

Black Soundtracks, White Subjects:
The Decontextualization of Black Music in
Contemporary Hollywood Cinema

by

Matthew Dueck

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Abstract

Arguing that soundtracks of pre-existing music in cinema are not examples of music consumption, but of resignification, this thesis investigates the use of black music in popular films to define white protagonists. Referring to films such as *The Great Gatsby* (Baz Luhrman, 2013), *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016), *Whiplash* (Damien Chazelle, 2014), and *Baby Driver* (Edgar Wright, 2017), the thesis draws from the field of black musical scholarship to reveal how the complex history of modern black music informs the construction of filmic characters. The critical literature on film music grounds the thesis' analysis of how music functions within particular films. In dialogue also with works that discuss the cultural production of whiteness, my project hopes to disclose the ways in which otherwise "neutral" white protagonists are granted access to the "culture" of black musical traditions in order to render their subjectivity more attractive, authoritative, or authentic.

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Introduction

The music produced by the African Americans has historically and contemporarily been commercialized and coopted by the white culture industries that view black subjects as peripheral to the white experience. In his book *Black Magic* Krin Gabbard argues that:

Because white culture has assigned black culture a central role in its own self-definition while simultaneously marginalizing or erasing black people, the films that perpetuate this project must often resort to what I have called magic [...] I use this term metaphorically to describe the enchanting effect of black music [...] [has] on movie characters, more often than not when the characters on screen are white. (6)

Contemporary popular cinema frequently makes use of a variety of forms of black musical expression as shorthand to bring out certain affective qualities within a scene, setting, or character. Frequently, the use of black music in film actively removes the music from black subjectivity, as when soul music is used to represent a white character's deep cultural capital and memory, or hip-hop (by which I mean the musical category that includes rap and R&B, not the entirety of hip-hop culture) represents a white character's wealth and self-assurance. In these cases, the cultural signification of the music has been bent away from the contexts that produced it so that it can signify resonantly for a white character. The radical decontextualization of black music from black people and experience is indicative of a cinematic form that prioritizes white experience while continuing to colonize black cultural production. In this thesis I use

the term “black music” not as an all-encompassing essentialist definition, but as one that denotes the ways in which the American Hollywood culture industry identifies and commodifies music rooted in the black lived experience (primarily in North America). To deploy the term “black lived experience” is another delicate turn; by using it I mean to discuss the ways in which it is impossible to simplify or essentialize the vast number of black lives and the differences that they face but are united in their lived experience of subjectivity. Frantz Fanon sums this experience up as one of profound responsibility:

I was responsible at once for my I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: “Sho’ good eatin’.” On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. (84-85)

Fanon’s experience of himself as an object, rooted in the history of white oppression, “discovers his blackness” in such a way that renders his experience of the world as fundamentally different from that of the white people who force him into this encounter with himself.

This familiar cultural practice is rooted in the white cooptation of jazz in cinema that had informed studio-era Hollywood and continues to leave its mark all the way up through the present, when black lived experiences and the music produced from them are repurposed in popular cinema to refer to white experiences. Current cinema

borrowed from practices of racial representation that date back to the 1920s, proposes political scientist Michael Rogin in his article “Black Face, White Noise”:

Blackface did the work of black faces, standing not for what is now called jazz but for the melting pot of the jazz age. Almost without exception, popular culture writing in the 1920s treated Negro primitivism as the raw material out of which whites fashioned jazz. Savage not polyphonic rhythm was heard in black music. Jazz was identified with freedom as emotional release rather than as technical prowess. Improvisational skill, instead of being recognized in African American musicians, was overlooked as central to jazz [...]. (448)

While it could be argued that racial integration in the “melting pot” of the American film industry has emptied of meaning this practice of decontextualizing and excavating black music, this is not in any way the case. My choice to focus my case studies on contemporary films either set in the past or present makes clear that these same practices are being used in very similar ways to those historically. As such, I focus my attention on contemporary Hollywood films, not to suggest that this is a new practice, but to point out the continuing incongruities of soundtracking practices. Before detailing the work I aim to undertake in my chapters, I will introduce the film-music scholarship that is central to my work with black music. To fully examine the issues of racial cooptation, it is important to look at changes in the film industry’s musical practices, such as the increasing prevalence in film music of recorded songs instead of an orchestral score as outlined by Hilary Lapedis, as well as the long-standing traditions of sometimes unnoticed underscoring that can often serve as background music and the continued use of nostalgic music to signify the past. I make a distinction here between

soundtracking, that is the use of pre-recorded songs within a film, and scoring, which I identify as the use of a composed set of works designed specifically for a film or scene.

Film-music scholar Hilary Lapedis's article "Popping the Question: The Function and Effect of Popular Music in Film," Lapedis explores the formal functions in contemporary films of familiar pre-recorded musical tracks, as well as the ways in which signification shifts uneasily between the visual and auditory in scenes marked by the performance of popular music. Lapedis also takes great care to examine the ways that the use of popular music frequently frustrates the dichotomy of diegetic and non-diegetic music. Points of audition for diegetic music, she observes, often change when cuts occur, and even non-diegetic music can directly characterize protagonists. This uneasy collapse of the diegetic/non-diegetic divide defines my case studies, where the diegetic point of audition typically becomes unclear at some point in the sequence: the song performance may appear diegetic, but the sound's timbre suggests otherwise. Lapedis is also mindful of the ways in which music's signification within film is often subsumed to the visual signification on the screen, to the point that "without the music, and its discrete meaning outside the visual text, the film would be less effective" (368). Contemporary film-soundtracking practices allow the signification of the songs, and the affective possibilities of a piece of music, to lose their cultural specificity and gain dramatically different meanings.

According to film-music scholar Claudia Gorbman in her book, *Unheard Melodies*, both historical and contemporary film underscores are, in most cases, essentially utilitarian. Scores are tied to their narrative function, and not "designed to be closely listened to, [but instead to] employ familiar musical language, [...] and bathe

the listener in affect” (5). This use of underscoring was and continues to be practiced throughout mainstream Hollywood. The audience can be affected by the music without paying attention to it, hence its invisibility. However, traditional underscoring continues to be augmented by rising filmic music practices, such as soundtracking with popular music. While this is by no means new, it has become more and more prevalent due to the vertical integration of Hollywood Studios and American Record companies (Gorbman, 367). Finally, the practice of using nostalgic music to signify the past is a tradition stretching back to the earliest instances of revue style films to the yearning for a forgotten past in contemporary films through their use of historical music. Nostalgia and pastiche make it possible to evoke the past through music alone. These long-standing film-music practices are both utilized and challenged in a variety of ways through the excavation of black music in the films I will be interrogating.

Finally, it is essential to question the ways in which whiteness is implicated in the commodification of black music. In my own positionality as a white person I want to be sure that my analysis of these films remains rooted in the ways that whiteness continues to be defined and naturalized by its comparison to racial minorities. I do not intend to set parameters or limits on what contemporary or historical black music sounds like but remain vigilant to the ways that it can easily be coopted. To that end, Richard Dyer’s foundational book *White* lays a groundwork for questioning the naturalness or neutrality of whiteness in the realm of film music when he argues that “Whites must be seen as white, yet whiteness as race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen” (45). Just as whiteness must be

unseen to maintain cultural power, it gains cultural capital through the invisibility of its leveraging of black cultural production.

My first chapter focuses on the complicated case of Baz Luhrmann's 2013 adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*. Here popular hip-hop music, soundtracked and produced by Jay-Z, is subsumed into the diegesis of the film through the use of a second layer of music featuring a modern big band, an experiment undertaken by Brian Ferry of British glam rock band Roxy Music. This big band nostalgically recreates the film's hip-hop songs in the style of the 1920s, the time period in which the film takes place. The use of current black music to represent the excessive and uncontrolled aspects of 1920s wealth culture is problematic in this film, where black characters are almost universally performers, servants, or members of the underclass. This case study aims to identify the through line of racial appropriation and signification from big band jazz, all the way to modern hip hop. A different, more empathetic treatment is accorded to the film's use of white popular music, which is allowed to play sincerely in emotional, tragic, and romantic scenes.

Chapter Two looks at Edgar Wright's 2017 film *Baby Driver*, a film of interest for its use of film music that both offers a clear point of audition yet is also extradiegetic in how it impacts directly on the world of the film's main protagonist. The synchronized sound and visuals, with their intensive editing techniques and muddled point of audition, function in a manner similar to modern music videos, which allows the film to play with sound in new and interesting ways. In *Baby Driver*, however, the mix of black soul and funk music alongside European and American rock music is problematized by the relegation of black music primarily to romantic situations.

Additionally, the black characters in the film are often kept from engaging with black music, as though to solidify the love of black music as the sole realm of the white music critic and collector. The problems of *Baby Driver* highlight the ways in which whiteness continues to leverage control over black cultural production, despite an ever-evolving use of music in film and perceptions of radically distinct black lived experiences.

My final chapter will take into account two feature films by director Damien Chazelle; *La La Land* (2016) and *Whiplash* (2014), both of which feature jazz music as critical plot points for their white protagonists. In both films jazz is depicted as concretized and historically specific, rooted in a “pure” past that disallows any room for black futurity. Additionally, both films highlight the suffering of their white protagonists in their quest to become truly great at the supposedly dying form of jazz music. While *La La Land* utilizes the nostalgic cinematic language of the film musical to make this suffering clear, *Whiplash*’s militaristic and competitive academic setting makes clear the hardships that one must face to become “one of the greats.” In both films the actual work of training in jazz music is simplified or even just skipped over to allow a cathartic ending in which the white protagonist has indeed mastered the form, while black performers are shunted to the sides of the narrative, or even portrayed as traitors to the genre of jazz. The films go to great lengths to include white jazz musicians as idols of “pure” jazz, such as Buddy Rich and Hoagy Carmichael, as if to show that this traditionally black genre of music can accommodate white stars.

The organization of these case studies aim to bring closer attention to the ways that black music remains limited by its use in white cultural production. *The Great Gatsby* attempts to create historical and cyclical overtures in its use of both hip-hop and

jazz, *Baby Driver* divorces black music from the black characters within the film and suggests that white protagonists are the appropriate custodians of black cultural production, and finally, Chazelle's two "jazz films" both aim to historicize jazz as something that remains firmly cemented within the past, by the very same white custodians that *Baby Driver* suggests.

Overall, my thesis aims to take a much closer look at the practices that have continued to plague "White Hollywood" and its complicated and interdependent reliance on black cultural production (Gabbard, 7). I attempt to understand the ways in which whiteness is delineated by the black music that functions both as a cultural other, and as a commodity that further centralizes the authority and dominance of the white subject. These case studies offer new and powerful examples of how postmodern thinking, such as pastiche, is used to breakdown the association between black music and black people. These films are invested in black music as a self-reflexive twist used to historicize or hybridize themselves without regarding the racial implications of this move. In this sense, terms such as sincerity are meant to reflect the films depiction of the music within its larger context, a sincere musical performance in film is un-self-reflexive in its insistence that the visual action is enhanced by the soundtracking. My thesis intends to make clear the ways that contemporary Hollywood has followed a century long tradition of racial cooptation that, through its specific framing can often be made invisible. Through an analysis of black music's association in these films with white excess, white cultural capital, white suffering, and white excellence, I aim to expose the ways in which this music has been twisted away from signifying the lived experiences of members of the black community become commoditized and fetishized

within a white supremacist entertainment industry, white supremacy in my thesis meaning the ways in which whiteness continues to be unquestioned as natural and neutral and not raced in any way, positioning it as both more normal and less dangerous than the influence of other races. In my decision to leave the term “black” uncapitalized, I follow in the tradition of critical race scholars such as bell hooks and Paul Gilroy, who argue that the multiplicity of black lived experiences cannot be represented as a monoculture. Like hooks and Gilroy, I regard blackness as a contested site of ever-evolving positionality that should be recognized. Finally, I will mention that I cite an author, Norman Mailer, who uses racist language that reinforces the genealogy of primitivizing and misrepresenting black lived experiences, but I do so because Mailer makes larger points that help illuminate the crucial role of black music in popular cinema.

Chapter 1:

Rap, Excess, and the Sincerity of White Music

Baz Luhrmann's 2013 adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* attempts to remind its audience of the specificity of the era in which the novel is set, the roaring 1920s, while simultaneously bringing out the ways in which that period can speak to contemporary viewers. The story centers around Nick Carraway (Tobey Maguire), a young stock broker who recently moved to New York City to earn his fortune, and his renewed relations with two old friends: the polo player Tom Buchanan (Joel Edgerton), holder of considerable inherited wealth, and his wife Daisy Buchanan (Carey Mulligan), an ingénue who enjoys her life of profound luxury. Nick happens to be neighbours to the mysterious and incredibly wealthy Jay Gatsby (Leonardo DiCaprio), who maintains a decades long crush on Daisy and believes that through his wealth true love will prevail.

The film's blend of past and present is primarily an aesthetic concern, and the sumptuous, over-the-top computer-generated visuals do not attempt to hide their historical inauthenticity. As Fredric Jameson writes in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*:

Everything in film, therefore, conspires to blur its official contemporaneity and to make it possible for you to receive the narrative as though it were set in some eternal Thirties [or Twenties], beyond historical time. The approach to the present by way of the art language of the simulacrum, or of the pastiche of the stereotypical past, endows present reality and the openness of present history with

the spell and distance of a glossy mirage. But this mesmerizing new aesthetic mode itself emerged as an elaborate symptom of the waning of our historicity [...] (68).

The camera moves in impossible ways through oversaturated and fantastical environments, the vehicle for CGI that dazzles the viewer with a vision of excess. The main cast brings exaggerated and stylized performances that make them almost caricatures of Fitzgerald's studied portraits. It is, however, the film's music that is perhaps the clearest aesthetic trick, as it continues Luhrmann's practice throughout his career of including anachronistic music that creates ironic connections across disparate filmic genres, narratives, tropes, and times. In other words, the music of the film seeks to bridge the gap between past and present, while simultaneously layering the film with racial signification beyond what can be conveyed visually. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, Luhrmann's musical choices are essential to *The Great Gatsby's* ambivalent engagement with the politics of racial difference, where black racially coded music comes across as excessive or novel because of its resistance to white musical norms.

The story of *The Great Gatsby* begins in the summer of 1922 with Nick, a young college graduate, trying his hand at stock trading. After moving into a small cottage on "West Egg" (a fictionalized Long Island), Nick begins to notice the contentious relationship between his cousin Daisy Buchanan, the wife of Yale graduate and wealthy "old money" man Tom Buchanan, and the reclusive millionaire Jay Gatsby, Nick's neighbour. As the film progresses, the seductive figure of Gatsby is seen at speakeasies and accused of bootlegging and is hinted to have made his fortune in less

than reputable ways. As their fates become entangled through various romantic affairs and confrontations, Nick comes to realize Jay Gatsby as the status of the American dream, a carefully designed story that continues to inspire belief, regardless of how improbable it is.

The Soundtrack's Three Layers

The film's music track is made up of three distinct layers. The first is the most noticeable and abrupt; a brash mix of hip-hop, rap, and pop music credited to Jay-Z, who was also an executive producer on the film. This music often underscores the establishing shots that set the tone and pace of the scene that follows. Artists like Andre 3000, Q-Tip, Nero, and will.i.am. set the tone for the fast-living and hard-partying scenes, while white pop musicians such as Jack White, The XX, Florence and the Machine and Lana Del Rey provide the music used in scenes that detail the film's tragic love story.

Comprising the soundtrack's second layer is the work of The Bryan Ferry Orchestra, whose retro style and instrumentation is used to draw viewers into the diegesis of the film and thereby bridge the gap between the film's period setting and its contemporary popular music. This gap provokes ironic self-awareness in the audience in light of Bryan Ferry's beginnings as a singer who became popular during the 1970's and 1980's through his work with the glam rock band Roxy Music. Ferry's subsequent solo career expanded across various genres, notably in his 2012 album *The Jazz Age*, which he recorded as The Bryan Ferry Orchestra. For this album, Ferry removed the vocals and reworked early Roxy Music songs into complex 1920's inspired jazz songs.

Inspired by this departure, Luhrmann and executive music coordinator Anton Monstad pursued Ferry and his orchestra to “work with [them] as the sound of 1920s traditional jazz” (Trakin, n.p.). Accepting the challenge, Ferry rerecorded jazz versions of a number of the contemporary songs by Jay-Z and others. In an interview with NPR journalist Audie Cornish, Monstad stated:

What we were trying to do musically was create the effect of, almost, sliding doors between very contemporary sounds and sounds that the characters in the film would have heard realistically at the time. As the movie plays out, many of the songs which appear in their pop incarnation on the soundtrack — they've got a sort of "twin brother," if you like, in Bryan Ferry's jazz version. So, we repeat songs, we repeat tunes, we set up musical motifs. (Cornish, par. 6)

Monstad’s description makes clear that Ferry’s work facilitates the integration of Jay-Z’s music into the diegesis of the film more broadly, as when, in scenes set at the gentleman’s club or at the mansion, Ferry’s version of a Jay-Z song is accompanied by a stand-in band visible in the setting. Throughout the film, the diegetic playfulness of Ferry’s work, which seems to come from both within and without the diegesis, instills a sense of nostalgia and pastiche that complements the in-your-face boldness of the contemporary music choices, directly expressing and collapsing the parallels between past and present that Luhrmann is clearly attempting to create. Film scholar Richard Dyer argues that pastiche:

evokes a (or may be taken to evoke) a past or contemporaneous form or style as somehow more innocent and simple, less self-aware. [...] each pastiche [...]

somehow implying that what went before [these pastiches] were unaware of themselves as constructions [...] (133, 2007)

The pastiche of this level of the soundtrack attempts to draw attention to the seemingly innocent construction of early jazz music. Ferry's music is evocative of the compromises that the film attempts to create between the past and the present.

Finally, comprising the soundtrack's third layer is a traditional orchestral score composed by Craig Armstrong. Both Armstrong and Music Supervisor Monstad previously worked with Luhrmann on *Moulin Rouge* (2001). This layer, which features a orchestral style string ensemble, a serene and unobtrusive tone, and conventional arrangements, serves as a background to the action on the screen without intruding upon it. This score is used almost exclusively to portray moments of contemplation and sadness in the film, with the clear distinction that several songs feature Lana Del Rey's vocals as well. Acting almost as non-diegetic pop ballads, Del Rey's music is included in the first layer of the soundtrack as well, but her inclusion here, under the heading of the film's orchestral score, speaks to the whiteness with which orchestral scores are often associated. Manifesting a rhapsodic pop music sensibility whose lineage runs through Frank Sinatra and Julie London, Del Rey's vocal performance speaks to a specifically white conception of leisure as displayed within the film, marked by a languid voice, demure lyrics, and soaring strings. Steven Connor writes that:

Corresponding to this white body, would be something that we might call a white voice, on the analogy of the whiteness of white light or white noise, that include all possible frequencies within them. Such a voice has minimal colour, taste or locative twang; it is, so to speak, vocality itself, without the distinguishing grain

that would tie it to a particular space, time, or body. It is a necessity of this writing that it seem faint, but its faintness is really loud with phonic ghosts. (par. 40, 2009)

The whiteness and neutrality of the music allows it to operate most clearly as a non-diegetic enhancement of the film's visual narrative. Unlike the other two layers of soundtracking, Del Rey's music never intrudes into the narrative. In a manner typical of traditional non-diegetic film music, this score is almost exclusively played over scenes of contemplation or sadness. The score's traditional nature, particularly when paired with Del Rey's vocals, codes this music as normalized and white.

Racial Flux as Displayed in the Film

The film's use of black racially coded music corresponds to the film's period setting, which invokes a time when "jazz" first became a commercial music genre and racial relations were being questioned and recodified. Historian David J. Goldberg writes that:

The Ku Klux Klan attracted those uneasy with the more assertive role of African Americans, Catholics, and Jews as well as those uncomfortable with rapid pace of social change in United States. [...] During the 1920s, African American migration from the South to the North continued at a steady pace (8-9)

Coinciding with these social developments was the introduction of radio, electric recording, and sound cinema, which facilitated the global dissemination of songs as never before. The film's depiction of people of colour alludes to these conditions through the frequent appearance of black people in the peripheries of the plot's setting,

where they serve either as servants to the wealthy Buchanans or as musicians who perform in clubs and at parties. In a number of pointed moments, the flux of racial positioning seems to be highlighted, such as when Nick voyeuristically peers through the windows of an apartment building and is bemused by the mixed race residents and their activities; a black sex worker strip teasing for a middle aged white man, a black man praying, a black couple having an argument and a white couple's sexual encounter. These multiple vignettes of other lives are made confusing and hard to grasp by the sheer quantity of activities in all thirty-two windows. The one important scene in which black wealth is portrayed, on the drive to Manhattan where he is confronted by reveling black men and women in a convertible car, much to the confusion of Nick, the viewer's surrogate it is made to be spectacular and unpredictable. While some argue that the film's attempts to draw attention to black identities in the 1920s "has to do with its intersectional exploration of identity" (Vogel, 31), one could argue that the film's deployment of black identity, in fact, only highlights the changing mores and lifestyles of the film's white protagonists.

Consider how the action in these scenes plays out. Early in the film, when Nick Carraway is first introduced to Tom and Daisy Buchanan at their sweeping Neoclassical estate, the viewer cannot help but notice the conspicuously black estate staff, as they literally frame the doorway in which Tom and Nick are reunited. When they appear sternly in a room filled with white curtains to announce dinner, their racial difference is highlighted both by the contrast of their skin with the light fabric of their uniforms, and by the synchronicity with which they operate, indicating their position of servitude and marginality. The cinematography insists on the visibility of this

underclass, but also on the ease with which all of the white characters ignore their service. Over dinner, Tom, a “Yale man,” discusses his recent fascination with eugenics by citing a fictional book titled *The Rise of the Colored Empires*, highlighting his distrust by flicking one of the black servant’s bowties. This scene is not emancipatory in any way, especially given the ways that the film highlights black contemporary performers. While the camera lingers on the black staff’s uncomfortable faces atop their starched uniforms, in a gesture towards humanizing them, the film allows only the white protagonists to react candidly to Tom’s racist argument. Daisy smirks and says briefly that “Tom’s very profound lately. He reads deep books with long words in them,” as the other two guests avert their eyes and stare down at their plates. This scene sets up race relations as a tool to differentiate the protagonists from the rest of the film’s characters, highlighting the apparent “goodness” of the former, who display their discomfort with Tom’s argument. Daisy’s obvious frustration with Tom’s tirade, and Nick’s apparent malaise in the situation define them as more open-minded characters than their counterparts, an open-mindedness that otherwise remains unexpressed in the film more broadly.

Nick, Daisy, Gatsby and even Jordan Baker (Elizabeth Debicki), a professional golfer and close friend of Daisy’s, never make any effort to meaningfully engage with any people of colour throughout the film. The one exception is Meyer Wolfsheim, Gatsby’s sleazy associate played by Indian film superstar Amitabh Bachchan. However, even in this case, the purpose of Meyer’s racialized appearance, one could argue, is to create a sense of menace by invoking Gatsby’s illicit business dealings. Showing up in the densely packed speak-easy filled with powerful men from

across New York, Meyer's appearance as a person of colour, combined with his commanding physical presence within the space of the speakeasy, are used to reinforce Nick's confusion regarding the racial hierarchies that have shaped his world. Indeed, Fitzgerald's rendition of Wolfsheim as Jewish in the novel acted to establish Wolfsheim as a clear threat to the racial and societal norms of Nick's world. As Richard Dyer, a film scholar who describes the ways in which whiteness is constructed in cinema, writes:

[Many] descriptors still tr[y] to fix Jewish colour geographically, not according to the rich flux and variation of whiteness – it is adaptation, not inclusive colourlessness. Nonetheless, it does suggest a conceptual closeness between Jewish and really white colouring. It is a closeness that has only sometimes worked to Jews' advantage. Adaptability could easily be viewed as the capacity to infiltrate, passing for gentile as a kind of corruption of whiteness. (57)

Through the race-swapping that transforms Wolfsheim from Jewish into South Asian, the film attempts to inoculate itself against claims of stereotypical anti-Semitism, despite the long tradition of Judaism in India. The lone speaking person of colour in the film is race swapped from one subjugated race to another, and the name and character traits from the novel can remain intact. However, the figure of the Jewish American was at times much more troubling for racist Americans, and in a historical narrative of American racism against Jewish people more readily removed to avoid claims of racism. Yet, the similarly exoticized Meyer simply reinforces the film's approach to racial difference, albeit with a bolder and more obvious infiltration. Flamboyant and indiscrete, Meyer alludes to his dirty business deals with Gatsby while smiling slyly at

the debauchery and corruption surrounding him, as black women dance suggestively, and Jay-Z's song "\$100 Bill" plays loudly, with lyrical references to decadence (0:40:00). That these traits are assigned to the character played by Bachchan, the lone person of colour speaking in the scene, makes Gatsby and Nick, once again, seem ethically neutral and upstanding, models of discretion and restraint, despite their raucous surroundings. This pattern of inoculating the film against accusations of racism persists throughout its duration, but never particularly clearly or cleverly, as the music makes most evident with its turns towards both rap and jazz, attempting to locate the film both within a historical period made up of new and transgressive jazz, as well as the contemporary turn to jazz's assumed successor, hip-hop. However, it is easy to view Meyer's exotic presence as an anomaly in the film's social world, in line with John Russell's discussion of race-switching in film:

Generally, however, these racially morphed characters are meant neither to stand in as simulacral whites nor, despite their stereotyped nature, to represent [racial] caricatures. Instead, ironically, they are presented as "colorless," parenthetical or incidental [minorities] that operate in predominantly white surroundings. (270)

The casting of Bachchan to play Wolfsheim works to subvert the anti-Semitic tone of the source material while also maintaining the racial difference necessary to bring out the refined characteristics of Nick and Gatsby.

A similar scene occurs during Nick and Gatsby's drive to Manhattan; as they cross the bridge into the city, they pass a car filled with reveling black people dressed in fine clothing and drinking champagne from ice buckets behind a white driver. This moment is shot in the film's trademark swirling and unfixed camera,

whereby the camera seems to float around, giving the audience an objective view that makes full use of the digitally created environment of the set. In response Nick's face once again displays a mix of wonder and uncertainty. Just before the car appears, Nick's voiceover intimates that "by the time we reached the bridge I was impossibly confused." This moment also marks the introduction of "Izzo (H.O.V.A.)," one of the songs by Jay-Z (0:49:00). This use of hip-hop implies a more fluid sense of racial belonging than the film ordinarily suggests, asking the viewer to consider black wealth as something that could exist in Gatsby's world.



Figure 1: The exception of black wealth in The Great Gatsby.

Otherwise, however, the film's entire conception of racial understanding is tied to strict distinctions between blackness and whiteness. The scene featuring the wealthy black revelers stands out as a moment when black excess seems equally, if not more, unhinged and out of control than the white revelries that are to come. The song fades out as soon as the car slips out of the frame, reinforcing the fixed signification between the black wealth displayed on the screen and the hip-hop music that stands in for jazz as a popular form of transgressive black musical production. As Tom speeds aggressively past the car, Nick's bewilderment seems to reinforce the difference that the film creates

between black and white wealth and excess. In this case, the music swells accompanied by the visual cue of slow-motion editing, as though to exaggerate the lavishness of the moment.

The drive-to-Manhattan scene's transitory display of black wealth and its association with "Izzo (H.O.V.A.)" is at odds with the ways that black musical production stands in for white wealth in numerous additional moments in the film. In effect, this scene serves to inoculate the film against the racialization to which it otherwise gives free reign. For example, one of the opening scenes features a now psychiatrically incarcerated Nick, detained at the fictional Perkins Sanitarium for his diagnosis as "Morbidly Alcoholic, Insomniac, [and prone to] Fits of Anger, and Anxiety." It is telling that at a time when insane asylums across the country were riddled with abuse, eugenic policies and permanent incarceration, life in a psychiatric institute should seem so worry-free to Nick, who reclines in a large study, calmly reflecting on his experiences in the summer of 1922, and never expressing any fear for his own safety. It is easy to reconcile Nick's fairly lenient and relaxed time in the sanitarium with his social status as wealthy, well connected and white. For many residents, however, life in a sanitarium was inhumane, as sociologist John R. Sutton writes:

Given the high levels of dependency among the aged and the fluid definitions of insanity that prevailed at the turn of the century, there was a surfeit of candidates for institutional treatment [...] [traditional depictions of institutions] fail to give explicit attention to the institutional processes that transform vague moral notions into authoritative models of deviance and conformity. (675)

Nick's white, class-inflected performance of racial and social conformity shunts the realities of psychiatric institutions off to the side. It is in this unrealistically comfortable and nurturing environment that Nick recalls his story to a doctor. The recollection involves a montage of archival footage of New York in the 1920s as well as new footage that has been digitally altered to match the film grain of the archival shots. As Nick describes the boom in the stock market, the loose morals, and the failure of prohibition, a frenetic montage of speed-ramped shots intoxicates the audience with what the film clearly sees as a dysfunctional vision of the American dream. This scene begins with an opening aerial shot of a digitally reconstructed 1920s New York accompanied by the opening beats of Jay-Z and Kanye West's "No Church in the Wild" (0:03:00)

Black Music/White Wealth

The sequence's combination of financial-district imagery, busy streets and vignettes from parties is set to an edited version Jay-Z's rap verse: "Tears on the mausoleum floor/ Blood on the coliseum doors/ Lies on the lips of a priest/ Rolling in the Rolls Royce Corniche," all the lines except for the last contradicting the imagery of wealth and excess. In suggesting a hidden human cost behind the boom of market speculation in the 1920s, the use of Jay-Z's verse in the film's introduction to New York demonstrates the use of anachronistic music to invoke truths that the film views as timeless or perhaps cyclical. The mention in the lyrics of the stock market alludes to the financial crisis of 2008, and references to Prohibition's failure brings to mind America's ongoing war on drugs. These allusions, alongside the anachronistic hip-hop music,

suggest the cyclical nature of capitalism, whose crises today invite comparison to those of the 1920s. However, it must be noted that both in the archival footage as well as in the digitally altered shots, no people of colour are depicted, and the use of Jay-Z's rap (which edits around all lines that refer to the drug trade as a means of black wealth) is fundamentally incongruous with the rest of the scene. As soon as the montage is over and the camera zooms downwards from the skyline towards Nick's upturned face, the music blends into a sample of an uncredited jazz song. The connections that the film attempts to create between jazz and hip-hop in this scene are clear: whereas jazz enables a certain kind of white nostalgia, hip-hop reminds modern audiences of the more transgressive elements of historically black music. In both cases the music affirms white values and white attitudes.

In various other scenes that make use of hip-hop, black people are made peripheral to the meanings that the music implies. An example is the party scene that occurs midway through the movie, when another Jay-Z song is played, though this time its signification functions quite differently from the earlier moment. In this scene, Nick and Tom are swept up in an afternoon of revelry at a secret Manhattan apartment that Tom keeps for his mistress Myrtle (Isla Fisher). The scene is shot raucously, opening with Nick being given an unknown pill as the song "Who Gon Stop Me" by Jay-Z and Kanye West opens with a sample from Flux Pavilion's "I Can't Stop" distorted and repeated, so as to render the impulse (not to stop) nonsensical in its relentlessness (0:20:00). As the scene continues and the party runs out of control, close-up shots luxuriate in the kitschy smallness of the apartment. A cutaway offers an exterior view of a black man playing the trumpet on a fire escape, and the piercing notes mingle with the

drum machines of the hip-hop song. This musical choice - the transition from trumpet to drum machine - is repeated throughout the film. If the first layer of the soundtrack encompasses the hip-hop songs, then the intermittent return of the black trumpet player suggests an enduring need to incorporate the second layer, diegetically introduced jazz music. In the instance involving the trumpet player, the two musical genres merge together, inviting the audience to consider the jazz-infused historicity of hip-hop, or perhaps to contrast the perspectives of the white protagonists with the black subjectivities that surround them. This comparison comes up throughout the film where Ferry's big-band versions of hip-hop songs point towards a common musical genealogy uniting new and old musical styles. However, this again is a dishonest move, as the hip-hop is not used to characterize the lives of the black characters but instead the revelries of the white protagonists. Indeed, most black subjects in the film are staff who facilitate the parties or unnamed civilians who appear occasionally on the peripheries of the film's narrative. The cutaway to the lone trumpeter exemplifies the film's need for a diegetic causality for the anachronistic black music. The trumpeter is not in conversation with the scene playing out across the street from him, and yet, his music justifies the use of black hip-hop to characterize the excesses of the upper-class white party. As if to underscore their privilege, Nick comments at the end of the scene that "this is better than the Yale club." The scene ends with an intoxicated Nick looking out the window and observing the various domestic dramas playing out across the street. These shots of Nick looking across the street at an incredible variety of neighbors once more gestures at the ways in which Nick's lived experience is privileged over many others in the city. Nick's face floats superimposed onto the image of the apartment

building as individual windows are enlarged to reveal themselves to the viewer. Nick here plays a type of urban ethnographer, voyeuristically letting city life pass before him, but not without passing judgment, such as when he states that he was both “enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.”

The party scene at Myrtle and Tom’s apartment sets the standard for the ways in which hip-hop is repeatedly used to signify excess, debauchery and immoral wealth throughout the film, most conspicuously in large and extravagant scenes that overload the viewer’s senses. The most transparent example of this is the first party at Gatsby’s castle, where Nick is invited to meet his neighbour and stumbles through such an extravagant event that his opinion of his host is markedly improved by the end. Nick comments that: “The whole city packed into automobiles and all weekend, every weekend, ended up at Gatsby’s, and I mean everyone from every walk of life from every corner of New York City, this kaleidoscope carnival spilled to Gatsby’s door” despite the solely white guests. These gestures toward inclusion and diversity, so evident in Nick’s claim of the “kaleidoscope” of guests, do not at all represent the actual lived diversity of New York in the 1920s. As Nick presses his way through throngs of people towards the great hall of the estate, diegetic organ music begins to build towards the opening beats of “Bang Bang” by black rapper and DJ will.i.am (0:24). Quick shots of revelry are choreographed along Nick’s description of the party’s attendees, each more outlandish than the last, as rapid camera movement and bright glittery costumes and sets bedazzle the audience. The hip-hop song is blended with the Brian Ferry iteration of the song, as wailing trumpets and pulsing synths collide to provide even more extravagance to the scene. As the music continues and Nick tries to get his

invitation accepted by various staff (the only black people in the scene), every shot discloses some new act of luxury consumption or revelry, eventually leading Nick to decide to get drunk.

A brief interlude in the festivities occurs as Jordan takes Nick on a secret mission through the mansion to find the mysterious and elusive Gatsby. When the pair enter a library, they encounter an elderly man in round glasses who exclaims that “ Mr. Gatsby doesn’t exist!”, after asking which Gatsby they have heard of, be it prince, spy, or murderer. The only response that Nick has to this assertion of Gatsby’s nonexistence is “Then what is this all for?” The notion of a titular character who doesn’t exist aptly demonstrates the concept of subjectivity as innately constructed, and in Gatsby’s case, the construction rests on white cultural capital accrued through the elaborate parties that Gatsby hosts at his enormous estate, with their huge variety of guests, eclectic musical performances, and ever-flowing champagne. Gatsby’s party makes manifest his subjectivity, at least briefly.

After forgoing their secret mission to find a host that doesn’t (apparently) exist, Jordan drags Nick out onto the outdoor dance floor as a “A Little Party Never Killed Nobody” by a pop singer from the hip-hop group The Black Eyed Peas, Fergie, begins to play (0:27). This dance sequence spans the lawn and features a furiously dancing band leader and a diegetic alibi for the music in a big band comprised of white men wearing bright red fezzes. The scene continues with guests jumping into the pool and Nick continuing to pursue Jordan before the song ends and confetti and streamers gracefully fall from the sky as a bird’s eye shot highlights the scope of the carousing below. As an angry socialite takes Jordan’s arm and leads her away just as the band

leader announces, “and now, a jazz history of the world with accompanying fireworks!” Nick begins to strike up a conversation with an unidentifiable figure, the band in the background begins to play George Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue” (0:29). As Nick’s unnamed conversationalist finally reveals himself to be his host Gatsby, the crescendo of “Rhapsody in Blue” plays over a shot slowed to luxuriate in Gatsby’s white smile and dazzling blue eyes, his face framed by the opening salvo of the fireworks display.



Figure 2: Gatsby is finally revealed to the strains of "Rhapsody in Blue."

This entire sequence is emblematic of the ways in which music is used to erase black subjectivities while simultaneously facilitating white people’s access to black cultural capital. Nick’s opening statements regarding the whole of New York coming out to the party betrays an act of black erasure that runs through the sequence, despite the use of hip-hop to characterize black music in terms of an excess or novelty unavailable through white music. The Brian Ferry big-band covers of hip-hop songs tie those songs into the diegesis and create a symbolic link between the film and the story-

world setting. Ferry's primarily white band borrows not only the music from black artists, but also their musical style as they emulate big bands like those of Duke Ellington. As the scene continues, the party climaxes with the fireworks display and the performance of "Rhapsody in Blue." In his book *Louis Armstrong and Paul Whiteman: Two Kings of Jazz* Joshua Barret describes a popular white, "symphonic" approach to jazz music identified with band leader Paul Whiteman:

[Whiteman] was nevertheless keenly aware that whites were "the dominant race." In much of what he did, especially from 1920 to 1926, he sought to consolidate that position; and in nothing was that clearer than in how he went about validating his ideas about "symphonic jazz" as a synthesis of the new "hot" jazz and European art music. This synthesis was central to his larger purpose in presenting "The Experiment of Modern Music" in 1924, for example, which marked the premiere of the most famous piece of "symphonic jazz" ever written, the specially commissioned "Rhapsody in Blue" by George Gershwin.

In fact, Whiteman was the performer of the first filmic version of "Rhapsody in Blue" in his musical revue film *The King of Jazz* (Anderson and Lantz, 1930). This version shares some familiar resonances with the Gatsby party scene that concretize both as performances of a newer and whiter form of jazz. Whiteman's performance of the song begins with a preface that states that "jazz was born in the African jungle to the beating of the voodoo drum," (an ahistorical claim that erases distinctions across the African diaspora) making the same connection that Gatsby's own bandleader makes in the film. These opening statements both seek to assure the viewer that though the heart of jazz

may lie in Africa, it has been colonized and historicized in keeping with modern white conventions.

Performances of “Rhapsody in Blue” in both films announce themselves as emblematic of the entirety of jazz history. Whiteman’s performance in *The King of Jazz* is introduced by Whiteman, the self-proclaimed “King of Jazz,” in his tuxedo in front of a gigantic prop of a scorebook. He explains that the Whiteman orchestra was the first band to perform the piece which features the “most primitive and the most modern musical elements.” Then the shot cuts dramatically to portray this “beating of the voodoo drum” by opening with a black dancer lit in silhouette dancing a beat out upon a surreally large drum. As soon as this prologue ends, a series of white dancers and performers appear, and the black dancer is not brought into the performance again. The white dancers that remain wear elaborate matching costumes of the same periwinkle blue, around a set of tremendous art deco silver disks and a gigantic piano. The performance scene from *The King of Jazz* and the Gatsby reveal scene in *The Great Gatsby* both revel in the excess associated with extreme wealth, allowing white audiences to rest assured that their cultural and financial wealth would not be damaged by an association with traditional black jazz. The use of Gershwin in Luhrmann’s film is profound in its emphasis upon whiteness not only in the party scene but in the familiar strategy whereby black cultural production is evacuated of its blackness to create bizarre hybridized musical forms characteristic of symphonic jazz pieces such as “Rhapsody in Blue.”

The first Gatsby party scene encapsulates the film’s use of black music to characterize its white subjects. The filmmakers went to great lengths to create

convincing imitations of black music, both diegetically and non-diegetically. Freeing its white characters from having to reconcile with the blackness of the popular music around them, Brian Ferry's white big band melds brash modern tracks into the diegesis through techniques of nostalgia and historical pastiche. The same can be said of the way in which Gershwin's symphonic jazz is echoed in the big band covers of modern hip-hop tracks performed by a diegetic band made up of white men who are symbolically racialized by way of their fezzes to stand in for more exoticized North African subjects. As a whole, the party sequence suggests the role of racialized cultural production in utilizing racist power imbalances and making black music available for appropriation by white consumers.

White Sincerity

In stark contrast to scenes that utilize black music (both modern and historical), the scenes that are soundtracked by white pop musicians heighten moments of emotional tension linked to the film's various romances and affairs. White pop singer Lana Del Rey's song "Young and Beautiful," a mournful pop ballad accompanied by piano, strings, organ and a choir, utilizes Del Rey's luscious vocals to imagine a future contrasted against the luscious present in which youth and beauty have faded, but love and wealth remain (1:00). She sings "Will you still love me when I'm no longer young and beautiful?/ When I've got nothing but my aching soul/ I know you will, I know you will," while simultaneously insinuating the lavishness of her current lifestyle: "I've seen the world, done it all/ Had my cake now/ Diamonds, brilliant, in Bel-Air now." Finally, however, she begs for a permanence that only death and the afterlife can afford: "Dear

Lord, when I get to heaven/ Please let me bring my man/ When he comes tell me you'll let him in/ [...] All that face makes me wanna party/ He's my sun, he makes me shine like diamonds."

This song accompanies the first scene in which Daisy and Gatsby are reunited and Nick accompanies them on a tour of Gatsby's palatial estate, where their host points out the spectacular appeal of his wealth. Noting that the estate's gates were shipped in from a castle in Normandy, showing off modern indulgences such as an automatic orange juicer, shooting golf balls off of a dock while a servant pours champagne from a docked boat, explaining his custom golden Wurlitzer organ, and finally tossing all of the shirts of various fine fabrics purchased by "a man in England who buys me clothes" down from his walk-around closet onto Daisy as she luxuriates on the bed below. The use of this song to demonstrate Gatsby's wealth evacuates the latter of its taint of illegality. Del Ray's voice with its engrained neutrality, keeps the scene in the mode of high romance even as the lavishness of the estate was previously made to seem much more intoxicating and overwhelming when scored with hip-hop. Here Del Ray's music inoculates Gatsby's vast wealth against the racialization that denotes the excesses often seen in the scenes set during parties or in Manhattan soundtracked by black hip-hop. The track selection within this scene draws attention to the romance between Gatsby and Daisy and allows Daisy's characterization as a charming, innocent, and leisurely woman of means, able to bedazzle even the most cynical viewer.

In a similar mode, the song "Love is Blindness," originally written by Irish rock band U2, is performed by alternative rock superstar Jack White (originally of the

band The White Stripes) (1:44). This song, which features organ, drums and bass guitar, along with White's signature twangy voice (clearly borrowing from the black blues tradition of his hometown, Detroit) slowly growing to a rousing climax. With lyrics that include "Love is blindness/ I don't wanna see/ Won't you wrap the night/ Around me?/ Oh my heart/ Love is blindness" the song's focus on romantic love combine with its piercing melody to create a sincerity that matches the disastrous scene playing out visually.

The song begins to play as Myrtle's husband George Wilson (Jason Clarke) violently accuses her of cheating on him, telling her that "You might fool me, but you can't fool God. God sees everything." Myrtle is able to escape George's grasp and runs out into the street, where, just as Gatsby's bright yellow car roars around the corner, she mistakes the driver of the car for Tom, the man with whom she's been having an ongoing affair and rushes out to meet him. However, the driver is not Tom, as the audience knows, in a tricky piece of dramatic irony. As the sports car roars towards her the music reaches its frenetic climax, and a shot of Gatsby grabbing the wheel is followed by a shot of the car crashing into Myrtle's silk laden body in dramatic slow motion, as witnesses look on, unable to intervene. As Myrtle rolls slowly up into the glass windscreen, the shot holds in place, ending on the dramatic blue billboard for an optometrist named Dr. T. J. Eckleberg, but whose ominous eyes look over the scene much like the eyes of God that George had just invoked. The anachronistic music in this scene requires no alibi for its inclusion, nor does it have a diegetic source to blur the musical lines. The moments of tragedy in the film soundtracked by white artists are

allowed to play out as sincere within a film that continually makes excuses for its use of black music.

The rap that highlights the display in *The Great Gatsby* of excess, parties and wealth is balanced by the pop ballads that mourn the doomed romance at the heart of the story between Daisy and Gatsby. Even in the spectacular party scenes, the film will not allow itself to be perceived as excessively *black*. Bryan Ferry's nostalgic orchestra resolves the inconsistencies of the hip-hop soundtrack, effectively taking that music off of the streets and onto the bandstand, where it is further inoculated via the diegetic inclusion of various big bands. When black people are included on the screen, they appear almost exclusively as servants of the wealthy protagonists, an uninspiring underclass within the city, or as musical props to justify the use of jazz or hip-hop. While the film clearly has resonances today's political climate, the exclusion of people of colour from the film's narrative is peculiar given their extensive presence on the soundtrack. At its core *The Great Gatsby* manipulates big-band jazz, hip-hop and swing in ways that erase the marginalized black identities that had created these musical forms in the first place.

Chapter 2:

***Baby Driver*, Soul, and the Production of White Authenticity**

Edgar Wright's 2017 film *Baby Driver* is narratively and aesthetically all about its music. A viscerally paced action film, *Baby Driver* features a young white getaway driver named Baby (Ansel Elgort), living in Atlanta, indebted to a fixer's gang, and attempting to extricate himself from the gang's rapidly deteriorating situation. Revealed through a flashback to have suffered tinnitus in a car accident that killed both of his parents, Baby listens to music constantly to drown out the ringing in his ears. This consistent diegetic soundtrack reveals Baby's deep-cut musical tastes, which span genres and decades. As Baby's playlist provides the musical content of the film, it is this character's perceived cultural capital that is performed throughout the film's soundtrack, as the young driver carefully selects a song for each heist and chase scene. The audience is guided by Baby's aural subjectivity throughout the film where his music serves as an auditory center much as his body offers a visual one. This performance of subjective capital becomes complicated when one takes into account that black soul and funk make up the bulk of the music used in the film, and thus provide a stark contrast to Baby's whiteness. By investigating Wright's use of diegetic popular music through the theoretical work of Claudia Gorbman and Hilary Lapedis, the impact of the film's innovative scoring practices will be examined, along with the film's use of black cultural production as a means of generating or re-defining what counts as white cultural capital.

The film is unique in the primacy it accords to the aural over the visual. In the opening scene, set to “Bellbottoms” by Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, Baby, in the second shot of the film, is seen in the driver’s seat of a red sports car, cuing up the song on his iPod classic (0:01:08). From this point forward, the scene remains almost completely synchronized to the rhythms of the song. The rest of the gang of thieves exit and close their doors in time to guitar stabs and stride confidently into a bank in step with the beat. Once he is alone in the car, Baby begins to sing along and dance in his seat. After the camera swoops around the exterior of the car with the windshield wipers sliding in time, Baby glances into the bank after hearing gunshots, once more in sync with his music. The gang returns to the car and a propulsive chase scene follows, with impressive on-set stunt driving seemingly subsumed to the musical track. The scene ends immediately as the song comes to a halt.

Pushing to an extreme the common practice whereby song sequences are cut to the music’s rhythm, this aurally motivated visual style is maintained throughout the entire film as each action sequence is timed, synced and edited to the exact length of the song utilized. In fact, according to a special feature from the Blu-Ray copy: “Wright was determined not to cut action from the scene, nor break his plan of one song per action scene [...] Wright also had one of his longtime editors, Paul Machliss, on set to make sure the action still perfectly matched the music” (O’Falt, n.p.). The production of the film depended equally on the visual intricacies of stunt filming as it did on the use of soundtracking to dictate and clarify the stunts, as particular attention was paid throughout production to the ways in which the aural soundtrack dominates the visual elements of the film. Even in the less intense scenes, the narrative is defined by the

musical knowledge that Baby and Debora (Lily James) share. In their introductory scene, the two protagonists discuss songs that feature their respective names and continue to bond over their shared appreciation of deep collections of music. When Baby is at his apartment, his tremendous collection of records, iPods and cassette tapes overwhelms the viewer with the impression of his musical taste and mastery. Moreover, his relationship with his foster father Joseph (Deaf actor C.J. Jones) is based on a shared appreciation of soul music, albeit in a fundamentally unequal way, due to Joseph's Deafness and physical immobility.

The Performance of Curation

Baby Driver's carefully curated soundtrack functions as a performance of both the film's own cultural capital as well as the cultural credibility of the film's protagonist. The music is able to orient viewers of the film through a curatorial aesthetic that matches the hodge-podge sensibility on display in the crates of records and shelves full of iPods that fill Baby's home.

Claudia Gorbman states in her 1987 book *Unheard Melodies* that it is precisely its position outside of the diegesis of the film that gives underscored film music its unique power. Gorbman is explicitly referring to traditional orchestral underscoring and its curious music – “robbed of its properly musical structure, it modulates and changes color, chameleonlike, in moment-to-moment deference to the narrative's images” (1). She states that “Background music should be less visible than other registers of the cinematic signifier since it is not as directly a part of the fictional world. [...] Music greases the wheels of the cinematic pleasure machine by easing the spectator's passage into

subjectivity” (69). Popular musical choices can also be considered functional in the way that they provide a connective bridge between the diegetic world of the film and familiar music that the audience recognizes, transcending the bounds of the story world to appeal directly to the viewers. This extradiegetic meaning is produced by the music as a way to simultaneously bring viewers into the story world and remind them of its construction. As Lauren Anderson writes: “the original context of any song comprises a part of the meaning that is frequently associated with that song; when the song is used in a new context (such as a film) meanings from the original context will be applied to the new situation” (Anderson, 104). This extension of the music’s meaning across changes in context often allows other aspects of the music’s signification to be left aside. For example, a hard rock song used in an action movie may suggest anger and danger but leave out potential meanings suggested by the song’s lyrical content. Acting as a liminal zone that signifies differently both within and outside of the filmic world, providing different atmospheres, moods, and emotions, songs can challenge the audience’s perception of the aural point of audition.

Baby’s curatorial instinct is a clear example of a very specific model of cultural capital that relies on the accumulation and careful selection of particular cultural products. It is this familiar communal performance of cultural capital that is embodied in Baby, but also more broadly in the diegesis of the film itself, as an expression of the taste of its director and music supervisor. This performance of taste necessarily complicates the viewer’s relation to the film given how the viewer becomes engaged with the story world through Baby’s headphones as well as the performance of cultural capital taking place within the film’s sound studio. The point of audition then becomes the point at

which the audience, as Gorbman puts it, is “eased into subjectivity.” The music’s familiar associations are performed in the film diegetically through Baby’s iPod, yet the entire filmic world ends up becoming synced to the rhythms of his music. The viewer is meant to be impressed by the selection of music to the point that the role of the director and music director in shaping the film’s style becomes conspicuous, based on the vast variety of music and “deep cuts.” Here the background soundtrack literally places the audience in the aurally subjective position of Baby, even as his music seems to magically reorder the world around him.

Gorbman’s analysis of music in film is expanded upon by Hilary Lapedis, who focuses specifically on the relatively recent rise in the use of popular songs on film soundtracks. Lapedis argues in her 1999 article “Popping the Question” that the use of popular music in soundtracks has fundamentally changed the narrative organization of films, as when the incorporation of songs involves the use of visual montage. She also takes great care to examine the ways that the use of popular music frequently frustrates the dichotomy of diegetic and non-diegetic music. This collapse of the diegetic/non-diegetic divide is clear in *Baby Driver*, where the diegetic point of audition is often muddied or even ignored as the action of the scene continues. An example is the extended chase scene following the burglary gone awry, which features the song “Focus” by Dutch prog-rock band Hocus Pocus (1:22:20). The scene offers no diegetic point of audition. The music begins seemingly of its own accord when the tension begins to ramp up. It is only Baby’s earphones and the moment at the end of the scene when Buddy (Jon Hamm) shoots Baby’s iPod (and the music stops abruptly) that we are reminded of the supposed point of audition within the scene, even as the entire scene plays out in step with the

song, Buddy's gunshots towards the pursuing cops, along with Baby's leaps across tables, all sync up with guitar stabs and drums. When there is an extended drum break in the song, we follow a fumbling Baby through the park before he hides behind a tree in perfect timing with a yodelling bridge in the song as Baby searches his surroundings to find an appropriate exit. As the drums and guitar kick back in Baby begins sprinting through a nearby shopping mall. The beats of the song continue to line up with diegetic music from the clothing shop and electronic store. Finally, Baby bursts into the parking lot where he smashes a car window, steals the car, and then backs into Buddy and Darling (Eliza González). What follows is a bloody gunfight between the two criminals and the police as Baby scrambles to get away. The entire scene plays like a music video, with synchronized action and movement choreographed precisely. This primacy of the aural allows for easy connections to be drawn between the film and music videos, where full songs are likewise allowed to play out. *Baby Driver* thus exemplifies Hilary Lapedis proposal that

[...] pop music in its three-minute form has affected the narrative structure of mainstream cinema, and [...]the emergence of the pop video in all its manifestations has changed both the way that music works with the image and the way in which audiences read visual/musical texts. (367)

This dependence on track lengths to determine action and scene beats is clear in *Baby Driver*, although some songs are considerably longer than the three-minute duration proposed by Lapedis. The dependence on songs to dictate scene length directly ties audience engagement with specific songs to particular moments within the film to the point that these scenes play out as music videos of their own, albeit within a broader

narrative. In fact, this rule is so firmly implemented that in one scene where the song seems to be too short, Baby breaks from the action to rewind the song on his iPod, thus making the action conform both to his aural experience and to the audience's musical frame of reference.

Baby Driver's use of music is ground-breaking in its ambiguous approach to the music's diegetic points of audition, as well as the ways in which the entire movie is narratively constructed around music-based action set-pieces, not unlike a traditional film musical. The viewer is at once confronted with the primacy of Baby's musical choices, and yet unclear about the ways in which those choices diegetically affect the world around him. However, the prominence of the film's use of popular songs also brings into focus the ways in which popular songs can subsume the meaning of the music to the meaning of the film's visuals. While the visual action depends on the music to give it shape and focus, the music serves primarily as a machine to drive the narrative forward. Stripped of their cultural positionality as works of art created from a specific lived experience – albeit through the machinations of the modern music industry – the songs become artifacts for the director to employ as signifiers of cultural capital, or even more emptily as tracks that provide the scene with enough energy and coolness for the viewer to remain interested. This simplification of signification is particularly troubling when it touches on issues of racial difference.

Soul Music and it's White Articulations

The musical artists featured on the soundtrack for *Baby Driver* are made up of about one-third black performers, most of whom perform Motown, soul, and funk music

from the 1960s through the 1980s. The white performers featured on the soundtrack cover significantly more variation in genre, ranging from European glam rock to punk to Californian surf-rock. Richard Dyer writes in his foundational study of white subjectivity that “The invisibility of these assets [of whiteness] is part and parcel of the sense that whiteness is nothing in particular, that white culture and identity have, as it were, no content” (9). In this regard, Dyer cites Cathy Thomas in Ruth Frankenberg’s study of American identity: “To be a Heinz 57 American, a white, class-confused American, land of the Kleenex type American, is so formless in and of itself” (9). What Dyer identifies here is a particular type of whiteness that is unique to the American contemporary experience. What stands out about the use of music in *Baby Driver* is that a majority of the film’s romance scenes are soundtracked by funk and soul music almost exclusively, just as black subjectivities are continually shunted to the peripheries of the film, even though the film’s story is set in Atlanta, an American city that has long represented racial divides and conflicts - such as in the second season of *Mindhunter* (Penhall, 2019), *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016), *Driving Miss Daisy* (Beresford, 1989) and *Gone With the Wind* (Fleming, 1939). Whiteness in the film is allowed to pass as neutral and unremarkable, removed from the critical practices of listening to racialized music with its history identified. Most of the white music in the film is either decades old American or European music. As if to distinguish itself from the dreck of American consumerism, one of the contemporary American selections, Beck’s “Debra,” seems intended specifically to disparage American commercial culture (0:43:22). Simultaneously raising the cultural capital of the use of white music in the film while making black music appear more authentic.

In her 2016 book *The Sonic Color Line* musicologist Jennifer Lynn Stoeber insists upon the relationship between black aural production and perceptions of black representation. Her term “the sonic color line” refers to the “hierarchical division sounded between ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness,’” which results, Stoeber argues, from the ways in which “certain bodies are expected to produce, desire, and live amongst particular sounds” (7). The representation of race through sound is then interpreted and integrated by “the listening ear,” a hegemonic practice that contains and demarcates the way in which a listener hears. The use of the theoretical devices of the sonic color line and the listening ear are useful in considerations of film music, where the performer is often visually absent, and the listening ear is the only way to identify the specifics of sometimes complicated racial presentations. The sonic color line also helps to identify the ways in which certain uses and reuses of black cultural production are deemed either appropriate or excessive. In *Baby Driver*, it is easy to see how “the sonic color line produces codes, and polices racial difference through the ear, enabling us to hear race as well as see it. It is a socially constructed boundary that racially codes sonic phenomena” (12).

Race is heard everywhere in the film; the opening credits follow Baby as he undertakes a quick coffee run that once more is filled with visual and aural gags, such as the lyric graffiti and synced-up sound effects. The song in this scene is “The Harlem Shuffle” by black musicians Bob and Earl, and perhaps it is no coincidence that the first song in *Baby Driver* that attempts to depict Atlanta as a racialized city features a song written and performed by black artists (0:06:31). Even more notable is the way in which the song prioritizes the ease with which Baby is able to travel through the space of the

film's story world, downtown Atlanta, where the community around him syncs up to a song that he has selected. Baby's reverie lasts up until the moment when the frustrated black barista at the coffee shop disrupts the synchronization. The film's handling of this moment is telling. Baby strolls into the coffee shop to the rolling chorus of "yeah, yeah, yeah, do the Harlem shuffle," but is cut off by the frustrated barista repeating "Next customer? Next customer!" As Baby removes one of his earbuds the diegetic music fades slightly. Baby places his order and offers his name, before the barista makes a smirk and exits the frame. In short, it is the black character who is shown to be not in time with the music that the rest of the community shares.

In the film, the whiteness of Baby and his entire racial performance is perhaps most effectively summed up through the retro Simon and Garfunkel ending song selection of the film, "Baby Driver" (01:48:24). This scene, complete with a 1950s Edsel Pacer and black and white visuals reminiscent of earlier segregation-era displays of cultural capital, makes explicit the type of privilege that Baby is expected to receive through his neutral white performance. This brings to mind such examples as the melodramatic simplicity of *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955), wherein Ron (Rock Hudson) is able to win Cary's (Jane Wyman) affections by merely seeming authentic, without any challenge to the communal or broader political stakes. Skvirsky, in her analysis of *All that Heaven Allows*, writes that "the critique is moralistic and not political in that it targets wayward individuals and not dysfunctional systems" (119) meaning that the film continues to prioritize Ron's individual notions of labour. The concluding scene of *Baby Driver* reinforces Baby's neutral whiteness and distances itself from earlier depictions of his fragmentary and constructed black performance, a strategy

that is only successful because black soul and funk music have provided much of Baby's perceived cultural capital. The film utilizes this turn towards nostalgic melodrama in both the black and white visuals, the white popular music, and the 1950s model car to highlight Baby's individuality and the ways he has successfully extricated himself from all manner of institutions and government systems, be they the courts, the prison system, or even the systems in place for caring for the disabled. Baby ends the film as a completely free and morally upstanding man, magically unharmed by the police who surround him.

The black music used is decontextualized to the point that the black characters around Baby are often characterized by their disconnectedness from the very soul music that Baby loves. The barista in the opening coffee run is the one character who actively interrupts the rhythm that the rest of the scene reinforces. Baby's foster father Joseph, a black, Deaf and disabled man, cannot share Baby's love of soul music or driving to the same extent, but seemingly gives tacit approval in scenes such as the one where a triumphant Baby loudly plays Carla Thomas' "B-A-B-Y" while dancing in their shared apartment (0:20:00)

While it is true that the Deaf community continues to foster a deep and expanding connection to music and performance, as the career of Deaf dancer Shaheem Sanchez suggests, Joseph's appreciation of music is apparent only in scenes where Baby makes the music available (Biedelman, Maggie, n.p.). Joseph is able to ask questions about Baby's mood through American Sign Language and waits as Baby moves Joseph's wheelchair to hold a hand over the speaker to feel the vibrations. Joseph's depicted disability is much more debilitating than Baby's tinnitus, and due to the continued neglect

of the disabled in America, he is portrayed as incapable of celebrating music to the same fullness evident in Baby's singing and dancing, incapable of committing the crimes necessary to lift the small family out of poverty, and unable to move freely through the highways and back lanes of the film's hyper-kinetic Atlanta.

In many ways Joseph exists as an alibi for Baby's cultural capital. While Baby's tinnitus is also a disability, the interlocking oppressions that Joseph faces as an elderly, black, and disabled man renders is contrasted with Baby's relative ability to "pass" as completely able-bodied, without any of the barriers that Joseph constantly faces within both society at large and in the crime ring (he is able to be understood by those not fluent in American Sign Language, and has fewer perceived barriers on his ability to move through the city space) and be understood by others. Baby and Joseph have profoundly different embodied realities and as such Joseph is unable to take credit for Baby's cultural and economic status, yet lives with him in the same apartment, a circumstance that seems intended to unsettle claims of racial appropriation. Perhaps as a younger man Joseph loved soul music and made sure to pass that down to Baby, or perhaps he was a part of a larger black community that involved Joseph in the local music scene through sign language interpretation. In any case, these "perhapses" are never given any screen time, and so the alibi remains a mystery and Baby can take credit for his own cultural capital, notwithstanding Joseph's presence as Baby's black foster father.

As a disabled man, Joseph's existence seems quite pitiable, as Joseph does not have the accessibility supports to leave the apartment on his own in the wheelchair and is entirely dependent on Baby for survival. As Goffman writes the able-bodied "expect the crippled to be crippled; to be disabled and helpless: to be inferior to themselves, and they

will become suspicious and insecure if the cripple falls short of these expectations” (qtd. In Siebers, 109). In a telling scene, as Baby attempts to flee the city, he carries Joseph to the entranceway of a care home and leaves him sitting in a rocking chair with a voice note and a heap of money, as though only in the most desperate of circumstances does Joseph actually deserve to be cared for, but this care is in fact a repetition of his disability, as institutionalization often serves to continue to confine and socialize disabled people as a problematic minority. Sieberman writes that “many people with disabilities are involuntarily confined to institutions, with no hope of escape, and the enormity of their oppression becomes palpable” (223). A further implication is that Joseph, much like an unwanted child abandoned at a fire station, is fundamentally a burden to Baby, whose present criminal dealings leave him seemingly incapable of caring for his foster father and depict the institution as a positive outcome for both Joseph and Baby. This is of course despite the implied care that Joseph has taken of Baby in his younger years. In short, the depiction of Joseph’s Deafness and physical disability suggests that Baby’s understanding of black music is not something that was passed down to him through Joseph, but rather a unique character trait that demarcates him as a hip and knowledgeable protagonist.

The film assumes that Joseph is incapable of participating in cultural production or deep appreciation and as such normalizes the problematic notion that to be disabled or Deaf is to be divorced from cultural practices. Haki R. Madhubuti, in his chapter “Are Black Musicians Serious?” explains this type of cooptation by writing that “Afrikans in America do not control their own musical art forms; we are not considered authorities on our own creation” (325).

Figure 3: Joseph; abandoned and helpless at the care home.



Finally, Bats (Jamie Foxx), a member of the crime ring who is notable primarily for his unstable and violent nature, is openly opposed to Baby's use of music during heists. Once again Baby is shown to be more engaged with black music than is an African American character. Indeed, setting the film in Atlanta, a predominantly black city, underscores Baby's ability to understand and become adept at blackness, as he maneuvers through the streets to the beat of the music. Baby's cultural capital always comes at the expense of black subjects and their lived experiences, Atlanta plays host to the Baby's white performance.

Performative Whiteness/Blackness

The film features a running gag, wherein Baby and Debora go through all the songs that they can recall that feature either of their names. It is perhaps no surprise that Beck's humorous soul song "Debra" should feature, in which the artist makes use of the genre of black soul music in the register of a romance song to reflect on the banalities of white middle-class LA. The absurdity, of course, comes through the contrast between the tone of the song and its lyrics. In Stoeber's book, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the*

Cultural Politics of Listening she recalls moments of interaction with strangers in coffee shops, who perform their impression of a black voice when informed of the book title. She writes that her interest is in “how [they] learned that voice – how [they] came to believe it was black, why [they] think it sounds so funny and weird and sexual, and how [they] feel they own it” (8). This kind of ownership is on clear display in Beck’s song, winking at his audience as he attempts to skewer the emptiness of white suburban culture with opening lines “I met you at JC Penney/ I think your name tag said "Jenny"/ I could step to you with a fresh pack of gum” as well as the romance genre he is borrowing from. The song explicitly parodies both the high camp of soul music as well as the banality of what Beck perceives as white culture. The solution for Beck is to ironically channel the “black sound” of soul music through the neutrality of whiteness to produce a critique of white suburban culture.

While less absurd and obvious than Beck’s song, *Baby Driver* also attempts to trade on the naturalness and neutrality of its white protagonists via the cultural history and energy of black music. The song is contrasted with examples of the exact type of black soul music that this song clearly parodies, tracks by The Commodores and The Detroit Emeralds, both of which feature similar instrumentation and romantic tone as the Beck song (at 0:34:00 and 0:43:51). This closeness to Beck’s example neuters any potential critique of black appropriation that the song may have had within the film, as it becomes just another example of white neutrality. If this scene had only included black artists, perhaps the appropriation of soul music would become clearer to the audience. However, the ironic subversion of the soul genre in “Debra” seems to indicate that for the filmmakers, and by extension the characters, soul music is undefined by racial markers.

Sharon Willis's book *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film* seeks to highlight the ways in which differences of identity are exaggerated as a point of conflict and anxiety in popular films. She writes that:

Representations that focus on the social boundaries of race, class, culture, and sexuality often exhibit ambivalent mixes of desire and violence that respond to collective anxieties about shifting borders. At the same time, they mobilize fantasmatic pleasure and aggression within structures that themselves displace differences. (2)

In *Baby Driver*, this multifaceted approach to race is clear, as the film obviously adores black musical production through its extended use on the soundtrack yet denies that music's cultural capital to the black characters within the film. Black characters in the film are set apart from their own cultural practices, either through dissociation or disability. The violence mentioned by Willis is obvious in the character of Bats, who is cartoonishly destructive and largely disinterested in the music that the film valorizes through its song-based editing and narrative. Blackness in the film, however desirable it may be, surfaces within a shifting and anxious interplay between cultural wealth, on the one hand, and threat and danger on the other. Willis continues by noting that black men have a "generalized iconicity [deriving from] a white male fantasy of black masculinity, where racial difference is reduced to a cultural icon for the dominant culture" (210). This iconicity is easily subsumed into the soundtrack of the film, as occurs in the extended opening scene, where Baby dances and shimmies in time with the music, or when the music's diegetic belonging simply links Baby to an icon of black masculinity, as can be seen when Baby hijacks a car from the two white men who are struggling to perform a

black hip-hop identity, and in so doing, allows Baby's appropriation of the genre to come off as authentic. Throughout the film, Baby parlays the simplified and decontextualized black identities associated with the music into a position of cultural power and white coolness.

For Willis, popular cinema is an important site for considering the effects of identity politics because of its role as an important hegemonic tool, but also because of its obligation of profitability. Popular cinema remains fundamentally rooted in its economic and financial viability, and so, in acknowledging the profitability of using black music, it becomes clear that cooptation is a financial decision for studios as well. Willis works to identify the ways in which white cultural products are invested in black cultural identity:

Contemporary representations of 'race' emerge in a culture marked by the difficulty that 'whiteness' has had in seeing itself as racialized. Since this culture is thoroughly racialized, this means that whiteness has a had a hard time seeing itself at all. Where it can juxtapose itself to 'blackness,' blackness becomes the bearer of racial meanings so that whiteness can emerge as free from meaning (3).

Willis' turn towards blackness as a way to "see" race is applied here to popular directors of contemporary cinema and the ways in which they construct whiteness through its complex relationships to black culture and the types of audiences that such signification collects. The presence of black musical production in these sorts of films is a logical extension of the ways in which popular culture demarcates and delineates these cultural fields through the sonic color line and the listening ear as defined by Stoeber. *Baby Driver* makes extensive use of black funk and soul music because it signifies and embodies something particular to the ways in which race is heard, which makes black

music racially demarcated while white music remains neutral and universal. As Richard Dyer writes, otherness is often deployed to stabilize notions of whiteness in a way that implies:

that white discourse implacably reduces the non-white subject to being a function of the white subject, not allowing her/him space or autonomy, permitting neither the recognition of similarities nor the acceptance of differences except as a means for knowing the white self. (13)

Dyer argues that whiteness is retained as a neutral space through its interaction with other racial performances, thereby erasing the aesthetic quality of its privilege while simultaneously positing the white subject as the appropriate subject to maintain command of other racial performances. He writes that “America can only be redeemed through bypassing the historical reality of the white USA, by returning what can be conceptualized as coming before and without the USA” (160). The perceived blankness and neutrality of whiteness makes it all the more able to adapt and incorporate the culture and traditions of non-white cultures. In *Baby Driver*, the use of soul and Motown music agnostically alongside Queen and Blur create an aural imaginary wherein white supremacy is sidestepped as non-existent and the white use of black forms of expression is considered ethically neutral, but it is easy to see that the context of these scenes sets them apart racially so that white music begins to play with head-bopping sincerity, while black music is always played under an alibi, whether as a romance song or as an item from the collection of Baby’s Deaf foster father.

A particularly strong example of how music can make whiteness seem neutral and appropriate comes late in the film when a desperate Baby and Debora, attempting to flee

the city, carjack two young white men who pull up in a bright red Dodge Challenger. In this scene, white neutrality and blackness play against each other. The two men in the car are made to look ridiculous by their attempts to perform black hip-hop culture while listening to the rap song “Know How” by Young MC (1:35:06). The song plays as ridiculous in its association with these two white subjects, who perform a bad imitation of a black cultural performance. Replete with an African American vernacular, grills on their teeth, and vapes, they are the antithesis of Baby’s strait-laced cool when they challenge Baby based on his decidedly un-“gangster” aesthetic. They first describe Baby and Debora as “More like Bonnie and Bonnie, yo.” (as opposed to Bonnie and Clyde, a slight based on Baby’s gender performance), and then ask, “Have you ever even shot a gun before, homie?” In effect, the film argues that the two young men, through their ineffectual protestations and the clearly racialized hip-hop performance that they attempt, are not appropriate white subjects. Once Baby hijacks their car, he achieves a position of authority over the music, and the mood of the scene changes drastically as the song by Young MC is able to play out sincerely. Baby steps on the accelerator at the first verse of the song, and the dissonance of the scene quickly dissolves with sweeping shots of the Challenger sliding around corners. The aerial shot of the car gracefully passing other vehicles further suggests that this combination of song, car, and driver belong naturally within the city’s environment. Baby’s face is stern yet calm as he aggressively muscles the car through the city until he squeals to a stop in a parking garage. Debora then breathlessly says “not a chauffeur, noted,” as though making explicit the sexual, cultural, and driving capital that Baby has available to him. Baby’s performance of cultural capital seems convincing compared to the racialized performance of the two white poseurs, but it

also expresses his affinity with black music, an affinity encouraged by the film's music-driven editing and cinematography.

Through his association with black music, *Baby* illustrates Norman Mailer's conception of the hipster. In his essay "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," Mailer engages with the existential and humanitarian crises associated with the Second World War, atomic weapons, and a renewed effort to reproduce cultural conformity in America. Responding to these issues, Mailer argues, is the figure of the hipster. Alternately styled as a petty criminal or an untested philosopher king, this figure desires to distance himself (in Mailer, the hipster is always a man) from a culture that is, at least to the hipster, bankrupt. Mailer argues that this retreat from society leads the hipster to the much more attractive and authentic lifestyle of African Americans. Mailer writes that:

Any Negro who wishes to live must live with danger from his first day, and no experience can ever be casual to him, no Negro can saunter down a street with any real certainty that violence will not visit him on his walk [...] The Negro has the simplest of alternatives: live a life of constant humility or ever-threatening danger. (279)

This deeply problematic and essentialist view of African American culture, though recognizing the daily struggle that African Americans experience in a white supremacist culture, goes far beyond invoking African American lived experience to instead primitivize the African American subject by suggesting that the latter knows "in the cells of his existence that life was war" (279). The description of an essentialized and homogenized African American culture is only rivaled by the simplistic psychopathy

that Mailer appropriates for discussing the ways in which the hipster borrows elements from existentialism to feed his “infantile desires” (283). While the essentialist nature of Mailer’s discussion of both race and mental illness is suspect, his essay remains an insightful study of the ways in which normative definitions of whiteness can be seen as inauthentic, conformist and anti-culture. The white hipster’s appropriation of a cultural vocabulary from some other group is seen in Mailer’s text as a symptom of a childish desire for greater control over the terms of the hipster’s own cultural signification.

This desire for renewed cultural signification is present in all manner of white culture. In film, the appropriation of black hip-hop culture, which is fundamentally resistant to white socio-political norms, is a clear example of this trend. This use of essentialized black culture to empower white individuality reduces white interaction with the cultural Other. In this context Baby functions merely as another in a long genealogy of characters whose authenticity in contradistinction to conformist white society is expressed through their command of black cultural production.

The Verge of Authenticity

As an extension of Mailer’s hipster, Baby’s search for authenticity is clearly championed by the film; not only does Baby not fit into conventional white consumer culture, but his criminal activities are directly related to his almost preternatural driving abilities. His cultural capital is tied to older and “simpler” forms of culture, exhibited not only in his crates of vinyl records and his trip to the local record shop, but also in his use of tapes and tape recorders, and the already outdated iPod Classic. The nostalgia embedded in these older technologies and forms of music function primarily to

characterize Baby as a consummate curator who not only collects, but also understands and appreciates his music. When Debora asks how many iPods he has, Baby replies, “I’ve got different iPods for different days and moods.” The similarity to curated playlists on streaming services such as Spotify is striking, as the effort that must go into collecting and managing a massive collection of iPods must be considerable, but it is the fetishization of a nostalgia-inflected obsolete format that is here a definite signifier of authenticity.



Figure 4: Baby and his extensive collection of iPods and outdated instruments.

Krin Gabbard, in his book *Black Magic*, writes extensively about the ways in which Hollywood co-opts black music to reinforce traditional racial hierarchies. His chapter “Revenge of the Nerds” highlights the ways in which white curatorial instincts depend on black musical expression to create identity. He writes that:

[t]hose collectors most devoted to black artists will insist upon the superior musical abilities of African American musicians and repress what is, at base, a very strange relationship with black masculinity. One could argue that the white fan of black music is a race traitor who turns his back on the mainstreams of Euro-American culture. Both whites *and* blacks can then charge the white fan

with any number of transgressions. A short list would include bad taste, snobbery, slumming, colonizing, voyeurism, and even a form of racism. (212)

Baby's masculinity is profoundly influenced by his position within a criminal organization, as well as his proficiency as a driver, as well as by his curatorial instinct and vast collection of recordings in various formats. Baby's interest in white music seems to follow from his love of black music in that in both cases his taste flies in the face of the status quo of the American music industry and most of the music he chooses to play is older, European and, for the audience at least, unexpected.

While Baby is a social outsider, his cultural and racial performance remains deeply neutral. His simple white tee-shirt and assortment of sunglasses clash with the austere black clothes of Buddy and the loud colours and graphics of Bats's attire. Baby's movement is not defined by any approximation of black swagger, and in fact, Elgort was classically trained as a ballet dancer. Gabbard writes that "the favored form of black masculinity for jazz and blues [and soul] collectors can be understated, ironic, instinctual, learned, witty, slightly transgressive, and maybe even a bit pathetic" (218). While Elgort's performance is certainly a far cry from black hip-hop culture, it offers a blank slate upon which black music is able to signify more readily and more effectively than for any of the black characters in the film, or for other white characters with racialized performances.

The film ends with Baby's inevitable arrest, and it is here that Baby benefits most obviously from his racial identity. As he and Debora cruise pastorally through a forest far from the carnage of Atlanta, with a cover of "Easy Like Sunday Morning" (Ritchie) playing, they pull up to a police checkpoint where numerous FBI and state

troopers wait with their guns drawn (1:44:20). In a powder blue Chevrolet Blazer that bears a striking resemblance to the Ford Bronco that OJ Simpson was arrested in, the film allows Baby to choose to turn himself in peacefully. A montage shows witnesses defending Baby's character in a court scene intercut with his monotonous new life in a penitentiary. Despite his twenty-five-year sentence, Baby is determined to show upstanding character, and before long, he strides out of the prison to the optimistic strains of Simon and Garfunkel's titular "Baby Driver," aiming towards Debora, who waits beside a 1958 convertible Edsel Pacer. It is clear from the relative leniency of Baby's prison term—recall his two murders—that Baby does not need to "know [...] in the cells of his existence that life was war" (Mailer, 279). Baby's ability to appropriate black musical expression as a means of performing his own authenticity does not and cannot approximate the black lived experience in the contemporary United States. As Stoeberl writes:

[...] Americans continue to hear, feel, think, and experience race, some leading lives invisibly (and audibly) structured by privilege, while so many othered peoples continue to struggle with exclusions, disadvantages, violence, and the added challenge of perpetually proving the impact of something that no longer officially exists. (5)

It is telling that at the end of the film, Baby's appeal to black cultural expression ends once the quintessential whiteness of Simon and Garfunkel begins, the change in music signaling the privilege that has allowed Baby to navigate the prison system safely.



Figure 5: The white vision of freedom that Baby and Debora envision.

Baby Driver is an excellent example of an updated form of popular cinema that emphasizes the aural experience of the film over the visual while maintaining control over the signification of the film's diegetic music. The music and its placement within the edit may generate energy and interest, yet the film remains staunchly resistant to linking the action to the lived experience behind the songs that it uses. Utilizing an ambiguous and unclear diegetic point of audition allows the film to characterize its protagonist through its soundtrack, while at the same time exercising an uncanny amount of control over the way that these tracks are experienced by the viewer. The use of synchronized movement and sound prioritizes the aesthetic experience of the film's music while reducing the music's signifying function. In fact, the film's main method of integrating music occurs through small visual gags, such as in the gunfight that is set to the drum solo of "Tequila" (Button Down Brass, 1:03:27), that completely circumvent any meaning-making the songs may attempt. This is especially true of the black music, whose generic differences play as specifically racialized instead of neutral in the manner of the music performed by the white, predominantly European, bands on the soundtrack. All of

this racial signification is washed away via the familiar process, employed throughout the entire film, whereby the film's visuals condition the music's meaning and affect.

The use of black music in *Baby Driver* to characterize a white protagonist troubles the music's signification further, reducing black musical production to a touchstone and a prop for white cultural capital and coolness. Here black music is employed against the very black subjects whose lived experiences had closely informed the music's themes. This use of black music to create and sustain the myth of white neutrality and cultural dominance reinscribes the ways in which white supremacy so often excavates black culture to demarcate its own borders and allow white subjects to levy a kind of cultural command that supersedes significations that would seem intrinsic to the music itself. White coolness in *Baby Driver* is epitomized by its ability to appropriate black musical production, while dissociating the music from the black contexts that created it.

Chapter 3:

La La Land, Whiplash, and White Impressions of Jazz

Director Damien Chazelle's first two feature length films, *La La Land* (2016) and *Whiplash* (2014), are both centered on the fetishization of a certain era and genre of jazz music. The use in these films of jazz music as an alibi for the suffering needed to achieve excellence suggests a problematic approach to a genre with roots in the slave trade and the oppression of the plantation. As Samuel A. Floyd writes:

From the African ring, through the ring song of slave culture, the funeral parade practices of early New Orleans jazzmen, and [...] revisiting the bluesmen in the 1920s and the beboppers in the 1940s, to the free jazz of the 1960s [...] African creativity in America was [...] found on the verges – and I might add, also at the crossroads – of African and American musical cultures. (268)

La La Land ostensibly focuses on the precarity and optimism of artists living and working in Los Angeles. The story revolves around Sebastian's (Ryan Gosling) attempts to open his own jazz club, while his love interest, Mia (Emma Stone), tries to break into the film industry while working at a coffee shop on the Warner Bros. studio lot. Sebastian is a jazz pianist whose most prized possession is a stool that white jazz songwriter Hoagy Carmichael had allegedly once sat on.

In a similar bout of nostalgia, the protagonist of *Whiplash*, young jazz drummer Andrew (Miles Teller), idolizes white jazz bandleader, television personality and drummer Buddy Rich while attending the fictional Shaffer Conservatory in New York City. When Andrew is finally accepted into the prestigious Studio Band, he is

confronted with the abusive band leader Terence Fletcher (J. K. Simmons). Stuck in a holding pattern of tenuousness as he struggles to maintain his position as the band's core drummer, Andrew becomes more and more reclusive; practicing until his hands bleed, breaking up with his girlfriend and climactically tackling Fletcher during a performance.

The white male protagonists of both of these films identify, consolidate and valorize a distinct and concrete impression of what the limits and borders of jazz music might be. Both musicians idolize a white performer despite the black history of the jazz genre, a circumstance that suggests an attempt to save jazz by keeping it modern. In any case, these performers are in fact ensuring that black jazz music remains fossilized in the past and that white performers control the ways that it moves into the present. Stuart Hall's essay "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture" reminds readers that:

America has always had a series of ethnicities, and consequently, the construction of ethnic hierarchies has always defined its cultural politics. And, of course, silenced and unacknowledged, the fact of American popular culture itself, which has always contained within it, whether silenced or not, black American popular vernacular traditions (375).

While academics and historians are often hesitant to provide a particular definition of what jazz music is, it remains clear that ignoring issues of race and the blackness is an ahistorical and problematic approach to the genre, as Paul Gilroy writes "[T]his fundamental dislocation of black culture is especially important in the recent history of black musics, which, produced out of the racial slavery which made modern western civilization possible, now dominate its popular cultures" (80). This erasure of jazz

history is explicit in early jazz films that suggest vastly different intended audiences depending on the tenor of the musical style and the performer. For example, one can clearly see these differences in a film such as *The King of Jazz* (John Murray Anderson, 1930). Previously noted for its rendition of George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," *The King of Jazz* uses black people primarily as historical props to introduce a "modern," Europeanized variant of jazz music. Alternatively, the 1934 Danish film *København, Kalundborg og - ?* (Brandstrup and Holger-Madsen), another revue style mashup that privileges spectacular performances over narrative cohesion, features a prominent early filmic performance by canonized African American jazz band leader, trumpet player and singer Louis Armstrong in Copenhagen. Armstrong appears calm, affable, and refined as he performs "Dinah" (Akst, Lewis, and Young, 1934) with charismatic charm and a level of lyrical and melodic authorship that made his performance of the song fundamentally different from the written music, exemplifying hybridity as a tenet of jazz music (Gabbard, 189). These two films and their representations of race clearly imply different audiences, as Anderson's film primitivizes and eroticizes its black characters while Brandstrup and Holger-Madsen's film is content to offer a documentary-style performance of a musician at the height of his career, without any cinematographic emphasis on Armstrong's racial performance.

In his book *Jammin' in the Margins*, film and music scholar Krin Gabbard explains how the term jazz eludes any particular concretization:

In writing a book about jazz and film I am excruciatingly aware of the problems raised by the term jazz. Many artists with permanent places in the jazz canon have rejected the term. Duke Ellington, Max Roach, and Anthony Braxton are only

three of the most prominent. [...] Early in the twentieth century it became associated with a specific music produced primarily by blacks in New Orleans. In the 1920s, after “hot” music had caught on with a national audience, the word came to mean nightlife and good times. The casual racism of the twenties simply repressed the African American component of the music. [...] Nevertheless, I am reluctant, on the one hand to jettison the word jazz or, on the other, to redefine it in the more contemporary fashion that centers on canonical geniuses but excludes some black premodernists and many white imitators. (8, 1996)

Considering this fraught relationship between the artform of jazz music, its definition, and the varied lived experiences that continue to inform it, it remains imperative to be sensitive to the ways in which the term is popularly deployed within the film community. For example, in a letter to editor of the New York Times jazz pianist Keith Jarrett criticizes Ken Burns documentary mini-series *Jazz*:

Regarding Ken Burns’ (or is it Wynton Marsalis's?) "Jazz": Now that we've been put through the socioeconomic racial forensics of a jazz-illiterate historian and a self-imposed jazz expert prone to sophomoric generalizations and ultraconservative politically correct (for now) utterances, not to mention a terribly heavy-handed narration (where every detail takes on the importance of major revelation) and weepy-eyed nostalgic reveries, can we have some films about jazz by people who actually know and understand the music itself and are willing to deal comprehensively with the last 40 years of this richest of American treasures? (par. 1)

It is clear that a recent history of film has difficulty in creating a cohesive through line between the historic jazz that Chazelle's films champion, and the lived realities of jazz musicians in the twenty-first century. In both of the Chazelle films that will be discussed in this chapter, the use of jazz is hyper-specific, referring to a particular sub-genre or aesthetic and thus ignoring the variety and breadth of the actual genre. Beyond this, both films utilize their limited conceptualizations of jazz to prop up narratives that offer a platform for white suffering and, eventually, white excellence.

Whiteness in Jazz

After *La La Land's* initial musical scene on the gridlocked highway, the narrative follows Mia having a Bad Day as a struggling actress in Hollywood. As a privileged white woman, her ordeal entails working a dead-end coffee shop job that she considers beneath her, being overlooked at an audition and going to a glitzy although (in her mind) morally bankrupt Hollywood party. After her car is towed, she must walk her way down from the hills back into Studio City. As she walks past a fading mural, she begins to hear soft jazz music playing from behind a back door. Transfixed, she opens the door, and in a way that demonstrates how racial subjectivity and music are intentionally blurred throughout the film, she walks into the restaurant Lipton's. The neo-bop jazz music provides emotional relief and serenity (0:17). The camera stays fixed on Mia, slowly panning towards her as the lighting of the scene fades, leaving only her, lit up in the soft glow of a spotlight. The changes in lighting and cinematography highlight her response to the music, which pointedly offers relief from her Bad Day. The piano player, the object of her emotional response remains unseen

throughout the scene. Represented only through the soft jazz music, the musical expression accentuates the sense of calm that Mia feels whilst simultaneously leaving the identity of the musician unclear. The audience thus has ample time to guess the identity of the pianist, who is revealed to be the white Sebastian.

This scene demonstrates the way in which blackness is not only seen but also heard. Stoeber, in her book *The Sonic Color Line*, writes about the reception of black opera singer Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield in the 1850s and the ways in which her race caused some people in the audience to refuse to watch her perform. She cites Steven Connor's claim that "[s]ound, especially sourceless, autonomous, or excessive sound will be experienced as a lack or an excess; both as a mystery to be explained an intensity to be contained" (114). Stoeber continues by stating that:

Many of Greenfield's white reviewers advocated a kind of "blind" listening to complement the initial surprise at hearing Greenfield's voice – particularly as impressive or beautiful – claiming she was best heard while looking away or closing one's eyes. [...] In Greenfield's receptions, "blind" listening became a race ritual [...] implying that her visible blackness would skew even the most musical ear's assessment and that closing one's eyes would enable white listeners to judge Greenfield's voice more objectively, for better or for worse. (115)

The scene of a transfixed Mia staring upon an unseen music player seems quite the opposite of the objectives of Greenfield's "blind" listeners (115). Mia maintains a clear and uninterrupted line of sight with the subject of her gaze, but the camera denies that same visual opportunity to the film's viewer. The scene suggests that revealing Sebastian would diminish the emotional impact of the jazz music, as well as

Sebastian's depicted mastery of it. Just as Greenfield's embodiment provided dissonance for her operatic audience, the "blind listening" of the jazz song at the restaurant offers a sense of mystery. This mystery allows Mia's visually represented expression of wonder to direct the audience's attention to the music. That is, until the scene is slowly subsumed by the sound of a car horn, which recalls for the viewer the earlier scene of the traffic jam, this time from Sebastian's particular perspective, still seated in his convertible. In the earlier version of the same scene the camera merely floats past Sebastian's car; this time, however, the viewer remains in the car as Sebastian honks at Mia and zooms around her.

The presentation of the same events of the day through Sebastian's point of view allows the audience to see the ways in which jazz music is used to establish Sebastian as a struggling musician. As he pauses outside an old jazz club that has since been turned into a "tapas samba place" (a term he spits out contemptuously), his nostalgic subjectivity is made explicit. While returning home, he is startled to see his sister Laura (Rosemary DeWitt) in his apartment, after executing a dance-like jump (moving with the beguiling immediacy evident in early film musicals) he begins to converse with her, insisting that she cannot sit on his prized possession—recall, the stool once sat upon by Hoagy Carmichael. After his sister gestures around the apartment full of unopened boxes and asks when he will unpack, he insists that only once he owns his own jazz club will he unpack his nostalgia-laden detritus, a move that only further cements Sebastian's status as an "authentic" jazz musician.

Sebastian's sister ends the scene by insisting that his unpaid bills are not romantic. He replies "You're acting like life's got me on the ropes. I want to be on the

ropes, okay? I'm just... I'm letting life hit me 'til it gets tired [...] Then I'm gonna hit it back. It's a classic rope-a-dope." His sister retorts by comparing him sarcastically to Muhammad Ali. The substitution of a musical for a sport reference here suggests just another way in which black men's racialized performances are exoticized. Black men in sports are often primitivized and exoticized, particularly in combat sports such as boxing. In the same way that Mia was calmed by the invocation of jazz at Lipton's, the act of struggling against life's constraints is compared to black experience. Invoking the specter of Mailer's "White Negro," Sebastian knows—just as had Mailer's black man—deep in the "cells of his existence that life was war" (279).

More broadly, Sebastian's musical style speaks to the ways in which black men's racialized performances are exoticized. His "neo-bop" musical style is reverent of the be-bop of the 1940s (Chambers, par. 3). Black be-boppers were told their music sounded crazy, and so, "bebop musicians and their fans embraced the word: 'Crazy, man' became a term of praise. For the large movie audience, it made perfect sense that many of the boppers [...] were hard drinkers and drug addicts" (Gabbard, 192, 2016). The racialized performance allows Sebastian's high energy, snap judgements and independence to be painted in a broad brush. An instructive basis for comparison can be found in Krin Gabbard's interrogation of Marlon Brando's early acting career and the ways in which he excavates blackness to create "authentic" roles. Brando's affinity for black culture inflected much of his performance in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Kazan, 1951), Gabbard proposes:

White Americans, especially when they are from the working class, base their expressions of joy, anger, and sexual desire on what they perceive to be the

behavior of black Americans. [...] By the late 1940s, when Brando was coming of age as an actor the African American traditions had become, in (Miles Davis biographer) Szwed's phrase "so absorbed" that Brando could partake of a variety of models when he performed his gender. (44, 2004)

It is easy to understand Sebastian's performance of a white jazz pianist as similarly inflected by an appropriated black subjectivity. Sebastian's life of relative privilege and ease, whatever his current financial precarity, is typical of how white suffering is valorized and normalized in contemporary films. Sebastian is not actually living below the poverty line in abject financial degradation. His sister's presence, along with her unappreciated gift of a throw rug, reassures the viewer that perhaps life does not have Sebastian on the ropes and that he is, in fact, investing in his own future, choosing a path of apparent suffering to enhance his evolving relationship with the music.

Once his sister leaves, Sebastian once again gets to work practicing his craft. He cues up a record of Monk's "Japanese Folk Song," while practicing at an upright piano beside a record player. He once more works his way methodically through the same phrase of music over and over again to match the rhythms of Monk's playing. This scene cuts to the next by way of a seamless sound bridge from Sebastian's tinny recording to a lush recording of the same song as he heads to work at Lipton's, where he works as a musician for the diners. After a brief and terse exchange with the restaurant's manager, Bill (J.K. Simmons), Sebastian agrees to play the set list that has been prescribed, with "none of that free jazz stuff." After artlessly playing a number of Christmas time staples such as "Deck the Halls" and "We Wish You a Merry Christmas," he breaks his promise to the manager and begins to play the song that the

film simply credits as “Mia and Sebastian’s Theme” by soundtrack composer Justin Hurwitz, a close friend and working partner with director Chazelle (0:23:12).

The Theme’s understated and flowing melody is identical to the one that clearly mesmerized Mia, prompting the viewer to understand that the two protagonists were in the same place at the same time. Only this time, it is the performer who is the scene’s focus. The stylistic reversal of Mia’s earlier encounter with the song, this scene repurposes the same fading background lighting and crisp spotlight, directing them now toward Sebastian. As the camera slowly dollies towards Sebastian, his playing becomes increasingly abstract. The viewer’s recollection of Mia’s earlier encounter with the music intensifies until suddenly Sebastian stops playing. The viewer’s new knowledge of Sebastian’s jazz bona fides nullifies the need for a “blind listener,” and in fact, puts in question whether such a listener is necessary. Sebastian confidently embodies the role of the over-zealous jazz pianist, to the point that he is fired for playing “that free jazz stuff.” Sebastian’s “mystery to be explained [and] an excess to be contained” (Connor) is resolved once Sebastian shows that he loves jazz enough to sacrifice his job.



Figure 6: Sebastian and Mia meeting through the transcendence of jazz.

A similar admiration for jazz informs Chazelle's previous film, *Whiplash*, whose music-school story requires no racialized mystery or "blind listeners." Here the film's competitive academic setting links the life of a jazz musician to explicit suffering. The authoritarian white band leader Fletcher is often abusive towards band members. As Fletcher's insistence on his personal vision becomes calcified in every performance of the entire ensemble, any deviation from his demands is met with verbal

and sometimes physical abuse. This abuse is epitomized when Fletcher accosts the fourth chair trombonist (C.J. Vana). Repeatedly asking if he knew he was out of tune, Fletcher berates the trombonist: “Do you think you were out of tune? What are you - there’s no fucking Mars bar down there, look up here, look at me. Do you think you were out of tune?” After the student reluctantly accedes that he was, in fact, out of tune, Fletcher screams “Then why the fuck didn’t you say so?” continuing “I’ve carried your fat ass for too long Metz. I’m not going to have you cost us a competition because your mind’s on a fucking Happy Meal instead of on pitch”. Later the abuse becomes physical, as Fletcher throws a chair at the drummer Andrew’s head and slaps his face in an effort to teach him tempo, asking repeatedly “Was I rushing or dragging?”



Figure 7: Fletcher slapping Andrew in the face to teach tempo.

This portrayal of jazz through Fletcher’s rigid outlook is unchallenged for the duration of the film. The institutional setting, fierce competition, and focus on “career making” competitions, such as the performance at Carnegie Hall, all work to guide the audience towards an understanding of what jazz performance should look and sound like. In his scathing review for the *New Yorker*, Richard Brody described the jazz in the film as a “grotesque and ludicrous caricature” (13 Oct. 2014). In Brody’s opinion,

jazz is not the fixed point of historicized cultural identification that Fletcher lays out. This is not to say that jazz music has ever been a stable site of signification. Gabbard describes the schisms that quickly formed around black jazz music, first between Dixieland jazz and swing and later “a new war flared up between traditionalists and modernists, this time around a set of young, African American musicians known as beboppers – Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell [...]”. The tensions between these stylistic and aesthetic choices are virtually erased from both of Chazelle’s films.

In *Whiplash*, Andrew idolizes Buddy Rich (so much so that it seems to make up the entirety of his jazz collection), a technically masterful jazz drummer who is nonetheless described by Brody as “A loud and insensitive technical whiz, a TV personality, not a major jazz inspiration” (par. 2). Krin Gabbard continues this criticism of Rich’s jazz persona in his discussion of the film by asking:

[W]ho would want to risk physical and mental well-being in order to play like Buddy Rich? To be fair, Rich was capable of playing with a certain level of sensitivity, but mostly he was an egomaniacal show-off. And when *Whiplash* climaxes with Andrew performing Rich’s tired old trick of tapping two sticks on a snare drum gradually slower and then gradually faster, one wonders what the filmmakers think the art of jazz is all about. (199)

These criticisms of the film’s chosen jazz archetype stress the ways in which the commercialization of jazz for white consumers emphasizes technical skill more than the earlier tenets of learning jazz music through practice, performance, and the study of recordings (Brody, par. 8). In a YouTube film review, Josh Bailey, a teacher at NYU

Steinhardt, lists off many modern and genre bending drummers that contemporary jazz students look up to, such as Nate Smith, Ari Hoenig, and Mark Guiliana (Neely). While modern jazz continues to produce incredible and talented drummers, the film is content to cite only two, Buddy Rich and Jo Jones. The performance of jazz drumming in *Whiplash* is closer to the precise combat of a boxing film or war film than to modern jazz's defiance of conventions. Chazelle's status as an auteur filmmaker is suggested in the portrayal of jazz in *Whiplash*, which is lopsided towards the director's personal past, offering a nostalgic homage to Chazelle's time in a high school jazz ensemble (Chazelle, 2017).

In a training montage, similar to those in sports movies, Andrew practices in isolation, working hard to perfect the only thing that has been demanded of him by his band leader; a double-time swing at perfect tempo. The sequence opens with a dejected Andrew ignoring calls from his father, gazing blankly at his stack of Buddy Rich albums, and moving all of his living essentials, even his mattress, into his practice room. This practice of literal self-isolation in the name of perfecting the performance of a specific piece of music leads to a frenetic series of shots alternating between Andrew's face and particular details of the drum set, such as the ride cymbal or snare drum. The scene turns on Andrew's looks of frustration and dedication. Close-up shots on callouses and blisters opening and breaking on his hands, and an ever-dwindling supply of band-aids, all underscore the personal, physical, and emotional toll of Andrew's aspirations. The scene ends with a dramatic slow motion shot of the band-aids flying off of his hand and a spray of blood staining the skin of his snare drum.



Figure 8: Andrew's bloody hands after a gruelling training session.

Juilliard jazz professor Mark Sherman argues in an interview for the internet publication *Vulture* that “People don’t draw blood like that, playing music. It just doesn’t happen, and if you do, you’re holding the sticks wrong. You’re screwed up technically if you’re drawing blood” (Fitz-Gerald, par. 2). He continues to criticize this particular practice sequence by arguing that “[s]ome of the things the drummer was practicing were not really things you’d want to practice. When Andrew was drawing blood, for example, he was playing the single strokes so fast and for so long.” (par. 3). Sherman’s analysis of the scene, along with Brody’s disdain for Andrew’s practice regimen in general, signals that the main goal of the film is not jazz technical accuracy. It becomes essential, then, to reconsider what these scenes mean for the film’s broader narrative, as examples of white suffering and the potential for white excellence.

The suffering in *Whiplash* is heightened to the point of unrealistic extremes for the sake of depicting the white protagonist as motivated enough to achieve excellence. Jazz is inaccurately portrayed in this film in order to make it a more ready vehicle for myths of white suffering and excellence. A telling scene occurs towards the end of the film after Andrew has been expelled and has had a hand in Fletcher being

fired from Shaffer. An extended sequence shows Andrew giving up on drumming. He packs away his posters, gear, music and drum set. The camera quickly shows him working in a service industry job and reconnecting with his father. As he walks home, he ignores a street drummer and the poster for the JVC Carnegie Hall Jazz Festival, while the camera lingers on these remainders of the life he has left behind. He seems to have put his time at Shaffer, and the abuse he suffered at Fletcher's hands, entirely behind him, until he notices a jazz club chalkboard that announces Terence Fletcher as a special guest. In a scene that shares resonances with the first scene of Sebastian playing piano in *La La Land*, Andrew is transfixed by Fletcher's delicate piano playing in an otherwise black jazz trio ("Fletcher's Song in Club" Justin Hurwitz, 1:15:58). Deprived of his penchant for physical and verbal threats, Fletcher comes across as a "real" jazz musician. Absolutely removed from the scene is any inkling of Fletcher's incredible demands on others. Instead he becomes a sensitive listener, a selfless participant in the music that is being created between the three performers. No insinuations for faster or more precise playing are made and Fletcher's soft motion over the piano is a far cry from his energetic pacing during band practices. Andrew seems genuinely moved by this transformation in Fletcher's performance of white jazz excellence and seems to reconsider the physical and emotional turmoil that he suffered at Fletcher's hands, if indeed the end result could possibly be such virtuosity in playing.

Black Performance Coopted in Musicals

La La Land introduces both Sebastian and Mia at end of the film's opening "musical" number, when frustrated commuters trapped in Los Angeles's famous

gridlock suddenly burst from their cars and into the music of “Another Day in the Sun” (Justin Hurwitz, 2017, 0:1:30). This scene follows the traditional Cinemascope opening title card (despite not being shot in true Cinemascope), as a cacophony of honking horns and different car stereos vie for the audience’s attention. Soon this mess of noise is subsumed into instrumental renditions of “Another Day in the Sun” and a young woman in a car begins to sing, exiting her car, before being joined in intricate choreography by the other commuters. Following the song, the drivers all return to their vehicles and begin once more to honk angrily at each other. The camera slowly pans down from the overhead shot into Sebastian’s old brown Buick Riviera convertible as he compulsively rewinds a particular musical phrase from Thelonious Monk’s “Japanese Folk Song” (0:05:20). The camera lingers on the cassette player in his car, followed by Sebastian’s concentrated facial expression. While the song is continually interrupted by car horns, the camera tracks out of Sebastian’s car and then follows the lineup, ultimately settling on Mia’s Toyota Prius, where the jazz music is slowly subsumed by Mia’s telephone conversation, which turns out to be a practice of a line reading for a film audition. This sentimental turn towards the “utopian” world of the film musical is displayed in the film’s opening number, whose grandeur and cohesion are suddenly subsumed to the “reality” of modern Los Angeles once Mia learns that her audition has failed (Dyer, qtd in Gabbard, 182). Sebastian’s performance of masculinity attempts to steal elements of the hard-on-his-luck be-bopper that he obviously adores; the underlying blackness of his performance is further underscored through the film’s nostalgic reproduction of earlier examples of 1940s and 1950s musical masculinity, such as Gene Kelly or Fred Astaire. The white performers of these musicals often came from a lineage of black

minstrelsy in film, including Bing Crosby, Eddie Cantor, Shirley Temple, Fred Astaire, Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland (Gabbard, 43). In essence, the layers of appropriation position Sebastian as the inheritor of a history of whitewashed performances of black masculinity, over-the-top gestures and expression, his use of dance to express his emotional interiority, his performance of a relatively soft masculinity as outlined in Gabbard's "variety of models of his performance of gender" (44). *La La Land's* appeal to traditional Hollywood musicals of the 1940s and 1950s is made completely transparent through the large and colourful opening number, the reverential rendition in a subsequent number of the moment in *Singin' in the Rain* (Donen and Kelly, 1952) when Gene Kelly swings around a lamp post, as well as the fantastical and obviously staged closing sequence, which is deeply entrenched in references to old Hollywood musicals. *La La Land* suggests the form of pastiche defined by Fredric Jameson in his chapter "Postmodernism and Consumer Society":

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without the still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. (114)

It is important to note that the primitivist and Euro-centric connections between masks and Africa might be said to surface here in Jameson, for whom a mask is like speech in a dead language, only to be understood by white interpreters and colonizers. *La La Land's* reverence for musicals is seemingly undone by its commitment to realism in its choice of story events; failed auditions, road rage, compromised visions, and an ending

without a heteronormal romantic pairing. In fact, the periodic intrusion of realism into *La La Land* only makes the film's musical moments play out as sincere and cathartic. The film is a pastiche that attempts to distance itself from its own function as a neutral practice of mimicry. Just as jazz is held at arm's length throughout the narrative, the whiteness of the musical cinematic form and its connections to jazz are never thoughtfully dealt with, nor are black subjects given any recognition for their contribution to either medium.

The Commodification of Black Music

In Sebastian's apartment in *La La Land* the presence of black cultural artifacts enhances the subject's connection to the genre of be-bop jazz at large. These nostalgic objects enhance the viewer's conception of jazz as a historical and commodified genre, wherein "things" have inherent value due to their relationship to black cultural production.

In *Whiplash*, this commodification of black music is pushed further. Following his gentle piano song at the jazz club, Fletcher makes eye contact with Andrew, who attempts a hasty exit from the club, but not before Fletcher catches up with him and simply says "Andrew." The scene cuts to the two men sharing drinks at a table in the club as Fletcher tells Andrew that he has been fired from Shaffer, apparently unaware that Andrew was involved in the firing. He continues by telling Andrew that he is conducting a "pro band" at the upcoming JVC festival. Additionally, the focus in this brief conversation is on entirely black musicians; Charlie Parker, Jo Jones, and Louis

Armstrong, is difficult to reconcile with Andrew and Fletcher's shared obsession with Buddy Rich. In Fletcher's words:

The truth is, I don't think people understood what I was doing at Shaffer. I wasn't there to conduct. Any fucking moron can wave his arms and keep people in tempo. I was there to push people beyond what's expected of them. I believe that is an absolute necessity. Otherwise we're depriving the world of the next Louis Armstrong or the next Charlie Parker.

He then recounts a much-exaggerated story of Charlie Parker's mishap with Jo Jones at the Reno Club, during which Jones supposedly threw a cymbal at Parker's head, "almost decapitating him." In his article on *Whiplash*, Brody quotes Stanley Crouch's biography of Parker *Kansas City Lightning* and the same incident:

Bird had gotten up there and got his meter turned around. [...] So finally, finally, Jo Jones pulled off the cymbal and said 'DING' __[throwing it] on the floor. Some would call it a crash, and they were right, a DING trying to pass itself as under a crash. Bird jumped, you know, and it startled him, and he eased out of the solo. Everybody was screaming and laughing. The whole place. (Brody, par. 5)

A transformed version of this story is at the core of Fletcher's beliefs about jazz, who makes the threat of violence more compelling for his students than a funny anecdote about dropping a cymbal. At every opportunity, Fletcher makes the choice to reduce jazz to the simplest impulses; pitch, tempo and technicalities are always more important than creating expressive music.

Fletcher concludes his much more violent version of the Parker story by saying people don't recognize the value in his unorthodox methods:

That to me is an absolute tragedy, but that's just what the world wants now. That's why jazz is dying. I'll tell you man, every Starbuck's "jazz album" just proves my point really. There are no two words in the English language more harmful than *good job*. [...] You know the truth is Andrew, I never had a Charlie Parker, but I tried. I actually fucking tried. And that's more than most people ever do, and I will never apologize for how I tried."

The scene ends with Fletcher offering Andrew a place in his "pro band" saying that he would be playing songs that Andrew was familiar with from the studio band at Shaffer. The next scene opens with Andrew opening the closet where he has stashed his drum kit and setting it up again for the first time.

The exaggeration of the Parker "origin story" is meant to excuse the tyrannical behaviour of Fletcher throughout the rest of the film, even as his performance in the club is a far cry from big band exactitude that he had enforced earlier in the film. If the jazz club scene is intended to humanize Fletcher, it does so by almost entirely rewriting his character and his position within jazz at large. The scene reverentially cites Jo Jones, Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker as existing only due to their struggle for greatness. A prime example of how blackness in films is used to stand in for an "authentic" personal struggle concerns the ways these two white men express their desire for the "true" jazz evident in the performances and lived experiences of black musicians, momentarily forgetting their love of white jazzman and television personality Buddy Rich. This scene stands out as contradictory to everything that the audience has been shown throughout the rest of the film, for a moment black jazz is considered as the highpoint of the genre, but quickly, we return to the kind of

technicality that the academy stands for. In the world of *Whiplash*, traditional be-bop and big band music is cemented as central to the school curriculum as well as the overall jazz community, Gabbard argues:

[I]n the 1940s and 1950s, when jazz was still the music of youthful revolt and many of the tropes of what was to become rock authenticity, including an aloof pose on the bandstand and the refusal to play the tepid pop music preferred by the uninitiated, were being developed in the discourses of jazz. (30)

This ideal of authenticity defines the curriculum of Shaffer, although the story's modern-day setting is out of synch with the histories that Gabbard points to. In *Whiplash*, jazz remains firmly entrenched in the ideals of the past.

Returning to *La La Land*, we can once more see the ways in which blackness and jazz are used to prop up whiteness. In an early scene featuring one of Mia and Sebastian's first dates, the couple visit a jazz club called The Lighthouse. This scene is much maligned by critics such as Richard Brody for its "mansplaining" (2016, par. 8). Brody argues that "after the first few notes are heard Seb[astian] launches into his elaborate mansplanation of the origins and merits of jazz, talking volubly and inexhaustibly over the music he loves as if it were nothing but the local background station" (par. 8). In fact, this might be closer to the truth than the film lets on; in an interview with Crystal Harrell, composer Justin Hurwitz states "The score of *La La Land* isn't really jazz – it's a dramatic underscore [...] in the scene where John Legend's character, Keith, comes over to proposition Sebastian about joining the band, the jazz group in the background is playing a jazzed up version of 'Another Day in the Sun'" (par. 3). The focus on the white protagonists in this black space is worth noting,

especially given Sebastian's identity as a jazz player. Sebastian's refusal to racialize the history of the music and his insistence on it as some kind of multi-cultural silver bullet disregards the proud black history of jazz; which has its roots in African music and its antecedents through the slave trade, which, for Sebastian, comes down to people who hate jazz (to him, average Americans):

They have no context, they don't know where it comes from. Jazz was born in a little flophouse in New Orleans, and it's just because people were crammed in there, they spoke five different languages, they couldn't talk to each other. The only way they could communicate was through jazz.

The reluctance to racialize the people in Sebastian's history, despite its obvious Creole origins, is remarkable given his presence in front of a quintet of black musicians, with whom he sits and partakes in the nightclub's black coded space. It is clear that for Sebastian no one has made obvious the "contradictions between presenting jazz as a model of democracy and transcendence, and as a product and subject of racism" (Farley, 127). For Sebastian, jazz only represents democracy and transcendence, and the "friction" in the "conversation" of jazz is understood as something uniquely egalitarian, which ignores the role in jazz history of egomaniacal big band leaders such as Whiteman. Sebastian does not recognize jazz as a product of racial difference and completely ignores the actual history of the "little flophouse in New Orleans," located in the heart of the Antebellum south.

The same tendency to ignore race plague another scene at The Lighthouse that occurs later in the protagonists' love affair. In this scene, Sebastian plays piano in a black neo-bop quintet while Mia dances excitedly, the lighting of the scene consistently

highlighting the two white characters, while the black side characters quite literally fade into the background. Richard Dyer argues in *White* that filmic technology is inherently racist, proposing, for example, that lighting and film stock have been designed to favour white bodies. He argues that “[t]he apparatus was developed with white people in mind and habitual use and instruction continue in the same vein, so much so that photographing non-white people is typically construed as a problem” (89). This is, of course, a historical filmic problem that was corrected over time by techniques implemented by black cinematographers such as Ernest Dickerson, whose work with Spike Lee led him to correct flaws associated with poorly lit black subjects (Dyer, 98).

The history of lighting helps explain why Chazelle chose for Mia and Sebastian to be lit centrally, in contradistinction to the other patrons or players in the club. The camerawork thus follows in the footsteps of older cinematographers less concerned with the black body. This spotlighting of the protagonists is an expressive choice that brings the abstract qualities of Hollywood musicals to mind but must never be allowed to subsume messaging of the scene. The white protagonists are lit from above with a spotlight, while the black characters are pushed to the peripheries of the screen. The scene’s frenetic whip-pans between Mia and Sebastian only further reduce the black side characters to props, as their faces are never in focus for long enough to be fully recognized. During the black trumpeter’s solo, the camera pans across the rest of the dimly lit band and then drops down below the spot-lit player, thus burying his face in the shadows and allowing the gleaming golden trumpet to dominate the frame. These technical and cinematographic issues are only enhanced by the appearance of Keith (John Legend), whose black face is suddenly perfectly lit. One assumes that Chazelle

simply did not want the other black patrons and players to be clearly distinguishable until the successful and attractive Keith appears.



Figure 9: The unnamed black trumpeter obscured by lighting and framing.

Keith's arrival challenges Sebastian's clear delineation of what jazz looks like. After their uncomfortable first encounter at The Lighthouse, where Keith offers Sebastian a position in his touring band, Sebastian seems determined to turn down music-industry opportunities. It is only when Sebastian overhears Mia discussing his financial precarity on the phone with her mother that he decides to accept the position for the money. The next scene shows Sebastian arriving at the rehearsal space where Keith gives him a brief overview of the financial viability of their band, The Messengers. Throughout this conversation Sebastian seems largely disinterested and awkwardly assents to join the band.

The rehearsal then begins in the piano-forward style that the audience has grown accustomed to, with Keith softly scatting over the beat and melody (1:07:00). However, after twenty-four bars Keith hits a button on a synth pad that immediately overlays an industrial and buzzing hip-hop beat overtop of the traditional jazz. While the other players don't miss a beat, Sebastian sits back in his stool, bemused by this

distortion of the music he loves. The scene ends with Sebastian doing his best to try to find his way back into the music, before the practice session abruptly ends with cuts to Keith and Sebastian seated, overlooking the practice space. Shot from over their shoulders in a shot/reverse shot exchange Keith justifies his contemporary take on jazz to Sebastian with the following argument:

I know. It's different. But you say you wanna save jazz. How you gonna save jazz if no one is listening? Jazz is dying because of people like you. You're playing to ninety-year olds at The Lighthouse. Where are the kids? Where are the young people? You're so obsessed with Kenny Clarke and Thelonious Monk. These guys were revolutionaries. How are you gonna be a revolutionary if you're such a traditionalist? You're holding on to the past, but jazz is about the future.

The rhetoric that Keith uses is familiar, as it has been seen before in earlier divides in jazz music. However, as Seve Chambers points out in his review:

Chazelle stacks the deck against [Keith]: Keith turns out to use a laughably 80s sound that's meant to seem completely disconnected from his jazz roots. For extra measure, he also uses a cheesy stage show complete with dancers — a luxury no modern jazz artist could afford or would even consider. It's almost as if, well, the movie wants us to hate new jazz. (par. 5)

It is perhaps most ironic that the film goes to such lengths to distance Keith from the core of what “authentic jazz” is, even as it celebrates characters like Miles Davis. For *La La Land*, the place of the black subject in relation to jazz is always as a primordial and ancestral history, and never as an active participant in what modern jazz could look like.

Chambers brings attention to the ways that authenticity for Sebastian is a fundamentally aesthetic quality. His piano at home is a vintage 1920s Steinway Model M, and to listen to music, he uses outdated media such as vinyl and cassettes. He hates electronic keyboards, such as the one he uses in the 80s cover band, or the dramatic looking keyboards he plays in Keith's band, which light up, or are in dramatic black and reds instead of traditional ivory.

A later scene of Mia attending The Messengers concert encapsulates the film's distorted ideals of what jazz looks and sounds like in the twenty-first century (1:45:15). The Messengers live performance is meant to trouble the audience, in its gaudy production, its dated, "de-jazzed" sound, and finally in the depiction of Mia's disenchantment with the entire production. Sebastian seems to accept his role in this new band with a slight smirk as he artlessly plunks away at the various keyboards and synthesizers that surround him. Mia's look of distaste broadens when the funky synthesizer solo begins. The camera then provides a bird's eye view of her pushing her way out of the crowd and towards the exit. Not only does the scene ridicule the very notion of fusion music, it also suggests that there is something inherently commercialized and artless about it. When the backup dancers take to the floor and begin to strut across the stage, the film's audience is meant to see the performance as a glossy band-aid fixed onto an artistically bankrupt music. The production design of the entire performance with its glowing lights, fanciful outfits, and excessive use of musical technology sets the audience up to dislike the music. With this in mind, we must consider Chamber's list of exciting black contributors to contemporary jazz such as Robert Glasper, Esperanza Spalding, Thundercat, and Kamasi Washington, artists who

“refuse to be fixed on the idea of purity; they’d rather push jazz to evolve” (par. 6). Seen in light of these other invested, talented and boundary pushing artists, Keith begins to look like a straw man intended to bring out Sebastian’s purity of vision and willingness to suffer for it. Chambers continues: “[d]espite what *La La Land* might have you think, the genre [of jazz] has already reckoned with and resolved the debate over the sanctity of jazz” (par. 6). By portraying anything outside of Sebastian’s vision of jazz as inherently compromised, the film effectively eulogizes this concretized and ahistorical version of jazz. Stuart Hall states that “it is to the diversity, not the homogeneity, of black experience that we must now give our undivided attention” (381). Effectively arguing against any one vision of black vernacular culture or jazz particularly, Hall’s emphasis on diversity within black experience suggests that Sebastian’s cooptation of jazz is ludicrous and narrow minded. In his book *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy devotes an entire chapter to hybrid and decentralized black musical traditions where he cites Wynton Marsalis and Miles Davis as offering contrasting points of view:

Marsalis argued that jazz provides an essential repository for wider black cultural values while Davis insisted upon prioritizing the restless creative energies that could keep the corrosive processes of reification and commodification at bay. Marsalis’s assertive, suit-wearing custodianship of “jazz tradition” was dismissed by Davis as a safe, technically sophisticated pastiche of earlier styles. This was done not on the grounds that it was inauthentic, which had been Marsalis’s claim against Davis’s “fusion” output, but because it was felt to be anachronistic. [...]

There are many good reasons why black cultures have had great difficulty in

seeing that the displacements and transformations celebrated in Davis's work after "In a Silent Way" are unavoidable and that the developmental processes regarded by conservatives as cultural contamination may actually be enriching and strengthening. (97)

If ever there was a character that fit the description of a "suit-wearing custodian of jazz tradition" it seems clear that that character is Sebastian. However, he lacks the racial authority of Wynton Marsalis to give him a clear sense of shared ownership, or for that matter, custodianship of the black be-bop jazz tradition. When Sebastian demeans himself by performing with The Messengers, he clearly draws parallels to the old debates within jazz about whether fusion could ever really be jazz in the proper sense. Sebastian's ultimate distaste for fusion music, combined with the perceived necessity of the transformation of jazz, reduces the range of styles that defines jazz music as a living tradition.

Postmodern Spectatorship and Jazz's Place Within and Without History

The scene that follows takes place after an intertitle announces the change of seasons to "Fall"—a device used by the film to establish its four-act structure. Following some months on the road touring with The Messengers, Sebastian surprises Mia by visiting her at home. They disagree about Sebastian's career choices as he explains the cyclical nature of touring and recording, to which Mia replies "So it's like the long haul?" She continues by asking, "Do you like the music you're playing?" to which Sebastian replies, "I don't know what it matters." The two end up in a fight over Sebastian's failure to fulfill his lifelong dream of opening his own jazz club. He argues

that nobody likes jazz, to which she retorts that people like what other people are passionate about. The scene ends with the smoke alarm going off and Mia unceremoniously leaving. Soon after, their relationship ends.

Mia's distaste for Sebastian's role in *The Messengers* seems to have created a sea-change in his identity and goals. The last time we see him as a member of the band is during a promotional photoshoot. The next time he is on screen he plays a soft bop song at his older sister's engagement party, once more wearing his signature brown suit and simple tie (1:31:09). His conventional jazz goes over with the crowd very well. People clap and applaud his gentle music, as if to prove both his own dedication to the craft and the wisdom of Mia's intervention into his own personal growth. This engagement party scene directly contradicts Sebastian's comment in the previous scene that nobody cares about jazz. Somehow, Sebastian's traditional view of jazz has gained enough cultural capital to garner a caring audience, against what he has previously argued.

The film glosses over the next five years of Sebastian's career, when a time jump shows that he and Mia have gone their separate ways. The camera returns to him, though, when the newly minted movie star Mia and her husband stop by Sebastian's jazz club by happenstance. The club is packed with people and "golden era" jazz memorabilia. It turns out that Sebastian's dedication to his craft has in fact generated profitable and sustainable interest in a traditionalist form of jazz. The fact that this success happens entirely offscreen runs against the entire narrative of struggle and compromise that precedes the film's epilogue. At no time does the depiction of Sebastian's suffering ensure professional success; only when he compromises his

(nostalgic) artistic vision is he given any level of financial stability—that is, until the film’s rapturous ending, when everything Sebastian ever dreamt of is provided.

Whiplash ends on a similarly cathartic note, wherein Andrew is ambushed at the JVC show, where Fletcher had the band open with a song that Andrew has never played before and for which he does not even have the sheet music (“Upswingin’” Tim Simonec, 1:28:58). Andrew fumbles his way through the song before charging off stage, humiliated. After a brief moment with his father, he strides confidently back onto the stage, sits down behind the kit and while Fletcher is introducing the next piece, loudly begins drumming. Fletcher turns around, furious, and the bassist looks at Andrew, confused. Over the beat Andrew says “‘Caravan,’ I’ll cue you.” What follows is Andrew’s hijacking of the entire performance. Even as Fletcher threatens to gouge his eyes out, Andrew forces him to cue the band to continue to play “Caravan” (Juan Tizol and Duke Ellington, 1936, 1:32:14). The film ends with Andrew finishing the song with a long, overwrought drum solo. Soon, Fletcher begins to see Andrew’s potential for greatness and even gives him subtle advice for the solo, pushing his hand down as if to tell Andrew to “bring the intensity down.” Only then does Andrew begin what Gabbard regards as “Rich’s tired old trick of tapping two sticks on a snare drum gradually slower and then gradually faster” (199, 2016). Similar to Sebastian’s sudden and unaccountable success, we are not privy to the actual practice that led Andrew to this solo. He does include a double time swing in the solo, but every other technique that we see him use here is brand new to the audience. The final solo is even more bemusing given the fact that Andrew is out of practice after having given up professional drumming.

A specific and ahistorical version of jazz is used as an alibi to make the protagonist's suffering worthy of time and effort in both of the Chazelle films, an alibi that leads to the protagonists' eventual achievement of excellence. The narratives of white suffering and white excellence fundamentally cannot account for the success that the protagonists find at the end of their films. In *La La Land*, Sebastian's black be-bop fetishism does not seem financially viable until suddenly it is, and in *Whiplash*, Andrew is constantly abused over his inability to properly become "like Charlie Parker," until suddenly he is. For Ira Madison III, *La La Land* amounts to a "Trojan horse white-savior film [...] because no one is as gifted at tickling the ivories as Gosling [Sebastian] and his pearly white hands" (pars. 3-4). The whiteness of the Chazelle films allows jazz (a musical genre that both films claim is near death) to appeal to a larger white audience, despite this musical form's deep histories in black culture. Madison's review ends by summing up the scene at Sebastian's club by stating:

[Sebastian] eventually opens up his own jazz club that's wildly successful and gains him a black apprentice who's pretty good on the piano himself, but not too good, otherwise he'd own Gosling's club himself! The nightclub audience laughs at this joke, but in the film audience, it lands with a thud, because you know what? If you're gonna make a film about an artist staying true to the roots of jazz against the odds and against modern reinventions of the genre (from white musicians like, say, Mayer Hawthorne), you'd think that artist would be black.

(par. 6)

The presence of a black protagonist in either of these films would certainly inoculate them against the pervasive whitewashing that occurs during uncomfortable moments

when the characters argue over what counts as real jazz, when the main candidates, Buddy Rich and Hoagy Carmichael, are white artists who took part in a largely black music scene.

This overwhelming fetishization of black music cannot be divorced from the black experience of oppression. Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* claims that:

[t]he oral character of the cultural settings in which diaspora musics have developed presupposes a distinctive relationship to the body – an idea expressed with exactly the right amount of impatience by Glissant: “It is nothing new to declare that for us [the African diaspora] music, gesture, dance are forms of communication, just as important as the gift of speech. This is how we first managed to emerge from the plantations: aesthetic form in our cultures must be shaped from these oral structures.” (75)

The focus on the black body in Gilroy’s writing may present an excuse for the suffering that white performers need to undergo to perform the same physicality as their black contemporaries, in an effort to somehow earn the same lived experience of the black subject. Yet no evidence of this is given in either *Whiplash* or *La La Land*. By willfully ignoring jazz’s socio-historical roots, these films use jazz in the form of pastiche as defined by Jameson, involving the “wearing of a stylistic mask” (114), with no actual tether to the lived experiences of the colonized people that the music was excavated from. Jameson redefines pastiche in terms of what he calls the postmodern experience:

In a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum. But this means that contemporary or postmodernist art is

going to be about art itself in a new kind of way; even more, it means that one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past. (115-116)

Jameson's definition of postmodernism suggests that the only way that one can create is to forego the creative impulse of newness. This is certainly true of Chazelle's jazz films, as they borrow the masks of a style that for Chazelle at least seems to have actually died and become calcified in its original acts of performance. Yet, this ignores the living and breathing practice of black music as something always-already hybridized and driven to the edges of possibility. As Gilroy claims:

I want to clarify some of the distinctive attributes of black cultural forms which are both modern and modernist. They are modern because they have been marked by their hybrid creole origins in the West, because they have struggled to escape their status as commodities and the position within the cultural industries it specifies, and because they are produced by artists whose understanding of their own position relative to the racial group and of the role of art in mediating individual creativity with social dynamics is shaped by a sense of artistic practice as an autonomous domain [...] (73)

In this sense, it is clear that neither Jameson nor Chazelle truly understand the demands of hybridity on black culture. Black music does not have the privilege of concretizing in the ways displayed in *La La Land* and *Whiplash* because to do so would make it another commodity from a white cultural industry, such as Hollywood and the mainstream record labels, a historicized version of the music that these films' white protagonists prefer. Jazz continues to grow and change and attempts to try to stay that process are

truly speaking through a dead language. As Miles Davis once said regarding Wynton Marsalis: “What’s he doin’ messing with the past? A player of his calibre should wise up and realize it’s over. The past is dead. [...] It’s over and there’s no point aping that shit” (qtd in Gilroy, 97). Miles characterizes Wynton Marsalis in the same way that Sebastian and Fletcher attempt to “mess with the past” in an effort to use traditional jazz as a signifier of broader white cultural capital. Both films set up traditional big band and be-bop as a platform for white suffering and white excellence, and neither film gives a satisfying account as to how the films’ white jazzmen managed to “make it.” It is ironic that both films celebrate Miles Davis, who throughout his career sought to move on beyond the stagnant forms of jazz of his day. Chazelle’s fetishization of jazz as a fully defined musical genre underscores the ways in which black cultural production is commodified by a white cultural industry that, contra Davis, would desperately prefer that the music stay cemented in the past.

Conclusion

In my three chapters I've attempted to recognize and name the ways in which contemporary film-music practices continue to follow a genealogy of racial cooptation and exploitation of black music. While the films that I've examined: *The Great Gatsby*, *Baby Driver*, *La La Land*, and *Whiplash* all deal with race and its production in radically different ways, they all attempt to use black cultural production as a means of characterizing white protagonists within the films. This type of racial excavation is something that is often overlooked in modern film criticism and must be studied more closely.

In *The Great Gatsby* contemporary black music is used to provide a soundtrack for an historical moment and class position often associated with looser morals, while the film's popular white music is allowed to be passed off as sincere and even appropriate within an anachronistic context. This kind of binary used to divide the ways in which music is used is partly circumvented by the pastiche of using a modern big band to perform covers of the contemporary black music, adding a level of dissonance to the already disorienting soundtrack. Above all, the film attempts to link appropriate displays of white wealth to white music, while excess and criminality is associated with hip-hop.

Baby Driver utilizes black soul and funk music to allow its protagonist, Baby, to adopt a persona of white authenticity, often associated with those disaffected from mainstream society. The vacuum of black musical appreciation within the diegesis

of the film sets Baby apart from those around him and gives him cultural authority of a genre and lived reality from which he is removed.

In Damien Chazelle's jazz films *La La Land* and *Whiplash*, jazz is constantly restricted by the impressions that the white characters who perform it have of the musical genre. Jazz in these films is concretized and historicized so that it can be properly excavated by its white saviour protagonists, whose suffering and excellence are compelling enough to "save" the genre, without allowing for it to grow in any meaningful way.

I have attempted to delineate the ways in which black music is often used as an excuse for white sincerity, authenticity, or the ways in which it idealizes what black culture should look like. Throughout my thesis I have been confronted with the ways that black music is continually used as a signifier beyond the aim of the artists in question. For every use of black music that gives credit to its long historical lineage, there are just as many that make use of black music as set-dressing within the film. This pastiche of using music to convey something beyond the aim of the music is troubling in both its postmodern and black implications. My aim in this thesis is not to identify the multitude of black cultural productions that continue to create hybrid and living art, but to recognize the ways that white supremacy continues to hold sway over the ways black culture is permitted to enter into popular cinema.

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