

Martin Lüthe

Color-Line and Crossing-Over
Motown and Performances of Blackness
in 1960s American Culture

Ansgar Nünning, Vera Nünning, Norbert Finzsch (Hg.)

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many scholarly authors claim that books, and texts in general, are journeys that reflect the author's own travels – literal and metaphorical ones. This book feels less like the result of the places I have been than of the people I have known all my life or got to know more recently as a result of my research for this study. Not surprisingly, I have a lot of people to thank. I will resist the temptation to find a line from a Motown song for each of them; as a matter of fact, I will not use a Motown line for a single one of them. The people most involved with the project are my academic advisors, who luckily are also and have been supporters of my graduate and post-graduate work:

Ansgar Nünning has for the past three years built a house and shelter – literally – for doctoral students in the study of culture in the heart of Germany; I am proud and happy that the GCSC, the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture, accepted me as a doctoral fellow in its very first year. Ansgar Nünning has provided much needed guidance and support but, more importantly, a creative atmosphere, in which the work of everyone found a place and respect. It is hard to measure the significance of your contribution to the study of culture in Germany. Bon Jovi sings, “you can't help but prosper, when the streets are paved with gold” – that is how I feel about the GCSC as a center for intellectual work, and I can only imagine how much blood, sweat, and tears on your side went into it. Oh, and one day I might be able to take revenge for the disgraceful “Tipp-Kick” incident I experienced during your office hours. Thank you for it all.

Norbert Finzsch is not only the true originator of this text; he is also responsible for making me pursue post-graduate work in the first place. For two reasons: Firstly and plainly, he told me that a book on Motown needed to be written and that I could be the one writing it; secondly, he has inspired me to even regard the university system as a place of “real people,” and cool people at that. I really appreciate your support, trust, courage and wish I could have made it to Cologne more often. Thanks Finzsch, you're the man; if it were not for you, I would not be here today finishing this text. I hope you like the result.

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My parents, Rudy and Ursula, who have never stopped supporting me, have always trusted me and believed in my work, and, most importantly, have always loved me. I will never forget – this, and you, mean the world to me.

Finally: Nicolle Härtling, this here is as much yours as it is mine. Thank you for having accompanied me during that phase. It turned out to be a tough one, for me and for you. I am aware of your contribution to the book and I am still very thankful for your support. I dedicate this to you, because without you I clearly would not have had the vigor and resilience to write it.

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1. INTRODUCTION: BLACK CULTURE, MOTOWN, AND WHITE CULTURE

*“Our employees must be neat and clean and really have
Something on the ball ...”* (Smokey Robinson 1962)

1.1 The Body of Motown

Motown became and has remained the sound of the sixties; Motown defined and presented itself as ‘the sound of young America’. As critical and important the music, the sound, may be and may have been, it is a concept that shrouds and disembodies the real complexity lurking in American culture before, throughout, and after the 1960s: the black body, the ultimate specter in the American imaginary. Motown, I strongly believe, thus provided much more than the mere sound of the sixties; it provided the sound – the music and voice – and the body of the sixties.

William “Smokey” Robinson Jr. – to most simply known as Smokey Robinson, lead singer of the all-male vocal group The Miracles – wrote a special song in 1961, which he dedicated to the company he worked for – *Hitsville, U.S.A.*, the headquarter of the Detroit record label Motown, the focus of this analysis of American culture. Robinson enthusiastically begins the song with the assertion: “Oh, we have a very swinging company” (1962a). The positive perception of *Hitsville, U.S.A.*, which functioned as the headquarters and recording studio of the emerging cultural phenomenon that has widely been summarized under the Motown moniker, by one of its employees is striking. The line of the company’s ‘anthem’ illustrates how the phenomenon itself functioned culturally. It was almost exclusively viewed as a positive, life-asserting example of a version of the American Dream materialized in a black-owned recording company and is still inscribed along these lines in the cultural memory of the United States.¹

More importantly, in the song, Smokey Robinson also chants that “Our main purpose is to praise the world with songs the D.J.’s are glad to play” and that “Our employees *must* be neat and clean and really have something on the ball” (1962a). “The Motown Company Song” is in many ways a fascinating and crucial account of the time, place, and concepts this thesis seeks to analyze and establish. The fact that the song construes the purpose of the company to be praising the world with songs and that it significantly emphasizes the need for everyone involved to be “clean”, “neat” and smart/motivated, already hints at the central arguments to be established in the course of this investigation of Motown during the 1960s, namely that the popularity of

¹ Throughout the text, I will use the umbrella term Motown, which is generally employed to describe the cultural phenomenon, even though Motown was only one of many labels Berry Gordy controlled in Detroit. Tamla, Gordy, Soul, and Black Forum are the most prominent labels usually subsumed under the term Motown.

Motown music during the decade was accompanied by the simultaneous construction and stylization of African American body types by the label, body types that indeed interrogated and renegotiated ‘neat’ and ‘clean’ as possible ascriptions to black bodies.²

Motown achieved national popularity at the height of what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall rightfully conceives of as “the long civil rights movement” (2005), a time during which the social, political, and cultural implications of race and racism came under broad attack. Whereas the beginning of the 1960s did not coincide with the emergence of the civil rights struggle, the beginning of the Kennedy administration to many historians marks a watershed in the history of the 20th century especially with regard to the drastically increasing cultural visibility of the civil rights movement; it certainly marks a decisive period of social, political, and cultural negotiation, resistance, and activism – an activism triggered by the unsatisfactory conditions different cultural groups in the United States found themselves in (cf. van Gosse 1995, 10ff; Heideking 2006, 386ff; Monteith 2008, 1ff).

This thesis construes Motown not only as “the sound of young America”³ and “a very swinging company,” it rather asserts that Motown provided the American middle class with a language, a set of signs and symbols related to and in conjunction with ‘the black cultural body’, which seemed to simultaneously speak to notions and desires of white consumption of blackness and the cultural aspirations of emerging black middle classes. In relation with the construction of these black bodies, the text accordingly explores the ways the social and political realities of this period came to be processed and commentated in the popular culture of the time, culminating in the pop cultural embodiment of blackness.

The Supremes, The Temptations, Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell, The Miracles, The Four Tops and other artists recorded the “soundtrack of the Sixties” and reached an unprecedented commercial success through what has been widely understood and described as the alleged “‘whitening’ of black musical forms”. (Harper 1989, 107) Evidently, such labels – white and black – explicitly cite an allegedly natural quality of the body, namely the color of the skin, in order to explain or approach the study of culture in general, and pop music specifically. Obviously, these categories or concepts determine the perception and reception of a cultural artifact of different cultural groups at given moments in American and global history. Recently, however, these categories have themselves become the site of interest within the various disciplines contributing to the study of culture and in the vast project of deciphering the forms and function of (popular) culture itself. Instead of judging degrees of blackness or whiteness in the

² Not surprisingly, Robinson deploys a metaphor from the “All-American” ballgame of baseball; a game which has itself become a metaphor for the “American Dream” and the “American Way of Life”.

³ “The Sound of Young America” became Motown’s slogan during the mid-1960s and it from then on was printed on every product (from artist sheets to merchandise and record covers).