horwitz, 2007). In contrast, a more recent *New York Times Magazine* piece on Lee Daniels, the director of *Precious* (2009), takes pains to highlight the authenticity of Daniels' childhood abuse, although casts doubt on whether the director *really* arrived in L.A. with only \$7 dollars to his name (Hirschberg, 2009). There is a shift here in the criteria of artistic authenticity, and particularly the visibility of race. Condon makes 'universal' stories about shared human experiences, and is thus universally qualified as a humanist. Daniels makes black stories, but is only racially qualified insofar as he himself is a 'victim'. Commentary on Condon's earlier *Kinsey* (2004) never linked its protagonist to the over-representation of white men in American universities, while Hirschberg's piece on Daniels is called 'The Audacity of "Precious"'.

Ed Guerrero and Herman Gray have both argued against approaches to racial 'representations' that consider head-counts of black faces over narrative meanings, or that elide the media-industrial complexes that continue to privilege white producers and white audiences as the agents of Hollywood's political transformations. Given the striking parallels between the construction of Jerry as an enlightened producer and Condon's own public relations exercises, consider finally the director's own statement about politics:

'We have an all-black cast that includes Beyoncé, Jamie Foxx and Eddie Murphy,' says Condon. 'You have to hope it's another sign that those barriers have been blown away. The very fact that *Dreamgirls* exists is a political act'. (Jafaar, 2007)



The question here is not only which ‘barriers’ matter, but who does the blowing away. Perhaps the important thing is that Beyoncé, Jamie and Eddie aren’t being forced by a cultural nationalist to make *Black Cleopatra*; then again, *Black Cleopatra* has never been made.

### Performance and the politics of respectability

While offering some compelling insights into the limited options facing female rhythm and blues singers in the early 1960s, the simplicity of both Curtis Taylor’s and Effie White’s trajectories in *Dreamgirls* leads to two questionable constructions of black femininity. Firstly, by casting women in girl groups as hopelessly talented victims, music journalists, historians and documentary film-makers have tended to deny the possibility of any female interest or competency in business practices (see Stras, 2010). For example, the stereotype of Berry Gordy Jr. as a self-made music ‘mogul’ has ignored the contributions of Loucye Gordy and Raynoma Gordy, who both played pivotal roles in the development of Motown records, and Suzanne Celeste de Passe, a friend of The Supremes who rose from New York talent manager in 1967 to the head of A&R at Motown records, and was by the early 1980s was president of Motown Industries. Well-meaning expressions of solidarity with the ‘naïve’ women who cross the paths of Gordy (or Phil Spector or Mick Jagger, for that matter) often risk re-affirming the perception that women, and particularly black women, have played no part, or *should* have played no part, in the ‘cutthroat corporate world’ (see Springer, 2007, p. 263).

Secondly, Effie’s self-rehabilitation plays into the most conservative assumptions underpinning individual narratives of victimhood. In *Dreamgirls*’ opening scene, Deena is shown diligently organizing her group while apologizing for their belated appearance at a Chitlin’ Circuit club, while Effie wanders in late, presumably unconcerned about professional comportment. Her ‘bad attitude’ culminates with her stubbornness and unreliability during rehearsals with the Dreams, and is most clearly illustrated when, having been dropped from the group, Effie fails to curb her bad behaviour to improve her career. To a prospective night-club employer, she boasts of spending ‘half a million dollars in two years . . . drinking!’. She becomes one of the many black women whose vocal concerns about inequality brand them as angry Diana Ross-esque divas, ‘difficult to work with’ and ‘carrying a chip on their collective shoulders and ready to go off at the least personal slight’ (Springer, 2007, p. 268).

Cutting immediately from the marital bliss of Curtis ‘letting’ Deena have ‘his child’, Effie’s low-point shows her scolding Magic in a waiting room, before returning to an exhausted conversation:

Case worker: Did you look for work this week, Miss White?

Effie: Mister, you can keep asking me that question, but the answer’s always going to be the same. The only thing I know how to do is sing, and since nobody ain’t let me do that no more – no, I did not look for a job.

Case worker: Have you considered asking the girl’s father for help?

Effie: Magic doesn’t have a father.

The intervention of chaste, respectable Marty saves her from her own bad temper, instructing her to ‘stop making excuses’ for her behaviour, and to start proving her own worth ‘just like the rest of us’, rather than wanting ‘all of the privileges but none of the responsibilities’. Effie gives a name to one of the anonymous millions that populated the social imaginary of Daniel Patrick Moynihan and, more recently, sociologists like William Julius Wilson, the woman who should work to save her family (she will turn to alcoholism and self-destructive behaviours otherwise), but who should have no desire to control the terms on which she works. Once employed – and thus in Wilson’s parlance, ‘motivated’, ‘structured’, ‘disciplined’, ‘fulfilled’ (Wilson, 1999) – family life and self-esteem for black women will improve.

Effie herself comes to this realization. Auditioning for a local night-club, the ex-Dream reflects on her own failure to be co-operative in the workplace and in her social persona: ‘Look at me/I am changing/Trying every way I can . . . All of my life, I’ve been a fool/Who said I could do it all alone/How many good friends have I already lost?’ Aided by Marty’s unfailing wisdom, Effie’s surprise encore in a Dreams farewell show leads neatly to familial closure when, under the lights of the entertainment complex, Curtis recognises Magic in the front row. Performing to a racially diverse audience, Effie is redeemed, while Curtis, recognizing his own daughter, is now primed to provide a much-needed paternal influence.

The trope of the impoverished single mother also provided material for Motown Records’ first foray into ‘message’ songs, with Diana Ross and the Supremes’ ‘Love Child’ of 1968. The lyrics included a now familiar mix of partial sympathies and moral judgement:

I started my life in an old, cold run down tenement slum  
My father left, he never even married mom  
I shared the guilt my mama knew  
So afraid that others knew I had no name  
This love we’re contemplating  
Is worth the pain of waiting  
We’ll only end up hating  
The child we maybe creating. (‘Love Child’, Taylor, Wilson, Sawyer & Richards, 1968)

Dressed in tattered costumes, the Supremes’ ‘Love Child’ performance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* enabled Motown Records to turn ‘one of the central policy concerns of America’s War on Poverty – inner-city unwed mothers – into a profitable musical product’ (Smith, 1999, p. 233).

In the late 1960s, urban sociologists, most notably Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, worried over the generational transmission of past traumas through ‘damaged’ and ‘dysfunctional’ black families in the present, which might impede the otherwise smooth upward mobility of black children enjoying the benefits of a color-blind America (see Kelley, 1997, pp. 3–4, 15–42, 119–120; Kaplan, 1997, p. 5). Phrases like ‘cycle of dependency’ or ‘culture of poverty’ still seek to link *previous* forms of racial discrimination to what are now perceived to be the self-perpetuating bad habits of de-motivated, overly dependent, and morally wayward black urban poor (Kelley, 1997, pp. 9–10). Both ‘Love Child’ and Effie’s story of self-redemption in *Dreamgirls* address questions of poverty and social deprivation as personal moral burdens autonomous from the social structures that link welfare agencies, housing authorities, law enforcement bodies, banks, department stores, and

other public institutions to the disenfranchisement working-class, but also many middle-class, black American families (Kelley, 1997, pp. 92–102).

The story of Effie's fall from grace, and then redemption through performance, mobilizes the intersecting logics of racial uplift and the politics of respectability; that is, a presumption that advancing black fortunes in white America should require reproducing the dominant cultural codes of the white middle-class, and in the case of black women, to pursue 'cleanliness of person and property, temperance, thrift, police manners, and sexual purity' (Collins, 2005, p. 71). The assumption underpinning such 'respectable' reforms has been that black working-class women were poor, or disempowered, or overworked, *because* they made poor lifestyle choices: in the words of Effie, they'd failed to 'change', to 'get their life together', to 'leave their past behind' ('I Am Changing', *Dreamgirls*). Effie begins as sexually provocative and riské in her life performance and her flirtatious exchanges with Curtis. Failing to curb her headstrong sexuality, she is punished, but later rewarded for submitting to the instruction of Marty, the epitome of black middle-class respectability, who had resisted the whole uptown 'soul' thing from the outset.

Quite appropriately, the closing reprise of the 'Dreamgirls' theme finds Effie joining the Dreams in willing servitude to imagined male companions, with whom the concert audience (including Curtis and Marty), and to some extent the *Dreamgirls* viewer, is invited to identify:

We're your Dreamgirls, boys  
We'll always care  
We're your Dreamgirls  
Dreamgirls will never leave you. ('Dreamgirls (Finale)', Eyen, 2006)

These two 'sides' of Effie, the stubborn and the sublime, the reckless and the respectable, are not two competing stereotypes. Rather, within the popular mythology of the self-debilitating black family, the 'welfare queen' trope is offered alongside the 'black lady' as two sides of the same coin, two responses to the 'cultures of poverty' ascribed to black households. As Wahneema Lubiano (1993) puts it, 'It is difficult to conceive of a "normal", an unproblematic, space in our historical moment for black women outside of the demonic-narrative economy of the welfare queen or the betrayal-narrative economy of the black-lady overachiever – both figures about which [Sen. Daniel Patrick] Moynihan warns. And deploying the two narratives does double duty for the machinations of the powerful' (p. 333). More recently, Kimberley Springer notes slippages between long-enduring 'superwoman/strongblackwoman' stereotypes and more recent (often implicitly, white) postfeminist politics, which celebrates headstrong women who can 'have it all' – work, family, and the shopping-mall – while disregarding the ways black woman continue to be overloaded with workplace obligations, while also being 'expected to *handle her business*' (Springer, 2007, p. 252, emphasis in original). Because the co-ordinates of racial uplift demand respectability, dignity and hard work as the virtues being aspired to, the labour of redemption is placed squarely on Effie's shoulders. While Curtis is the ostensible 'villain' of the piece, Effie's journey of self-improvement will redeem everyone.

Or more accurately, Effie's *willingness to perform* can redeem everyone. In the self-reflexive musical-about-making-music, inflated virtues are commonly attributed

to the ability to entertain *in itself*. As Jane Feuer argues in her discussion of musicals in the 1930s and 1940s, ‘entertainment is “mythified” ... entertainment is shown as having greater value than it actually does. In this sense musicals are ideological products; they are full of deceptions’ (Feuer, 1995, p. 443). While *Dreamgirls*’ backstage dramas would seem to undermine the viewer’s utopian expectations about the world of soul, quite the opposite happens. Traumatic revelations of financial and sexual betrayal are managed through vocal catharsis, with the singers – specifically, Effie and Deena – empowered, rather than objectified or exploited, by their ability to perform at crucial narrative junctures: ‘Family’ smoothes over Effie’s demotion in the Dreams, ‘And I Am Telling You I’m Not Going’ both dramatises and eases her departure from the Dreams, ‘I Am Changing’ brings together her newfound self-discipline with her self-enjoyment as a performer, ‘Listen’ finds Deena recording a song about independence and autonomy for Curtis in *his* recording booth, and ‘Hard to Say Goodbye’ placates the Dreams when Deena departs for an independent acting career.

As a mandate for most soul and r&b bio-pics, black performers’ natural outpourings of soul become the main devices for character development, inviting the viewer to participate in a ‘vision of musical performance originating in the folk, generating love and a cooperative spirit that includes everyone in its grasp and that can conquer all obstacles’ (Feuer, 1995, p. 449). Although the audience is witness to the cultural, historical and technological processes engendering the performance spectacle, entertainment must be reified at a meta-narrative level (pp. 447–448). In the case of *Dreamgirls*, key narrative turning-points thus hinge on ‘myths of spontaneity’ that revalorize the individual desire to perform, lest the audience feel uncomfortable about its own participation in Rainbow Records’ exploitation of women’s bodies and labour. Only insofar as the unequal power relations between performers and audiences, and between the commerce of ‘black folk art’ and its middle-class consumers, are displaced onto the domestic power-plays of Curtis, Effie and Deena, can the viewer’s desire to witness the self-liberation of Effie be made commensurate with the more urgent desire to see her perform. This, of course, must be recast as Effie performing ‘for herself’, albeit in public.

### The politics of progress

In a 2003 article from *USA Today* entitled ‘Hollywood moves beyond its racial obsession’, Michael Medved (2003) commends the increased visibility of minority actors in ‘color-blind’ films, where racism ceases to matter and Hollywood’s ‘racial obsession’ no longer distorts real-life experiences:

When it comes to racial issues ... recent films deserve praise for their implicit endorsement of the welcome message that black people and white people can work together, laugh together, even love together, without making a huge fuss over their differences. These movies finally embrace the idea that integration isn’t just a dream or a destination – it’s a current reality. (Medved, 2003)

Medved suggests that racial issues only exist in the skewed universe of John Singleton’s ‘clumsy’ race and ethnicity films, but is being overcome by a different sort of participation from black directors: ‘Hollywood ... has liberated talented black

directors from their race-based movie ghetto, assigning them important commercial projects unconnected with African-American identity'. He cites Singleton's *2 Fast 2 Furious* (2003) and Spike Lee's *25th Hour* (2002), films that include a 'rainbow coalition' and a 'nearly all-white cast', respectively. These efforts reflect that fact that while 'liberals and conservatives may argue over affirmative action . . . Americans of every orientation profess a profound weariness with the sad tendency to focus on racial identity over individuality'.

*Dreamgirls* was also frequently reviewed in terms of its possible meanings for a color-blind America. Newspaper articles like 'Beyoncé's Destiny' (Amber, 2005), 'Dream a Little Dream' (Mitchell, 2006), 'My Life's Proof That Dreams Come True' (Synnot, 2007), 'Keeping the 'Dream' Alive' (Horwitz, 2007), and 'Living the "Dream"' (twice, by Braxton, 2006 and Smith, 2006) all recognized that inequality has previously faced some African Americans in Hollywood, but with confidence about the upward trajectory of the *Dreamgirls* cast, and with a resounding consensus that its message moves beyond polarizing identity politics. As *Vogue* magazine put it:

It's about singing one's way to the top. No one gave Hudson the position she holds today – it took talent, education, hard work, and determination . . . There's an old hymn about the power in the blood, sung in church during Communion. Hudson is ready to show the world she's got staying power in hers. (Vogue, 2007)

In this case and others, we are invited to view *Dreamgirls* as a product of the Effies or the Deenas, rather than the Curtises, of this world, as if the battle against racism and sexism really was won in 1975. That Diana Ross' own solo success did not usher in a golden age of equality points to the ambivalence of 'history' – now you see it, now you don't – in framing *Dreamgirls*, and also Hudson's and Beyoncé's, contemporary success stories. Black women become politicized symbols of the most oppressed or the most downtrodden of American society, but only insofar as their oppression is mystified by murky images of 'ghetto' childhoods, existing in another time and place from the 'now' of equal opportunity America (for example, see Daly, 2006). Thus for *The Star-Ledger*, *Vogue*, *The Daily Record*, *Billboard* and *Entertainment Weekly* (among others), Jennifer Hudson's working-class, bus-driving dad becomes proof that things have really changed – Jennifer is not driving a bus, after all – with the intimation that any day now, her dad will *also* be answering the phone to *American Idol*.

There are complicities between historical recycling in Hollywood and the politics of the 'post'. In 'At Last . . .?: Michelle Obama, Beyoncé, Race and History', Farah Jasmine Griffin suggests that 'images of Michelle Obama and Beyoncé are available to all our nation's girls; that they may now aspire to the previously unimagined heights occupied by their idols is perhaps the greatest indication of our nation's progress. Unfettered access to these heights will be the true test of our post-racial future' (Griffin, 2011). While arguing that spectacles of elite success are the best indices for social progress, the title of Griffin's own essay betrays a remarkable irony, insofar as Beyoncé's success is given moral weight through allusion to the late-1950s blues and jazz singer Etta James, whom she plays in *Cadillac Records* (2008). In this way, famous past success stories offer blueprints for making sense of 'progress' in the present, even while risking the contradictions involved in such narrative repetition. Paradoxically, Beyoncé becomes intelligible through past tropes of strong,

independent black women, while eliding these women's specific trajectories in the music industry and discontinuities between their symbolic victories and the transformations taking place (or not) in the communities for whom they were performing. The further irony that Beyoncé, rather than Jennifer Hudson, was later cast as Etta James – whose actual physique was hardly that of a former Destiny's Child – also reminds us that historical dramatization can hide as much as it can reveal. Contrary to *Newsweek's* predictions, the post-*Dreamgirls* period has not 'launched Hudson into the stratosphere' (Smith, 2006).

A strategic deployment of nostalgic symbols evacuated from historical processes was also evident in much of the press reception for *Dreamgirls*. While frequently citing the 1960s as the golden age of black music and 2006 as the highpoint for African Americans on screen, achievements of black artists or film-makers were frequently written out of the media gushings surrounding *Dreamgirls*. Without a touch of irony, *Entertainment Weekly's* Steve Daly regarded *Dreamgirls* as having 'the strongest black cast' since Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* (1985), erasing the mid-1980s resurgence of black independent film-makers as viable players in the otherwise exclusionary Hollywood circuit. However, both the *New York Daily News* and *Vogue* did reproduce a comment about *Dreamgirls* by black conservative commentator Stanley Crouch:

Audiences are happy to get something about the so-called ghetto in which the people aren't all minstrel figures disguised behind cursing and pornography ... if *Dreamgirls* reiterates some positive things to the masses, popular music may begin a comeback in which actual talent is celebrated. (Vogue, 2007)

In Crouch's social imaginary, hip hop becomes the spectre of negativity against which the soul ethos is invoked. Setting aside decades of samples, tributes, DJ reissues, and independent film soundtracks that have kept Stax and Motown alive as dynamic cultural archives within hip hop and r&b, this brand of Motown enthusiasm discovers the true 'Sound of Young America' in a movie that sounds less like *Hitsville USA* than the *Late Show with David Letterman* (for an apt criticism of the film's not-very-soul soundtrack, see May, 2007). All the while, the possibility of other kinds of black cinema is foreclosed by impossible choices between ghetto voyeurism and racial uplift, one that, like the 'welfare queen' and the 'black lady', works to evacuate wider social structures and institutions – in government, law, housing, economics, and so on – from the dominant stories we tell about why racial inequality persists, and whose behaviours need to be changed.

Nevertheless, in criticizing the deployment of female r&b singers as symbols of collective social progress or as more 'uplifting' images of 'actual talent', we must avoid lending legitimacy to dismissals of *Dreamgirls* found among more vitriolic, masculinist reviewers, whose views might seem diametrically opposed to Crouch. The *Star-Ledger's* Charles Taylor, for example, opens his attack on *Dreamgirls* with an exaltation of James Brown's political courage (compared, unfavorably, with Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey and *Dreamgirls'* Dreamettes), then notes that after two hours of show-tunes passing as rhythm and blues, 'the film comes to seem like a bizarre gay man's fantasy of soul music' (Taylor, 2007). Elsewhere the film is described, in a more sympathetic piece, as 'the gay man's Lord of the Rings' (Vilkomerson, 2006). These criticisms, which resemble many r&b historians'

dismissive treatment of The Supremes, The Ronettes and The Shirelles (among others), are couched in spurious oppositions between authentic, black masculine politics, and feminine pop steering dangerously close, apparently, to homosexual fantasies. Where *Dreamgirls* evacuates economics and ongoing institutional racism from its post-Civil Rights narrative, many (mainly male) commentators are still content to see feminization and queer sensibilities as absent from, or even threatening to, the history and integrity of black American activism (see Collins, 1990; Richardson, 2003; Gray, 2005, pp. 23–24). Music industry corruption needs to be seen not in terms of the old tripartite – men, money and power – but in terms of different types of inequality articulated through intersecting racialized, gendered and sexed social formations, a point that *Dreamgirls* at least highlights, despite its narrative failings.

### On not always historicizing

There is always a risk that when Hollywood re-discovers Civil Rights heroes and black entertainment icons, these will be used to subtly reframe present social opportunities for black Americans. Motown, Stax, Chess – these symbols of progress often become, paradoxically, infinitely recyclable. Just as the 1950s once functioned as a paradise lost for Reagan-era conservatives, the 1960s has come to offer a compelling Civil Rights mythology for color-blind conservative critics who, hand-picking the most suggestive phrases from Martin Luther King Jr., ‘invoke the rhetoric of equality and opportunity to justify dismantling race-based programs’ (Kelley, 1997, p. 90). When faced with clear evidence of disparities between the wealth and prospects of African American and white American communities, this renewed civil rights discourse does not just manipulate statistics or distort the realities of the present, but rather positions existing inequalities as *residues of the past*. Post-racial commentaries displace ‘racism’ onto ‘backward’ sectors of American society, often coded as Southern, rural or working class, while the long-term future is constructed as a color-blind, cosmopolitan utopia, one already existing at a cinema near you. In this way, explicit anti-racist politics comes to appear as divisive, and indeed as backward, as racists themselves (see Joseph, 2009; Teasley & Ikard, 2010, p. 420).

While *Dreamgirls* may indeed tackle some ‘universal’ themes (perhaps love, ambition, and betrayal, as well as ‘outsiders looking in’), the film does play deliberately on its ‘racial’ histories, from the early authentication of its characters on the Chitlin’ Circuit to Curtis’ overzealous *Black Cleopatra* of the early 1970s. More subtly, passing shots of the Detroit riots of 1967, dubbed by some the ‘police riots of 1967’ (see Bergesen, 1982), coincide with one of Effie’s more volatile tantrums: Effie’s lack of discipline comes to mirror the local black community’s own ‘failure to behave’. While a devastated Detroit provides the backdrop to Effie’s bus ride home from her fifteen minutes in the limelight, the historical circumstances of these transformations are never made explicit. Jimmy Early’s *What’s Goin On*-esque protest song, ‘Patience’, has an exclusively anti-Vietnam War message, with no hint that Early – or Marvin Gaye (‘Inner City Blues’) or Donny Hathaway (‘The Ghetto’), the clear reference points – may be reflecting on the failures of Civil Rights to deliver substantial economic gains for poorer black American communities. In interview, director Condon stated that: ‘In the 1960s Detroit had a very hopeful

economy and there was a comfortable mix of black and white . . . There's no question that Motown had a lot to do with pushing forward the black movement . . . But the riots that came later in the decade devastated the city and it never bounced back' (quoted in Jaafar, 2007). Throughout *Dreamgirls*, histories of urban renewal, white flight and the disenfranchisement of unions through deindustrialization are smudged out by the terror of African Americans sabotaging their own opportunities, presumably themselves unaware that there was 'a comfortable mix of black and white' in Detroit.

The historical shifts from Civil Rights to Afrocentism and cultural nationalism, often mistakenly periodized as mutually exclusive and unambiguously gendered 'male' (see Collins, 1990), also provides the allegorical syntax through which *Dreamgirls*' narrative unfolds. The opening scenes of the film celebrate Effie's bold, raucous stage presence, implicitly coded as 'black' through the presence of an all-black audience, and joint billing with a B.B. King sound-a-like. The audience of the film's finale, by contrast, is the rainbow 'mix' now familiar to viewers of American insurance company advertisements, and the desire of Effie's performance is redirected towards her own self-transformation. The headstrong blues-woman is pushed into the receding past of African American 'folk' expression, which suddenly seems out of place, and potentially self-destructive, in the post-integration utopia of *Dreamgirls*' final frames. The emotional 'truth' of the Dreams' final performance, rendered in the universal language of American Broadway, has an historical architecture, in which the Chitlin' Circuit and its non-integrated audiences provide the scaffolding, but must eventually be cleared away from the finished spectacle. The vibrant social justice spirit of early Rainbow Records initiatives, targeted at empowering marginalized performers, is replaced by individual self-development in a 'post-racist', 'post-sexist' post-Civil Rights era.

## Conclusion

*Dreamgirls* plays out entrepreneurship through sex and criminality, themes that deserve far more consideration in most organizational analyses of music industries. Unfortunately, the constant interface between masculinized business and feminized performance in *Dreamgirls* collapses wider regimes of communication, capital investment, and legal negotiation into (hetero)sexual struggles between the chaste and the promiscuous, the positive thinkers and the emotionally dysfunctional. By using sexual drama to narrate the history of soul, specific struggles over gender and sexuality in the institutional contexts of American entertainment industries are re-scripted as timeless relationship dilemmas. Thus I have argued that the difficulty with *Dreamgirls* is not just that Motown is being misrepresented, but that its fables of corruption and self-redemption collapse historical time into gendered economies of individual meritocracy, whereby the worthy receive just deserts by working even harder for the industries that marginalise them. The familiar spectacle of the failing black family invites audiences to engage questions of racial difference, while leaving the relationships between (black) sexual politics and (white) social institutions – including film and music industries – neatly under wraps.

Under cross-examination, Jamie Foxx has insisted that 'I got my character from all the record executives that I have ever met in the past four years. Not Berry Gordy at all' (Robinson, 2007). In a peculiar way, Foxx is probably right: not as much has



changed in the US music industry since the 1960s as we might hope. Perhaps if we could watch *Dreamgirls* backwards, we would find the new ending, where African American media visibility is dependent on an implicitly white entertainment industry, somewhat more compelling.

## Notes

1. For a critique of the complicities between 'ghetto sociologies' and the study of African American popular culture, see Kelley (1997, pp. 15–42).
2. Payola was practice held under public scrutiny in the late 1950s, when major labels complained that independents were 'forcing' rock 'n' roll into the charts through indirect payoffs. See Sidak & Kronemyer (1981).
3. See Sanjek (1996) on the legal constraints placed on media ownership, especially *vis a vis* mergers and acquisitions.

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