



## What's Whitney Got to Do with It: Black Female Triumph and Tragedy in the 2015 Lifetime Biopic *Whitney*

Jaap Kooijman

University of Amsterdam

### Abstract

In 2015, the cable television network Lifetime broadcast the biopic *Whitney*, depicting the troubled life of the late superstar singer Whitney Houston. *Whitney* is the first film by director Angela Bassett, who, as actress, famously portrayed Tina Turner in the biopic *What's Love Got to Do with It* (Brian Gibson, 1993). In this article, I will first position *Whitney* within a larger tradition of the Hollywood biopic by making a comparison to earlier important biopics about black female entertainers, namely *Lady Sings the Blues* (Sidney J. Furie, 1972), starring Diana Ross as Billie Holiday, and *What's Love Got to Do with It*. Second, I will discuss how the narratives of these three biopics tend to reduce their female subjects to victims, emphasizing the tragedy in their personal lives, while assigning much more agency to the male partners of these black female entertainers. Third and finally, I will analyze the final scenes of these three biopics in detail, as each presents a grand finale musical performance that seems to resolve the contradictions of the triumph and tragedy in their subject's lives, yet in significantly different ways.

*Keywords:* biopic, Whitney Houston, stardom, Black female stars

### Samenvatting

In 2015 zond het kabeltelevisienetwerk Lifetime de biopic *Whitney* uit, een biografische film die het getroebleerde leven van de overleden supersterzangeres

Whitney Houston vertelt. *Whitney* is de eerste film van regisseur Angela Bassett, die als actrice Tina Turner portretteerde in de biopic *What's Love Got to Do with It* (Brian Gibson, 1993). In dit artikel zal ik eerst *Whitney* plaatsen binnen een langere traditie van de Hollywood biopic door een vergelijking te maken met eerdere belangrijke biopics over zwarte vrouwelijke entertainers, namelijk *Lady Sings the Blues* (Sidney J. Furie, 1972), met Diana Ross als Billie Holiday in de hoofdrol, en *What's Love Got to Do with It*. Ten tweede zal ik bespreken hoe de verhaallijnen van deze drie biopics hun vrouwelijke hoofdpersonen reduceren tot slachtoffers, door de nadruk te leggen op de tragedie in hun persoonlijke leven en meer handelsbekwaamheid aan hun mannelijke partners toe te dichten. Tenslotte zal ik de slotscènes van deze drie biopics in detail analyseren, omdat ze elk een groots muzikaal slotoptreden presenteren dat de tegenstrijdigheden tussen de triomf en de tragedie in het leven van hun hoofdpersonen lijkt op te lossen, zij het op zeer verschillende manieren.

*Trefwoorden:* biopic, Whitney Houston, sterrendom

On 17 January 2015, three years after Whitney Houston's death, the US American cable television network Lifetime broadcast the biopic *Whitney*, directed by actress and first-time director Angela Bassett. One day before its release, Pat Houston (Whitney Houston's sister-in-law and president of the Whitney Houston Estate) denounced the film in an open letter published on Whitney Houston's official website, stating that *Whitney* had been made with neither the consent nor the cooperation of the Houston family: 'If you watch this movie, watch it knowing that Lifetime is notorious for making bad biopics of deceased celebrities and brace yourself for the worst. [...] Never would Whitney allow her story to be told by an inexperienced team'.<sup>1</sup> Without mentioning her by name, Pat Houston clearly implied that Bassett had abused her 'friendship' with Whitney Houston, with whom she had starred in *Waiting to Exhale* (Forest Whitaker, 1995), to justify making a sensationalist television movie about the superstar's life.

Pat Houston was right to point out Lifetime's bad reputation in producing biopics of black female entertainers. The 2014 biopic *Aaliyah: The Princess of R&B*, directed by the white male Bradley Walsh, had been a critical disaster. By hiring Angela Bassett as director, Lifetime obviously attempted to give *Whitney* professional credibility. As *Rolling Stone* magazine reads, 'There's an excellent reason "Directed by Angela Bassett" is plastered all over the ads for Lifetime's Whitney Houston biopic [...] and the reason is *Aaliyah*'.<sup>2</sup> As an actress, Bassett had ample experience in biopics, playing

Michael Jackson's mother Katherine in *The Jacksons: An American Dream* (Karen Arthur, 1992), Rosa Parks in *The Rosa Parks Story* (Julie Dash, 2002), Coretta Scott King in *Betty & Coretta* (Yves Simoneau, 2013) and, most notably, Tina Turner in *What's Love Got to Do with It* (Brian Gibson, 1993), the latter for which she earned an Academy Award nomination as best actress. Moreover, since its founding in 1984, Lifetime had promoted itself as 'Television for Women', presenting stories about women, preferably made by women.<sup>3</sup> Unlike *Aaliyah*, *Whitney* is not only about a black woman, but also directed by one.

Although less devastating than the critical response to *Aaliyah*, reviews of *Whitney* were lukewarm to negative, placing the blame less on Bassett's directorial skills than on the generic quality of the script and the low production value (in budget and shooting days), typical of made-for-television movies. In stark contrast, the two documentaries *Whitney: Can I Be Me* (Nick Broomfield & Rudi Dolezal, 2017) and *Whitney* (Kevin Macdonald, 2018) received much critical acclaim. This difference in appraisal can be partially explained by the (often gendered) genre distinctions between the 'serious' documentary and the 'trivial' television movie, yet one cannot help but notice that both documentaries were made by white European men.<sup>4</sup> Without extrapolating too much from this observation, it does raise questions about authorship, about the amount of space that is granted to a black woman to tell a story about a black woman within the confines set by the entertainment industry, and about the extent to which she is constrained by the genre conventions of the biopic. In his review of *Whitney* in *Vulture*, Matt Zoller Seitz seems to address such questions, albeit implicitly. On the one hand, he aims to recognize the qualities of Angela Bassett as a director, yet, on the other, he clearly has no high regard for the conventional and clichéd made-for-television biopic. He comes to a rather awkward conclusion: 'I can't stress enough that this is not a great movie, and that at times it's not even that good a movie; but I also hope you'll watch what it's doing visually and in terms of tone, so that you aren't surprised when Bassett emerges as a major filmmaker'.<sup>5</sup>

The aim of this essay is not to assess whether Angela Bassett's *Whitney* is a 'bad', 'good', or even 'great' movie, but rather to explore what the film can tell us about the way black female entertainers are depicted in mainstream popular culture and, more specifically, how such a depiction is enabled or constrained by the genre conventions of the biopic. To do so, I will first position *Whitney* within a larger tradition of the Hollywood biopic by making a comparison to earlier important biopics about black female entertainers, namely *Lady Sings the Blues* (Sidney J. Furie, 1972), starring Diana Ross as Billie Holiday, and *What's Love Got to Do with It*, starring Angela Bassett as Tina Turner.<sup>6</sup> Second, I will discuss how the narratives of these three biopics tend to

reduce their female subjects to victims, emphasizing the tragedy in their personal lives, while assigning much more agency to the male partners of these black female entertainers. Third and finally, I will analyze the final scenes of these three biopics in detail, as each presents a grand finale musical performance that seems to resolve the contradictions of the triumph and tragedy in their subject's lives, yet in significantly different ways.

### The biopic's gendered genre conventions

There is much to say about the documentaries *Whitney: Can I Be Me* and *Whitney*, but here it is sufficient to point out that both start with Houston's untimely death at the age of 48 and then retell her story chronologically in an attempt to 'explain' what went 'wrong' in her troubled life, using archival footage alternated with talking head interviews with family members, friends, and professional associates. The documentaries find alleged explanations – some different, most of them overlapping – in the strict discipline by her parents, the sexual abuse she suffered during her childhood, the introduction to drugs by her older brothers, her repressed bisexuality and 'forbidden' romantic relationship with former teenage friend turned personal assistant Robyn Crawford, her turbulent marriage with Bobby Brown, and the persistent pressure of being a superstar. Yet the overarching 'explanation' in both documentaries is that Whitney Houston had to deny her 'blackness' to become successful within a predominantly white entertainment industry, an accusation illustrated by the infamous incident during the 1989 Soul Train Music Awards, when the audience booed Houston at the moment her name was called. This emphasis fits other non-fictional accounts about Houston (in the academic literature as well as the popular press) in which the 'whitewashing' of Whitney 'Whitey' Houston's image and music has been a prominent trope from the start of her career to beyond her death.<sup>7</sup>

Lifetime's *Whitney* also uses the 1989 Soul Train Music Awards as a defining moment, even as its opening scene, yet without the booing and for a quite different reason. This is the moment when Whitney Houston (Yaya DaCosta) meets Bobby Brown (Arlen Escarpeta), leading into Whitney singing 'The Greatest Love of All' and marking the start of a love story that covers the first five years of their relationship (as several reviewers have suggested, *Whitney and Bobby* would have been a more appropriate title for the biopic).<sup>8</sup> *Whitney* tells neither the triumphant story of how Houston became one of the most successful female singers of the late 1980s, nor the tragic story of her drug-ridden downfall. On Lifetime's promotional website, Angela Bassett explained the choice to present a love story: 'I didn't know any other way to

consider [the story], other than between a boy and a girl and their love and excitement for each other, their future together and the things that conspire against that'.<sup>9</sup> Yet the choice seems most of all a generic one, conforming to the 'guilty pleasure' formula of the made-for-television movie in terms of topic, genre conventions, and audience expectations, which also was noted in most reviews.<sup>10</sup> 'Bassett or no Bassett, Whitney is still a cheese-intensive Lifetime melodrama, using all the tricks of the trade: a young woman with big dreams, a man who fails her, family disapproval, career pressure, motherhood, lies, tears, long talks with Babyface', writes Rob Sheffield in *Rolling Stone* magazine, using a lighthearted style that playfully mocks the genre's campiness. 'As a great woman once sang: I don't know why I like it. I just do.'<sup>11</sup>

Instead of comparing *Whitney* to the two documentaries about Whitney Houston, the biopic can be compared more productively to other biopics about black female entertainers, such as *Lady Sings the Blues*, starring Diana Ross as Billie Holiday and Billy Dee Williams as her main love interest Louis McKay, and *What's Love Got to Do with It*, starring Angela Bassett as Tina Turner and Laurence Fishburne as her domineering and abusive husband Ike.<sup>12</sup> Before focusing on the similarities, however, some significant differences need to be recognized. First, the three films are each separated by two decades, released in 1972, 1993, and 2015, respectively. Second, *Lady Sings the Blues* and *What's Love Got to Do with It* are feature films, directed by white men, whereas *Whitney* is a television movie, directed by a black woman. Third, unlike *Whitney*, both *Lady Sings the Blues* and *What's Love Got to Do with It* are based, albeit very loosely, on the autobiographies of their subjects.<sup>13</sup> Fourth, *Lady Sings the Blues* and *Whitney* are films about singers who are deceased, whereas *What's Love Got to Do with It* is about a superstar who is still (both then and now) very much alive. The final significant difference between the three films relates to vocal musical performance. In *Lady Sings the Blues*, Diana Ross sings the songs of Billie Holiday herself; in *What's Love Got to Do with It*, Angela Bassett lip-synchs to the voice of Tina Turner, who rerecorded several of her hit songs especially for the film; in *Whitney*, Yaya DaCosta lip-synchs to the voice of Deborah Cox, who had sung with Whitney Houston in the past and recorded four of Houston's songs ('The Greatest Love of All', 'I'm Your Baby Tonight', 'I'm Every Woman', and 'I Will Always Love You') to be used in the biopic.

In spite of these differences, the three biopics are remarkably similar in the way they reduce the complexities of a black female singer's life into a one-dimensional tale of triumph and tragedy. In his book *Bio/Pics*, George Custen recognizes this reduction as an inherent contradiction of the Hollywood biopic: 'While proclaiming the greatness of individuals by honoring them with a showcase about the uniqueness of their lives, Hollywood film really reduces individuals to part of a set of almost

Proppian moves, a mass-tailored contour for fame in which greatness is generic and difference has controllable boundaries'.<sup>14</sup> While such reductions also occur in biopics about male subjects, Dennis Bingham points out that the lives of female subjects tend to be reduced in a more specific way:

The genre of women's biography, in film and literature alike, is infamous for displacing public ambition and achievement onto male partners, managers, and/or husbands, for gravitating to public women who lost control of their private demons and were brought down, and focusing on women more famous for suffering and victimization than for anything they accomplished or produced.<sup>15</sup>

In the case of the three biopics, the artistic accomplishments of Billie, Tina, and Whitney are not totally absent; the musical numbers are rousing showcases of their talent, providing a sense of why these singers became stars. Yet, at the narrative level, these triumphant performances merely function as on-stage counterpoints to the tragedy in their off-stage personal lives and, as such, by sheer contrast, enhance the suffering and victimization. Billie Holiday's artistic triumph becomes a tragic story about a woman who struggles with, and eventually succumbs to, her drug addiction; Tina Turner's artistic triumph becomes a tragic story about a woman who suffers from, and eventually escapes, her husband's abuse; Whitney Houston's artistic triumph becomes a tragic story of a woman who cannot cope with her success, in spite of the support of her loving yet cheating husband.

### **Black female triumph and tragedy**

While Bingham explicitly focuses on gender, bell hooks has argued that the victimization of black women in biopics also is connected to race. Referring to *What's Love Got to Do with It*, she has questioned the emphasis on 'black female tragedy' rather than 'black female triumph' in Hollywood film. It is not Tina Turner's success in the entertainment industry, but her relationship with the abusive Ike that provides the film's main focus: 'It's so interesting how the film stops with Ike's brutality, as though it is Tina Turner's life ending. Why is it that her success is less interesting than the period of her when she's a victim?'<sup>16</sup> By the time *What's Love Got to Do with It* was released, it was seventeen years since Tina Turner had left Ike and she had been a solo superstar for a decade, yet by focusing on her time as a victim, the film provides a tragic backstory to her triumphant superstardom that defines and reduces her to a survivor of tragedy rather than a successful entertainer. A similar emphasis on black



female tragedy can be seen in *Lady Sings the Blues*, as the film focuses less on Billie Holiday's musical career than on her continuous (and eventually fatal) struggle with drug addiction. In his discussion of the film, James Baldwin praises the way Diana Ross 'picks up on Billie's beat, and, for the rest, uses herself, with a moving humility and candor', but also asserts that Ross's fictional Billie Holiday has little to do with the real-life one. 'She was much stronger than this film can have any interest in indicating, and, as a victim, infinitely more complex', Baldwin writes, arguing that the film not only reduces Billie to a victim, but also that her character has been silenced in the process: 'That victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim: he, or she, has become a threat,' and that is something the film can neither accept nor use.<sup>17</sup> As Baldwin suggests with the use of 'he, or she,' the victimization of Holiday is not (just) based on her gender but (also) on her race.

At first glance, Lifetime's *Whitney* seems less focused on black female tragedy, as the biopic only covers the five years of her life when Houston was at the height of her commercial success. The film does not touch upon the last two decades of Houston's life, thus leaving out the scandalous incidents and her erratic behavior caused by drug abuse — eagerly reported by the tabloid press — that seemed to define her career during those years. Her artistic success is shown in the musical numbers. In addition to the performance of 'The Greatest Love of All' at the Soul Train Awards, the film includes a montage sequence of Whitney performing 'I'm Every Woman' live on stage at different concerts and a scene set in the studio where Whitney records 'I'm Your Baby Tonight' under the guidance of producer Babyface. Yet, these successful musical moments stand in contrast to the portrayal of Whitney as a victim in her private life, as she struggles with the loneliness of stardom, her family's disapproval of her marriage to Bobby, as well as Bobby's repeated infidelity. Her successful movie career, starring in *The Bodyguard* (Mick Jackson, 1992), is mentioned, but merely functions to highlight her suffering a miscarriage during the shooting of the film. Throughout the biopic, Whitney — quite casually — is doing cocaine or smoking marijuana at home, including after her daughter Bobbi Kristina is born, while no reason is given for her drug habit (though the movie makes it clear from the start that she began using drugs before she met Bobby). In spite of covering her most successful years, *Whitney* emphasizes the tragedy of the superstar's life, foreshadowing her eventual tragic fate yet without explicitly displaying, let alone explaining, her downfall.

In both *Lady Sings the Blues* and *What's Love Got to Do with It*, the male partners — Louis McKay and Ike Turner — play defining roles in the triumph and tragedy of the female subjects, Billie and Tina. *Lady Sings the Blues* presents Billie as a woman who is almost pathologically dependent on her one main love interest Louis (although, in real

life, Holiday had dated and married several men).<sup>18</sup> Louis is the first to recognize Billie as a serious singer rather than a raunchy nightclub act; he introduces her to the New York high society, turning a former prostitute into a lady. Throughout the film, Louis 'saves' Billie again and again, by bailing her out of jail, marrying her, admitting her into rehab, financing her career, and arranging a national concert tour to enable her comeback at New York Carnegie Hall with the aim of reinstating her cabaret license. Her addiction to heroin is 'explained' not only by the pressure of continuously touring, but, most of all, by having to tour without her man present. Indeed, as Gerald Early has pointed out, *Lady Sings the Blues* is 'not so much about the downfall of a brilliant artist as it is about the struggle of a black woman to become a respectable lady in this society with the help of a decent, proud [black] man.'<sup>19</sup> In stark contrast to the way Louis is presented as Billie's savior, in *What's Love Got to Do with It*, Ike is the film's obvious villain, yet their roles are remarkably similar. Like Louis, Ike is the one who discovers Tina's talent and recognizes her as a serious artist. He transforms the shy Anna Mae Bullock from Nutbush, Tennessee, into TINA TURNER, the national R&B star, who he not only manages but also marries, controlling her by giving her his name. Ike becomes the film's villain because he physically and emotionally abuses Tina, a behavior that in the film is 'explained' (and thereby arguably softened) by his growing jealousy of her success, as well as his addiction to cocaine. The film barely addresses Turner's struggle for success after she left Ike (she did not become a global superstar until seven years later), making Ike not only a central character in the narrative, but also basing Tina's success mostly on her ability to endure and eventually escape Ike's abuse — thus assigning him an essential part in her superstardom.

Bobby Brown plays a prominent role in *Whitney*, yet he is neither the villain like Ike (which audiences might have expected given his reputation in the tabloid press), nor the outright savior like Louis.<sup>20</sup> Although Whitney is already a famous star when the biopic starts, Bobby is the first in the film to validate Whitney's talent by telling her that she has a beautiful voice and looks great. Throughout the film, he aims to support Whitney in her career, yet he struggles with his jealousy of her success (exemplified by his annoyance at being referred to as 'Mr. Houston'), as well as his own infidelity and addiction to alcohol. He tries to save their marriage by going into rehab, only to hurt Whitney instead by confessing to his therapy group that she is a drug addict, which then gets leaked to the tabloid press. Although many of his actions end up hurting rather than helping Whitney, the film suggests that they are nevertheless well-intentioned, and thus not those of a villain. Reviewers have questioned Bobby's dominant and flattering portrayal in the film. 'Why was Bobby Brown the star?' reads the headline in *The Telegraph*, expressing the reviewer's surprise that 'this biopic, one



of Lifetime's highest-profile movies ever, portrayed an admitted abuser as something close to a saint'.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Lifetime immediately followed the original broadcast of *Whitney* with the one-hour interview special *Bobby Brown: Remembering Whitney*, in which the real-life Bobby Brown tells host Shaun Robinson: 'I stayed sober, to try and help her. I went and did what I had to do for myself in order to be good enough to help her out,' thereby reinforcing the way he is depicted in the biopic. Yet, regardless whether Bobby plays the savior, the villain, or something in between, his prominent role fits the genre conventions of the biopic, in which the male partner's actions tend to push the narrative, while the female subject merely endures them.

### Resolution in the final performance

As Richard Dyer has pointed out, '[t]he biography of a musical figure is a sub-category of the musical recognized as such by Hollywood itself, for which it coined the term *biopic*'.<sup>22</sup> In his classic essay 'Entertainment and Utopia', he argues that, in musicals, the 'essential contradiction [...] is between the narrative and the numbers', with the musical's narrative addressing problems ('what is') and its numbers providing escape ('what could be'): 'What musicals have to do, then, [...] is to work through these contradictions at all levels in such a way as to "manage" them, to make them seem to disappear'.<sup>23</sup> The three biopics discussed here all end with a triumphant final live performance that brings the narrative and the number together, providing a resolution that seems to 'manage' the 'essential contradiction' between black female tragedy ('what is') and triumph ('what could be'). In *Lady Sings the Blues*, Billie sings 'God Bless the Child' at the New York Carnegie Hall; in *What's Love Got to Do with It*, Tina sings 'What's Love Got to Do with It' at the New York Ritz; in *Whitney*, Whitney sings 'I Will Always Love You' at an unidentified concert hall. Like the other vocal musical numbers in the films, these final performances showcase the triumphant on-stage artistry of the biopic's subject in contrast to the tragedy of their off-stage lives, yet, most importantly, they not only render this contradiction between triumph and tragedy visible but also 'manage' it by resolving the seemingly irresolvable through the escapist pleasure and promise of entertainment.

The grand finale of *Lady Sings the Blues* starts with a close-up of Billie singing the last chorus of 'My Man', followed by a shot of an exuberant on-screen Carnegie Hall audience, giving a standing ovation and shouting 'more, more, more.' Billie's comeback performance is a success, suggesting that she has fulfilled the requirements to get her cabaret license reinstated (and thus promising a happy end to the film). Then Billie gives a full performance of 'God Bless the Child', shown in (medium) close-ups

and long shots, alternated with three close-ups of ‘her man’ Louis standing in the wings watching Billie perform (figure 1). While she is singing, newspaper headlines are superimposed on the screen, informing the non-diegetic, off-screen audience that, although the performance is/was a ‘smash’, Billie did not receive a new license (figure 2).



Figures 1 and 2

The triumph of the performance (which continues until the end of the film) is thus contrasted with the tragedy of the narrative, supplied by the newspaper headlines reporting Billie’s relapse into drugs, presumably caused by the rejection of her license application (figure 3), and eventually her death (figure 4), presumably caused by her drug addiction.

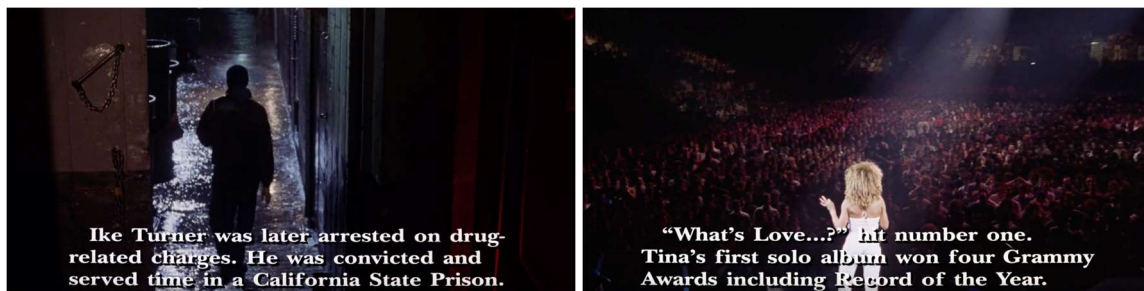


Figures 3 and 4

The irony of this contrast between triumph and tragedy was not lost on James Baldwin: ‘And the film fades out, with a triumphant Billie, who is, already, however, unluckily, dead, singing on-stage before a delirious audience — or, rather, two: one in the cinema Carnegie Hall, and one in the cinema where we are seated’.<sup>24</sup> Yet, the film’s grand finale provides a reconciliation of this triumph/tragedy divide not only through the pleasurable experience of the performance, but also by being a showcase for Diana Ross’s stardom, the newfound movie actress. *Lady Sings the Blues* was her debut film for which Ross earned an Academy Award nomination as best actress, just as Angela Bassett would earn one for *What’s Love Got to Do with It* (though neither won; in 2002, Halle Berry became the first black woman to win an Oscar in that category). The fictional Billie has to ‘die’ to enable the arrival of DIANA ROSS, using the black female

tragedy of one to celebrate the black female triumph of the other. ‘Diana Ross: Lady *Doesn’t* Sing the Blues,’ as *The New York Times* aptly noted.<sup>25</sup>

The grand finale of *What’s Love Got to Do with It* starts with Ike visiting Tina in her dressing room and threatening her with a gun. No longer afraid of him, Tina stands up and walks to the New York Ritz stage to perform ‘What’s Love Got to Do with It’. As she is performing, Ike wanders into the audience, stares at Tina, and lights a cigarette (clearly signifying his ‘bad’ character). Then he slowly turns and walks away, with the onscreen text: ‘Ike Turner was later arrested on drug-related charges. He was convicted and served time in a California State Prison’ (figure 5). Once Ike is — literally — out of the picture, the camera returns to Tina singing, but now showing the real-life Tina performing in a grand stadium, with the on-screen text: “‘What’s Love...?’” hit number one. Tina’s first solo album won four Grammy Awards, including Record of the Year. Tina has become one of the world’s top recording artists. Her tours continue to break concert attendance records worldwide’ (figure 6).<sup>26</sup>



Figures 5 and 6

These two (succeeding) long shots are framed in a similar form, which emphasizes the contrast between Ike’s failure and Tina’s success. Both are shot from the back, yet Ike is presented as a silhouette walking away into the dark, embodying Tina’s tragic past, while Tina wears a bright outfit and faces a large crowd of fans, embodying her triumphant future. Here, too, the scene provides a reconciliation of the triumph/tragedy divide, yet in a different way than in *Lady Sings the Blues*. Before Ike leaves, Tina is singing ‘What’s Love Got to Do with It’ on the New York Ritz stage, visually (though not vocally) performed by Angela Basset (figure 7), only to be replaced by the real-life TINA TURNER in the grand stadium once Ike has left (figure 8).



Figures 7 and 8

The replacement of the fictional Tina by the real-life one at the conclusion of the biopic was received with some disquiet. Reviewer Harry Pearson commented that ‘Suddenly, we breathe a sigh of relief and say: “This is how it it’s supposed to be, this is why she’s a star.” This intercut undercuts all the work Bassett has done up to this point’.<sup>27</sup> bell hooks questioned: ‘Why does the real Tina Turner have to come in at the end of *What’s Love Got to Do with It?* It’s like saying that Angela Bassett isn’t a good enough actress — which I didn’t think she was, by the way — and that’s part of why, in a sense, it becomes Larry Fishburne’s narrative of Ike, more so than the narrative of Tina Turner’.<sup>28</sup> The answer lies, again, in the way triumph and tragedy are reconciled. On the one hand, the ending is similar to the final performance in *Lady Sings the Blues*, as the fictional Tina and the black female tragedy she embodies (as exemplified by her relationship with Ike) need to be ‘eliminated’ to reconfirm the real-life Tina Turner as the triumphant superstar, just like the fictional Billie Holiday needs to ‘die’ to enable the triumphant performance by the emerging superstar Diana Ross. On the other, there is a major difference. The tagline of *Lady Sings the Blues* may have suggested that ‘Diana Ross IS Billie Holiday’, she clearly was not; the real-life Tina Turner, in stark contrast, appears at the end of the film of which she is the subject to attest that she is no longer the tragic character as portrayed by Angela Bassett. Yet, in both cases, the films provide a tragic backstory to authenticate the triumph of superstardom, with the only difference being that Ross appropriates the life story of Billie Holiday, while Turner uses her own.

The final performance of ‘I Will Always Love You’ in *Whitney* starts, at least vocally, at the end of a previous and quite dramatic scene (set in the private bedroom) in which Whitney first breaks up with Bobby and then tells him she will give him one more chance. While Whitney’s teary-eyed face is shown in close-up, her voice (performed by Deborah Cox) can be heard on the soundtrack, singing the opening verse of ‘I Will Always Love You’ acapella, providing a sound bridge into the very short next scene of Whitney in her dressing room, with Bobby coming in and telling her ‘Baby, you’re on in ten.’ Then Whitney is shown in (medium) close-ups and long shots performing



on stage in front of a large audience at an unidentified concert hall (figure 9), singing her signature song from the soundtrack of *The Bodyguard*. Like Louis in *Lady Sings the Blues*, Bobby stands in the wings of the stage; Whitney’s performance is intercut by thirteen close-ups of Bobby watching his wife sing (figure 10).



Figures 9 and 10

The performance of the song has a threefold function. First, similar to the biopic’s other musical numbers, it is a showcase of Whitney’s talent and as such provides the film with a triumphant finale. Second, with this song, Whitney is saying ‘goodbye’ to her audience, at least the off-screen one, as this is her ‘final’ performance in the film (in ‘real’ life, Whitney Houston went on a controversial ‘comeback’ world tour in 2009-2010, which, due to her erratic vocal performance, and in particular her failure to reach the high note of her signature song ‘I Will Always Love You’, was widely perceived as a showcase of her tragic downfall).<sup>29</sup> Third, and most important for the biopic’s narrative, the song signals the ‘bittersweet’ romantic ending of her relationship with Bobby.<sup>30</sup> When Whitney sings the line ‘I hope life treats you kind and I hope you have all you’ve dreamed of’, she looks directly at Bobby (figure 11), who answers her gaze, creating an eyeline match (figure 12).



Figures 11 and 12

At the end of the performance, Whitney is shown in a medium shot, at the center of the frame, standing in a triumphant position on stage (figure 13). While the diegetic audience gives her a rousing round of applause, Whitney fades away into the bright



light, signifying — quite obviously — her death (figure 14). Here the triumph/tragedy divide is reconciled. Not only is her relationship with Bobby brought to a close (he clearly loves her, yet, as Whitney sings, 'we both know I'm not what you need'), but the tragedy in her private life is also left behind, including the tragedy that was still to come, undoubtedly known to the off-screen audience, yet left untold.



Figures 13 and 14

Unlike the 1972 off-screen audience of *Lady Sings the Blues*, the 2015 audience of *Whitney* does not need to be reminded that its main subject is dead. While the diegetic audience cheering continues, the white screen turns into a black one, showing the following text in white letters, merely mentioning Houston's death in passing:

After 15 years of marriage, Whitney and Bobby divorced in 2006. During her career, Whitney sold over 200 million records and was the most awarded female artist in the world. Since her death in 2012, her music continues to influence and inspire generations of artists who consider her one of the greatest voices of all time.

Similar to the on-screen text about Tina Turner in *What's Love Got to Do with It*, Whitney Houston is presented (or, in this case, remembered) as a successful star, measured by her commercial and artistic accomplishments. However, in *Lady Sings the Blues* and *What's Love Got to Do with It*, both the fictional Billie and Tina had to be 'eliminated' to displace the tragedy they embody with the triumph as personified by Diana Ross and the real-life Tina Turner. Here the final performance is neither a showcase for Yaya DaCosta and Deborah Cox (that it takes two performers to portray Houston, both visually and vocally, merely emphasizes the magnitude of Houston's talent) as the one in *Lady Sings the Blues* was for Diana Ross, nor just a celebration of Houston's real-life stardom, as the one in *What's Love Got to Do with It* was for the real-life Tina Turner. In the end, Whitney — both the fictional and the real-life one — simply disappears.

So far I have discussed the contradiction between the narrative and musical number at the representational level, whereas Richard Dyer also recognizes this contradiction as ‘one between the heavily representational and verisimilitudinous (pointing to the way the world is, drawing on the audience’s concrete experience of the world) and the heavily non-representational and “unreal” (pointing to how things could be better)’, including within the musical number itself.<sup>31</sup> In all three cases, the final musical performances evoke the sensation of success, thereby showing how black female triumph ‘feels’ in spite of the tragedy that these biopics depict. However, while the final performance of *What’s Love Got to Do with It* relies on the success of the ‘real’ Tina Turner to overcome the tragedy of its subject, the performances of *Lady Sings the Blues* and *Whitney* present possible experiences of black female triumph: what if Billie Holiday or Whitney Houston had survived and succeeded? In this way, these final performances fulfill the ‘unreal’ promise of depicting (and enabling the viewer to ‘feel’) the triumph that was lost and rendered invisible in the tragedy.

## Conclusion

In April 2020, Anthony McCarten, screenwriter of the Freddie Mercury biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Bryan Singer, 2018), announced that he was working on a new biopic about Whitney Houston, tentatively entitled *I Wanna Dance with Somebody*, to be released as a feature film. This time the Whitney Houston Estate is actively involved in the plans, co-producing the film together with Houston’s former executive producer Clive Davis. Stella Meghie has been mentioned as possible director, which could mean that the biopic will be directed by a black woman.<sup>32</sup> Another forthcoming feature film biopic about a black female entertainer, and directed by a woman of color, is *Respect* (Liesl Tommy, 2021), starring Jennifer Hudson as Aretha Franklin. Time will tell whether or not these two new feature films will be able to present the life stories of black female entertainers without being constrained too much by the biopic’s genre conventions that tend to reduce the female subjects to victims and to assign most agency — whether as savior or villain — to the main men in their lives.

Like most biopics, *Whitney* cannot escape its genre conventions turning her specific life story into a generic tale about the downside of success, despite having been directed by Angela Bassett. By focusing on her most successful years, rather than her subsequent downfall, the film at least tries to avert bell hook’s assertion that Hollywood highlights black female tragedy at the expense of black female triumph. Yet, *Whitney* is not about Houston’s success but about her relationship with Bobby Brown, thereby presenting another generic tale, one of a genuine love that cannot be.

In this way, the film not only predominantly becomes Brown's narrative, but also reduces Whitney Houston's artistic triumph, her superstardom, to a subplot of its main love story. As the film suggests, just as her romance with Bobby is doomed to fail, so too is her superstar career, although the latter is never explicitly addressed. When, in the end, she disappears into thin air, Whitney Houston's story is left untold.

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### About the Author

Jaap Kooijman is an associate professor in Media Studies and American Studies at the University of Amsterdam, author of *Fabricating the Absolute Fake: America in Contemporary Pop Culture* (AUP, 2013), and co-editor, with Glyn Davis, of *The Richard Dyer Reader* (BFI, 2022). His articles on pop culture and stardom have been published in journals such as *The Velvet Light Trap*, *Celebrity Studies*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Popular Music and Society*, *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies*, and *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies*, as well as in edited collections such as *Unpopular Culture* (AUP, 2016), *A Companion to Celebrity* (Wiley Blackwell, 2016), *Revisiting Star Studies* (Edinburgh UP, 2017), *Music/Video: Histories, Aesthetics, Media* (Bloomsbury, 2017), and *Beyoncé: At Work, On Screen, and Online* (Indiana UP, 2020).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Houston, Pat, 'Statement from Pat Houston, President of The Whitney Houston Estate re Lifetime Movie', in: *WhitneyHouston.com* (16 January 2015), <https://www.whitneyhouston.com/news/statement-pat-houston-president-whitney-houston-estate-re-lifetime-movie/?path=us/news/statement-pat-houston-president-whitney-houston-estate-re-lifetime-movie>, date accessed: 22 August 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Sheffield, Rob, '10 Most Hell-to-the-Yes Moments in Lifetime's *Whitney*', in: *Rolling Stone* (18 January 2015), <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-news/10-most-hell-to-the-yes-moments-in-lifetimes-whitney-55828/>, date accessed: 22 August 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Hundley, Heather, 'The Evolution of Gendercasting: The Lifetime Television Network – "Television for Women"', in: *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 29:4 (2002) 174-181; Newman, Emily L, and Emily Witsell (eds.), *The Lifetime Network: Essays on 'Television for Women' in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2016.



<sup>4</sup> Nick Broomfield is English, Rudi Dolezal is Austrian, and Kevin Macdonald is Scottish. See also Kooijman, Jaap. 'Talking [Heads] About Whitney.' *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies* 9:2, 2020, 445-448, <https://necsus-ejms.org/talking-heads-about-whitney/>, date accessed: 22 August 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Zoller Seitz, Matt, 'Whitney Is Not Particularly Good, But Director Angela Bassett Knows What She's Doing', in: *Vulture* (17 January 2015), <https://www.vulture.com/2015/01/tv-review-lifetime-whitney-houston-biopic.html>, date accessed: 22 August 2021.

<sup>6</sup> This essay builds on Kooijman, Jaap, 'Triumphant Black Pop Divas on the Wide Screen: *Lady Sings the Blues* and *Tina: What's Love Got to Do with It*', in: Ian Inglis (ed.), *Popular Music and Film*, London: Wallflower, 2003, 178-193.

<sup>7</sup> Bogle, Donald, *Brown Sugar: Over One Hundred Years of America's Black Female Superstars*, New York and London: Continuum, 2007 (265-269, 330-337); Kooijman, Jaap, 'The True Voice of Whitney Houston: Commodification, Authenticity, and African American Superstardom', in: *Celebrity Studies* 5:3 (2014) 305-320; Shelton, Marla, 'Whitney is Every Woman?: Cultural Politics and the Pop Star', in: *Camera Obscura* 36 (1995) 135-153.

<sup>8</sup> When referring to fictional characters in the film, I use the first names (Whitney and Bobby); when referring to them in real life, I use the last names (Houston and Brown).

<sup>9</sup> 'Angela Bassett Interview', in: *Lifetime* (January 2015), <https://www.lifetime.co.uk/shows/whitney/angela-bassett-interview>, date accessed: 30 June 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Zeman, Jack, 'Lifetime's *Whitney*: What the Critics Are Saying', in: *The Hollywood Reporter* (17 January 2015), <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/whitney-lifetime-review-what-critics-764525>, date accessed: 22 August 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Sheffield.

<sup>12</sup> Obviously, *Whitney* can also be compared to other biopics, most notably to the HBO films *The Josephine Baker Story* (Brian Gibson, 1991) and *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (Martha Coolidge, 1999), which both are discussed by H el ene Charlery. As she argues: 'The two HBO films thus "characterize" the women as subjects and narrators of their own stories, deviating from the victimizing and psychological approach used in the biopics on Tina Turner and Billie Holiday.' As I suggest, in this regard, *Whitney* is more similar to *Lady Sings the Blues* and *What's Love Got to Do with It* than to *The Josephine Baker Story* and *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge*. Charlery, H el ene, 'HBO's Black Women Artist Biopics: *The Josephine Baker Story* and *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge*', in: *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal* 14:2 (2016), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/lisa.8993>.

<sup>13</sup> Holiday, Billie, with William Dufty. *Lady Sings the Blues*. New York: Doubleday, 1956; Turner, Tina, with Kurt Loder. *I, Tina: My Life Story*. New York: Avon Books, 1987. Both co-authors are white men.

<sup>14</sup> Custen, George F. *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992 (25-26).

<sup>15</sup> Bingham, Dennis. *Whose Lives are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010 (214).

<sup>16</sup> hooks, bell. *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996 (139).

<sup>17</sup> Baldwin, James. *The Devil Finds Work: An Essay*. New York: The Dial Press, 1976 (110).

<sup>18</sup> As Matthew Sutton has pointed out: 'In real life, McKay, her third husband, was not around for most of the events depicted in the film. He certainly was not there the first night she sang, nor did he bail her out of troubles with drugs and the law as Billy Dee Williams's character does repeatedly in the screenplay. McKay, however, did serve as a paid "technical advisor" on the film, contributing another voice (and agenda) to the telling of Holiday's posthumous story'. Sutton, 'Bitter Crop: The Aftermath of *Lady Sings the Blues*', in: *alb: Auto/Biography Studies* 27:2 (2012) 294-315 (307).

<sup>19</sup> Early, Gerald, *One Nation Under a Groove: Motown and American Culture*, revised and expanded edition, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004 (120).

<sup>20</sup> In the documentary *Whitney: Can I Be Me*, Bobby Brown's sister Tina jokingly recalls how her brother and Whitney Houston would mimic scenes from *What's Love Got to Do with It*, in which 'She'd be Tina Turner and he'd be Ike'. When I watched this scene in the cinema, I had to laugh, as did many others

in the audience, yet it was a very uncomfortable laugh. While Tina Brown told the story to counter the way the tabloid press had covered the troubled and allegedly abusive marriage of Houston and Brown, the connection between Tina and Houston, and Ike and Brown, only seems to confirm rather than to deny the abusive character of their relationship.

<sup>21</sup> Bernstein, Jonathan, 'Whitney, Review: Why Was Bobby Brown the Star?', in: *The Telegraph* (19 January 2015), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/tv-and-radio-reviews/11348054/Whitney-review-Lifetime.html>, date accessed: 22 August 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Dyer, Richard, *Social Values of Entertainment and Show Business*, Birmingham: Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1972 (368, emphasis in original).

<sup>23</sup> Dyer, Richard, *Only Entertainment*, second edition, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, (27).

<sup>24</sup> Baldwin (104).

<sup>25</sup> Harnetz, Aljean, 'Diana Ross: Lady Doesn't Sing the Blues', in: *The New York Times*, 24 December 1972, <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/12/24/archives/diana-ross-lady-doesnt-sing-the-blues-diana-ross-lady-doesnt-sing.html>, date accessed: 22 August 2021, emphasis in original.

<sup>26</sup> The historically incorrect information in the on-screen text highlights the fact that the film leaves out the seven years between Tina Turner leaving Ike and her becoming successful. The 'first solo album' mentioned, *Private Dancer* (1984), was in fact her fifth solo album. Two solo albums were released when Tina Turner was still with Ike Turner, while the next two, *Rough* (1978) and *Love Explosion* (1979), were released after she left him, but before she became a superstar.

<sup>27</sup> Pearson, Harry, 'What's Love Got to Do with It?', in: *Films in Review* 44:9/10 (October 1993), 344-346.

<sup>28</sup> hooks (111).

<sup>29</sup> Kooijman, 'The True Voice of Whitney Houston' (315-316).

<sup>30</sup> Here there is a clear parallel to the way 'I Will Always Love You' functions in *The Bodyguard*. Although Whitney Houston's character Rachel Marron does not perform the song on stage, her rendition is the soundtrack of the film's final scene in which Rachel says farewell to her bodyguard turned lover Frank Farmer, played by Kevin Costner.

<sup>31</sup> Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (27).

<sup>32</sup> Blistein, Jon, 'Whitney Houston Biopic In the Works With Estate Approval', in: *Rolling Stone* (22 April 2020), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/whitney-houston-biopic-movie-details-988535/>, date accessed: 22 August 2021.