Tia Smith

My favorite movie is The Five Heartbeats. The film focuses on the journey of a fictionalized R&B singing group, The Five Heartbeats, from the 1960s to the 1990s. During the scene in which the group discovers a white family on the beach will represent them on their album cover, one of the most poignant lines from the film is delivered by one of The Heartbeats: "Crossover ain't nothing but a double cross."

For years I wondered about the relationship between black musical artists and black versus white audiences. What does it mean that black people could perform at the Cotton Club but not be members of the audience? What allowed for the backlash of Beyonce's performance at the Country Music Awards? What is the impact of Leon Bridges performing his song "Brown Skin Girl" for a white audience?

Additionally, I noticed how black male musical artists were granted more flexibility to venture into genres associated with whiteness without the harsh backlash faced by black female artists. The King of Pop is Michael Jackson, yet his music is appreciated within and outside of the black community.

In Dr. Town's Writing 101 course, I was encouraged to engage with popular music and dance cultures that are a part of my experience. Throughout the class, I was challenged to use my own perspective and language to describe, analyze, and construct arguments based off of performances. I discovered a tweet comparing the criticisms Lizzo currently faces to the criticisms targeted towards the late Whitney Houston. This tweet directed the focus for my final project, an exploration of how blackness is attributed to or taken away from black female artists.

My essay was not written to instruct black women on who to accept as representation or to encourage black women to accept all types of representation. This piece was written to encourage the use of specific language concerning blackness. It was written to question the standards we set for black musical artists and to interrogate whether or not we implement these standards equally.

I would like to thank Dr. Sarah Town for encouraging me to use my own words to describe what I see in the world. In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Sheryl Welte Emch and the *Deliberations* editorial board for their feedback. Lastly, I would like to thank my sister, Tyra, and my best friend, Marlena, who aided me in writing my essay at all of its stages.

Not Black Enough:

The Cost of a Static View of What It Means to be Black for Black Women Performers

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Writing 101: *¡La gozadera!* Music/ Dance/ Emotion
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Before Whitney Houston's iconic rendition of the "Star Spangled Banner" at the Tampa Stadium for the 1991 Super Bowl XXV, Houston appeared on the late-night talk show, ***The Arsenio Hall Show,*** to promote her most recent album *I'm Your Baby Tonight*. After performing the single from the album of the same name, Houston sat down with Arsenio Hall to discuss her upcoming performance of the national anthem and future musical projects. While the interview maintained a lighthearted tone coated in smiles and laughter, the mood began to shift as Arsenio transitioned the conversation to a more pressing issue.

Arsenio: (looking downward and away from Houston) Can I ask you one serious question? Something that always--

Houston: (jokingly) How serious is it?

Arsenio: Well it's not about your personal life--

Houston: (with great relief) Oh, thank you.
She places her left hand on top of his right hand. Immediately following, Arsenio leans forward to bring his left hand on top of hers.

Arsenio: It's about a little professional thing that always bothered me. (pause) What is this deal in the past when you've had the friction at the Soul Train Awards? Where does that come from?
Arsenio separates his hand from Houston, brings it to the center of his chest and moves it back and forth.

Houston: Oh.

Arsenio: For those of you who don't know--
Houston slightly opens her mouth, then proceeds to speak.

Houston: (bluntly) They booed me at the Soul Train Awards.
She follows that with a quick laugh while leaning forward.

…

Houston: I don't really know what it's about, but I think that I've gotten a lot of flack about 'I sing too white.' Uh, you know. Or that I sing you know, 'I sing white' or something like that. So I think that maybe that's where it comes from.

The idea of Houston *singing white* is interchangeable with the idea of Houston *not being black enough* in terms of her proximity to black culture. This ideology perpetrated inside of the black community often plagues the experience of black youth and follows them into adulthood. The term oreo (black on the outside and white on the inside) is also used to describe who is not black enough. The quality of your speech, the level of your education, the way you wear your hair, the shade of your skin, the country of your origin, the fashion trends you follow, or the media you consume, all of your attributes come into play in determining how black you are.

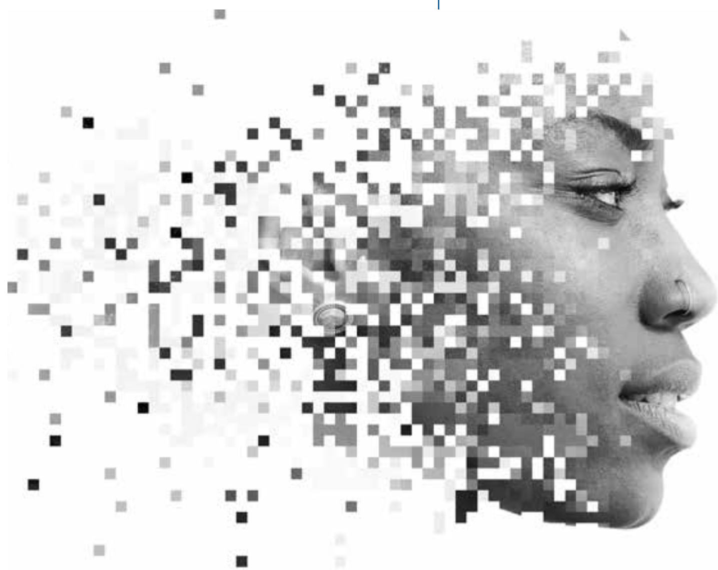
While the black community may have some unwritten standards about how one's blackness should manifest, white people also hold certain perceptions about what it means to be black. Black journalist, Ernest Owens, details his experience as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania in his 2017 article, "A Black Face in a White Space: My Four Years at Penn." Owens provides information about his high school education and experience where his "background and school were often used to stereotype" him. His excellence in academic decathlon was attributed to him being a "supernatural being" (Owens).

The 1987 film *Hollywood Shuffle* addresses the notions that white people hold about black people and the pressures faced by black actors to uphold stereotypical perceptions. The main character, Bobby Taylor, is a young black actor who is cast in the movie ***Jivetime Jimmy's Revenge.*** Already engaged in layering stereotypes for the development of his movie character, Bobby is informed by the white director that he needs to see, "a little more black. You know what I'm saying…um… like stick your ass out. Bug the eyes. You know how they move. You know."

In the case of Whitney Houston, in addition to the sound of her voice, the style of music Houston produced influenced others' perception of her blackness. Early in her career, Houston worked alongside the chairman of Arista Records, Clive Davis, to create her sound. Having a desire to make a pop idol, Davis refrained from producing music easily associated with blackness. The 1987 pop single "I Wanna Dance with Somebody" contributed to Houston's acceptance by a white audience instead of a black audience. But as Houston's success in pop music grew, black music listeners developed resentment towards Houston's acceptance by white America. This led to backlash such as the booing at the 1988 Soul Train Awards. Following this incident, Houston advocated to produce more R&B music for her career with the songs found on her album *I'm Your Baby Tonight* (Leight). Houston's appearance on *The Arsenio Hall Show* reaffirms her efforts to reconstruct the narrative of her blackness.

The lines between being black and one's blackness are often blurred. While black is a racial category based on one's phenotype or physical appearance, blackness is comprised of the expressions, actions, and thoughts associated with being black. Because these attributes are often thought of as interchangeable, there are "expectations about not only what they [black Americans] look like but also how they are distinctly inclined to think and act" (Zack). Despite the possibility and reality of different definitions of blackness for every black person, there is a narrow view, carried by both black and non-black people, of how one's blackness should manifest. There is a belief in the shared common experience among black people, such as being raised in a low-income environment, knowing how to braid (for black women), and/or using slang in one's style of verbal communication. While

these experiences may be true for many black people in America, they are not true for all. And oftentimes, when one's experience deviates from the shared common experience, one's blackness is questioned.



Identifying his experience as a "cultural mulatto," in his article, "The New Black Aesthetic," Trey Ellis recounts his experience navigating through both black and white communities. Ellis, a writer of many mediums, including essays, novels, and screenplays, initially penned the "The New Black Aesthetic" during his time at Stanford University. Ellis' coined phrase "cultural mulatto," references the racialized and often derogatory term "mulatto" which describes the race of one who is both black and white. Living in various white middle class suburbs and attending Stanford, a predominantly white elite university, are factors that have shaped Ellis' blackness. The New Black Aesthetic is a movement in which black artists create their "own definition of blackness no matter how loudly either white or black people might complain" (Ellis 241). The artist puts themselves first over their audience. Even still, the New Black Aesthetic movement did not erase the backlash faced by black artists when wanting to define their own blackness. Despite the broadening media representation of blacks in the 1980s and 1990s, black art that was deemed negative faced criticism. For example, Spike Lee was forced by Hugh Gloster, the president of Morehouse College (Lee's alma mater and a historically black college) to terminate filming his 1988 film *School Daze* (which explored the experience of young black students attending a historically black college) because the college president believed that the film lacked positive black representation.

The president's actions were a case of "propagandistic positivism," in which solely positive images of black people are accepted and deviant narratives are denounced to counteract negative associations with blackness (Ellis). Gloster believed that the actor who portrayed the president of Lee's fictional HBCU "somehow looked like Uncle Tom." Gloster's treatment of Lee shows that beyond not being black enough, there is a rejection of blackness that does not align with the representations some desire to see (Ellis 238). If one does not approve of the way a person represents their blackness, that person could be ostracized from being black. This ideology is at the root of several critiques faced by the black female musical artist Lizzo.

Many of the representations of black people are not controlled by black people. Throughout American entertainment history, there have been efforts by individual black people and black organizations to regain control over their media representation. The continuing and overwhelming negative depiction of blacks motivates some black people to only support undeniably positive depictions of black life in hopes of counteracting demeaning stereotypes. While these actions are noble and many times necessary, divergent truths of the black experience from black artists can fall victim to these choices.

Through her gradual success, accompanied by a series of live performances on talk shows and awards shows, Lizzo has solidified her place within the music industry with her song "Truth Hurts" (originally released in 2017) recently ascending to #1 on the Billboard Hot 100 Chart, a feat that only five female rappers have acquired prior. After Billboard acknowledged this achievement on Instagram, black female rapper Azealia Banks responded with several degrading comments, including accusing the artist of being a "millennial mammy." The mammy archetype, which Banks refers to, is a stereotype that emerged in the antebellum era to refer to the enslaved black women who were caregivers for white children. In various

media and imagery, the mammy figure has been depicted as "extremely overweight, very tall, broad-shouldered; her skin is nearly black. She manages to be a jolly presence" (Wallace-Sanders 6). The domestic role of the mammy is a caregiver to white children; "her unprecedented devotion to her white family reflects her racial inferiority" (Wallace-Sanders 6). Lizzo's association with the mammy archetype does not improve the pre-existing representations of black women, and therefore her image is rejected by other black women. The closeness between Lizzo and the mammy stereotype brings into question: Is this the type of representation that black women want to see? Additionally, like Houston, Lizzo is denounced by members of the black community for attracting a white audience.

The mammy archetype is rooted in the history of American cinema and media representations of black women. The most notable example comes from the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind,* in which the actress Hattie McDaniel plays the character Mammy. Oftentimes, playing this stereotypical role, and others, is rewarded by white media as McDaniel became the first black actress to win an Academy Award. The sole physical aspect of the mammy archetype that Lizzo possesses is her heavier body weight. However, the most significant attribute of the archetype is the mammy's dedication to the white children she cares for, which is evident in how Lizzo's body-positive, self-loving image and music is endorsed by white audiences. Before her performance of "Good as Hell" at the 2019 Glastonbury Festival, Lizzo gives an inspiring speech to her predominately white audience. She recites a mantra and encourages the audience to say it to themselves at home: "I love you. You are beautiful. And you can do anything." However, Lizzo is not ignorant about her audience's demographics. In preparation for her 2019 BET Awards performance, Lizzo alluded to struggling to garner a black audience stating, "It's really special that it's the BET Awards because my music is finally reaching the black community and that's exciting for me." Lizzo's appearance at the BET Awards and Houston's appearance on *The Arsenio Hall Show* (with the first black late-night talk show host) highlight both artists' awareness of how their audience view their proximity to the standard, widely accepted version of blackness.

For black female artists, black performance is confined to perceived traditional black genres, such as R&B and hip-hop. When these artists venture outside of these bounds they are often faced with backlash. However, their blackness should be expanded to their own personal definitions. Houston's musical identity should incorporate not only her roots in gospel and R&B music, but also her transition to pop. For Lizzo, her blackness is a spectrum that ranges from marching band music to hip-hop and pop to R&B. It is one that focuses on body positivity and inclusion. Like the artists from Ellis' generation, Lizzo should be free to define and express her blackness without regard to how it will align with perceived notions of what is or is not white or black. Ellis attributes Houston's early conflict between her black and white audience to Houston not putting her satisfaction above her audience's (Ellis 242). For Lizzo there seems to lack substantial evidence that she puts the needs of her audience over her own. Additionally, critics have weaponized her style of music in order to erase her blackness.

As an artist, Lizzo's musical and performance style is derived from past popular culture elements, including ones from black popular culture. Mirroring the narrative

Hattie McDaniel (left) with Olivia de Havilland and Vivien Leigh in a publicity photo for the classic 1939 movie Gone With The Wind.

McDaniel (1895-1952) was the first Black actor to receive a Best Supporting Actress Oscar in 1940 for her portrayal of the maid "Mammy" in Gone with the Wind.

Photo credit: MGM

flikr.com, Public Domain

style of neo-soul found in artist Erykah Badu's "Tyrone," in her song "Jerome" and performing an unofficial tribute to 1992 film *Sister Act* at the 2019 MTV Movie & TV Awards are just two notable examples.

In the spring of 2019, Lizzo performed her funk-inspired pop single ***"Juice" on Jimmy Kimmel Live!.*** The song mirrors the carefree lyrical tone of pop songs such as Cyndi Lauper's 1983 single "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" and Houston's 1987 track "I Wanna Dance with Somebody" for a contemporary audience. In *The New York Times* video, "How Lizzo Made 'Juice' as Joyous as She Is," Lizzo, Theron Thomas (songwriter), and Ricky Reed (producer) all reiterate how "Juice" "has a throwback feel but [was] definitely made in 2019." Inspired by artists such as Prince and David Bowie, Reed incorporated horns and a synthesizer to reference electronic music made in the 1980s.

The pattern of connecting new to old is referenced in both the music video and live performance on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* of "Juice." The music video includes scenes of Lizzo exercising in a hot pink leotard with weights as she performs biceps curls—a reference to the 1980s aerobic craze. Singing and dancing in a Supremes-like style, Lizzo performs in a slit dress with a faux fur wrap resting on her shoulders as two matching backup singers perform alongside her, alluding to the Motown era of music. In her live performance, Lizzo demonstrates this connection by juxtaposing attributes found in the shared common experience of black American culture (found physically in her performance) with aspects that deviate within this experience (represented tonally).

The *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* performance begins with a close-up on Lizzo's face. Metallic gold eyeshadow, winged eyeliner, soft red blush, and a pink lip gloss all adorn her face. Large gold hoop earrings, specifically door knockers, hang from her ears. The environment is undeniably summer as Lizzo and her gang of friends wear jerseys and t-shirts with "Crenshaw" emblazoned in white screen print along with black shorts. With a microphone in hand, the camera highlights her gold acrylic nails as she sways her head from left to right. This performance demonstrates how Lizzo affirms her connection to traditionally accepted black culture while performing in her true artistic style.

Braids, references to Crenshaw, large hoop earrings, and acrylic nails are all aspects of popular black culture that were used in Lizzo's performance. Used as protective styling for black hair, braids are a popular hairstyle and are used as a vehicle of personal expression found on both women and men, young and old. The specific style of braids worn by one of the performers—box braids (sometimes referred to as Poetic Justice braids)—grew in popularity in the 1990s as they were worn by Janet Jackson in the 1993 John Singleton film, *Poetic Justice.* Crenshaw, a neighborhood in Los Angeles, has been depicted in the media several times over—such as in the 2006 film, *Bring it On: All or Nothing and All American,* the current CW teen television show. The name of the neighborhood is worn of the shirts of the main characters in the films *Love & Basketball* and *Boyz n the Hood* respectively. Door knocker earrings and acrylic are accessories highlighted during the '80s and '90s and were solidified through media representation of black artists and entertainers. A sense of community found amongst black people presents itself as Lizzo and her dancers interact as a group of friends and participate in a call and response. As these attributes are commonly tied to blackness, Lizzo is tapping into the shared common experience.

However, when the camera pans out, Lizzo is seen performing her blackness in her plus-size body for *Jimmy Kimmel's* predominantly white audience. Lyrically, "Juice" induces an upbeat tone. Hanging out with friends, drinking, materialism, and hooking up with guys, are not taboo topics within black music, yet in conveying these themes in a joyous and carefree tone, "Juice" aligns itself more within the pop genre than funk or R&B. There is not much of a visible precedent for black women in the pop music industry, despite pop music's dependency on black music. In turn, this has caused members of the black community to associate Lizzo's music with whiteness while ignoring the several references to the shared common experience. Even if Lizzo's performances did not reference this experience, her art should not be deemed not black enough. Once there is the realization that being black is conflated with blackness, it can be acknowledged that artists have been judged based upon personal opinions of what it means to be black and not the artist's definition.

Thirty-one years after Houston was booed at 1988 Soul Train Awards, the conversation of who and what is black enough resurfaced. In November of 2019, Lizzo was awarded the Album of the Year award for her album *Cuz I Love You.* After one of her fellow nominees, R&B/Soul artist

Ari Lennox, expressed her disappointment in her loss on social media, several Twitter users responded to her video and the results of the award ceremony. There is a genuine critique that Lennox should have won the award over Lizzo as Lennox is a definitive soul artist. At the same time, Lizzo's multi-genre sound is often ignored as her default category is pop. Both Lizzo songs on her award-winning album, "Cuz I Love You" and "Jerome," are within the soul genre. This alone should qualify her as a nominee as the list of past winners and nominees contains non-R&B/Soul artists and albums. From its inception, both R&B/Soul and non-R&B/Soul artists have been nominated and won the award. In 2016, Beyoncé won the same award with her multi-genre album *Lemonade.* Two days after the 2019 Soul Train Awards aired, Twitter user @ goddessway_ wrote "Lizzo didn't deserve that award. Facts only. She makes pop music for white girls who have live laugh love tattooed on them. Ari Lennox made a black ass SOUL album and got snubbed. I'm tight." This statement not only disregards the history of the award, but intentionally others Lizzo's music from blackness.

When encountering a black person who challenges associations of what it means to be black, there is the opportunity to either adapt commonly held associations or denounce the encountered person's blackness. Ellis urges us to remember that no matter how one chooses to express their blackness, one's blackness does not supersede another. He affirms that "the culturally mulatto Cosby girls are equally as black as a black teenage welfare mother. Neither side of the tracks should forget that" (235).

How do we get to a society that continually expands its associations of blackness instead of upholding rigid standards? 1) We must understand the difference between black and blackness. 2) We must educate ourselves on the historical representations and identifications that black people have held. Here we can learn if there is precedence to the blackness that we may be quick to reject. 3) We should use specific language to describe our thoughts on one's blackness. What is truly meant by not black enough? Is someone's blackness different? Does one's blackness make you feel uncomfortable? 4) We need to understand that we should accept one's blackness for that person, not for ourselves as individuals. The more we open ourselves to new definitions of what it means to be black, the more freedoms we grant to not only to the artist, but the audience as well.

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