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## “Wanna be Startin’ Somethin’”: Black Feminist Bookwriters and Bio-Musicals

By Michael DeWhatley

### Abstract

*Ain’t Too Proud: The Life and Times of the Temptations*, *Tina: The Tina Turner Musical*, and *MJ the Musical* are three biographical jukebox musicals that premiered on Broadway between 2019-2022. All three feature books by Black women, a significant diversification of the Broadway musical, which has been historically dominated by white men. However, each of these three shows in turn were lambasted by critics as intellectually flimsy musicals; unoriginal, nostalgic and of limited cultural value. Important critics from *The New York Times* to *The Hollywood Reporter* to *Variety* dismiss the shows (and particularly their books) as unworthy of the performers cast in them and the audiences who attended them. Using Black feminist epistemologies and surveying various reviews by different types of critics, I reframe *Ain’t Too Proud*, *Tina*, and *MJ* as not merely the latest iterations of a tired biographical-jukebox musical form, but as important celebrations of Black feminist cultural memory and historically significant breakthroughs for Black women creators on Broadway.

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In the history of the Broadway musical, only six Black women have ever been nominated for a Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical. None has ever won. Two of the six, Micki Grant and Vinnette Justine Carroll, were collaborators on each other’s musicals in the 1970s and early 1980s. Grant, a composer and librettist, was nominated for *Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope* in 1973. Vinnette Justine Carroll was honored for her work on *Your Arms Too Short to Box with God* (1977). Over forty years passed between the opening of *Your Arms* and the next musical to earn a Black woman librettist a nomination for the Great White Way’s highest honor. Bucking historical trends, three Black women each separately earned nominations for Tony Awards for writing the books of musicals about the lives of Black icons, starting in 2019 and continuing for two subsequent seasons<sup>1</sup>.

Those three shows were *Ain’t Too Proud: The Life and Times of the Temptations* (2019) by Dominique Morisseau, *Tina: The Tina Turner Musical* (2019) by Katori Hall, Frank Ketelaar and Kees Prins, and *MJ the Musical* by Lynn Nottage (2022). Each of these three shows in turn were lambasted by critics as intellectually flimsy musicals; unoriginal, nostalgic and of limited cultural value. Important critics from *The New York Times* to *The Hollywood Reporter* to *Variety* dismiss the shows (and particularly their books) as unworthy of the performers cast in them and the audiences who attended them. These criticisms are damaging to Morisseau’s, Hall’s and Nottage’s artistic reputations, but they are also a significant dismissal of the contributions of biographical-jukebox musicals written by Black feminist

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were no Tony Award nominations or ceremonies in 2021.

authors as a method of creating Black feminist cultural memory. Without a new understanding of what these three musicals accomplish, those memories may be permanently misperceived as exploitative puff pieces when they hold the potential to help audiences understand their past and reimagine their present. I reframe *Ain't Too Proud*, *Tina*, and *MJ* as not merely the latest iterations of a tired biographical-jukebox musical (which I refer to hereafter as bio-musical) form, but as important celebrations of Black feminist cultural memory and historically significant breakthroughs for Black women creators on Broadway.

When *Ain't Too Proud: The Life and Times of The Temptations* opened at Broadway's Imperial Theatre on March 21st, 2019, reviews were mixed. While the jukebox musical's score landed with critics, the book by Dominique Morisseau came under heavy criticism. Frank Rizzo of *Variety* claimed that compared to *Dreamgirls*, a show with an all-white writing team, "rich and complex storytelling [is] missing from [*Ain't Too Proud*]." Leah Greenblatt wrote in *Entertainment Weekly* that the *Ain't Too Proud* company with their "sheer overwhelming talent" overcomes the inadequacies of script that doesn't give any character an arc or "the contours of a full personality beyond a few fast details." In *The New York Times*, still considered the arbiter of taste for commercial theater, Ben Brantley described the book as clichéd and "sometimes too fragmented," in a review that otherwise celebrated the "glistening smoothness" of the production. Writing for *Vulture*, Sara Holdren argued that Morriseau's book, filled with "corny clunkers," "feels less like narrative development than like box-checking."

*Tina* also struggled to overcome negative reviews of its libretto in the days following its Broadway opening. David Rooney's review of *Tina* for *The Hollywood Reporter* praises the performance of Adrienne Warren as Tina Turner while lamenting the "framing device set up in the opening minutes

[that] lets you know instantly this is going to be a bumpy dramaturgical ride." Marilyn Stasio's opinion of *Tina* for *Variety* is more generous, calling the show "heaven," while also noting "the narrative arc is hardly challenging, advancing step by step in strict chronological order as dictated by the trajectory of the songs." *MJ*'s critical fate echoed that of *Tina* and *Ain't Too Proud*. Jesse Green, in *The New York Times*, accused Nottage of using "clichés from the jukebox playbook to dramatize [MJ's] story," and described the show on the whole as "a grind of obfuscation." Naveen Kumar, for *Variety* wrote that Nottage's book was "not so much a biomusical as a high-shine and surface-skimming rehabilitation tour for its late subject, flattening rather than reckoning with his complex legacy." While each of these three musicals were celebrated for their high production value and the virtuosity of their leads, their librettos were regularly dismissed or denigrated by the press.

*Ain't Too Proud*, *Tina*, and *MJ* are all bio-musicals, which I define as narrative shows created around existing catalogs of music by specific historical performers in a way that reveals the life stories of the performers as well as (to different extents) their internal struggles. Each of the three musicals has a container, an overarching narrative structure, that is similar to bio-musicals such as *Jersey Boys* (2005), *Ring of Fire* (2006), and *On Your Feet!* (2015). *Ain't Too Proud*, based on Otis Williams's memoir, *Temptations* (1988), takes place in a series of events narrated to the audience by Williams. It moves chronologically forward from the assembling of the original five Temptations through their ascendancy to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. *Tina*, which benefited from Tina Turner's producerial role in the show, also moves forward chronologically from Turner's childhood in Nutbush, Tennessee through her successful solo career after her breakup with Ike Turner. *MJ* is set against the backdrop of the buildup to Jackson's 1992 Dangerous World Tour, with a fictional series of interviews with a

reporter allowing for various flashbacks to different eras in Jackson's life and career. All three shows highlight the biographies of their performers, in the context of the United States in the second half of the twentieth century, in relatively straightforward ways.

While their narrative approach is straightforward in these shows, Morisseau, Nottage and Hall are three profoundly talented Black feminist writers who have three Pulitzer Prizes for Drama, two MacArthur "Genius Grant" Fellowships, and five OBIE Awards between them. Each of these three playwrights is widely respected for their non-musical plays. Katori Hall won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2021 for *The Hot Wing King* and her play, *The Mountaintop*, won the 2010 Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play in the West End before enjoying a Broadway run in the 2011-2012 season. Lynn Nottage is the first, and so far the only, woman to have won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama twice, for *Ruined* (2009) and *Sweat* (2017). Nottage has also written for opera, adapting her play *Intimate Apparel* to a libretto composed by Ricky Ian Gordon, and she wrote the book for the musical adaptation of Sue Monk Kidd's novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, which was produced by the Atlantic Theatre Company in 2019. Dominique Morisseau's Detroit Trilogy, which includes *Detroit '67* (2013), *Paradise Blue* (2015) and *Skeleton Crew* (2016), and her separate play exposing the structural racism in the U.S. educational system, *Pipeline* (2017), have contributed to Morisseau's notoriety. Her work has been so widely produced Morisseau has been listed among the top five most produced playwrights in America by *American Theatre* magazine in 2018-2019, 2019-2020, and 2022-2023. All three playwrights bring their considerable efforts to bear as creators of cultural memory in these shows as they exist within a bio-musical form. I challenge the arguments of mainstream critics about these three shows and the librettos, crafted by Black feminists, that hold these shows together. As a white, male, cis author, I attempt this reframing primarily through the

words of Morisseau, Nottage, and Hall as well as Black feminist theorists, critics and writers. By listening to and lifting up their words, I hope to demonstrate a clearer argument for these shows as Black feminist cultural memory than I might on my own.

I highlight Morisseau, Hall, and Nottage as creators of the three bio-musicals I investigate here as a way of untangling what musicologist Dominic McHugh calls the “compositional culture” of musical theatre authorship (606). In traditional musical theatre and musicology scholarship, authorial credit has generally gone to the composer of a musical’s score; composers are usually referred to first (or only). In bio-musicals, this problem becomes even more complex. My focus on the writers—Katori Hall for *Tina*, Dominique Morisseau for *Ain’t Too Proud*, and Lynn Nottage for *MJ* - illuminates their profound control over the container of their stories and what is revealed (or not) about the lives of the characters therein.

One of the problems Morisseau, Hall, and Nottage face in their creation of Black musical memory in their shows is the traditional shunting of jukebox musicals to the peripheries of what tastemakers consider valuable. For example, in Jesse Green’s review of *Tina* for *The New York Times*, Green laments that Katori Hall’s book “is so thin it’s see-through.” Green qualifies the complaint by adding, “You can’t really blame Hall, whose earlier work...is complex and layered. No, this is a problem built into the biographical jukebox genre, whose songs leave the narrative only enough time for turning points and climaxes” (“Stepping Into a Diva’s Heels”). In Green’s view, it’s impossible to write a musical that uses pre-established songs “bent into improbable shapes to serve a story they weren’t designed for” (“Stepping Into a Diva’s Heels”). Stacy Wolf’s feminist history of the Broadway musical, *Changed for Good*, speaks to Green’s viewpoint here. “Starting in the mid-1940s,” Wolf writes, “The critical judgment of a musical depended on how well the show’s elements were formally integrated” (9).

The prioritization of integration undermines the powerful functionality of songs in jukebox musicals that can, according to musicologist Millie Taylor, “leap from [their context] and make connections with other parts of the audience's lived experiences” (162). In *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, Jessica Sternfeld and Elizabeth Wollman criticize jukebox musicals as they define them. “Instead of offering new songs evocative of past styles,” they write, “jukebox musicals string together preexisting songs by a popular artist or group with the aid of a unifying (often frivolous) plot” (121). Critics of individual shows and scholars analyzing the field at large have developed a consensus around bio-musicals’ cultural location: outside the spotlight. “If you meant to see a true union of song and story, though,” Green writes at the end of his review of *Tina*, “You won’t get it here. Because that...would be a real musical.”

Even scholars deeply concerned with the role of Black musicals and Black artists have an aversion for bio-musicals that prevents them from acknowledging the work of women like Morisseau, Hall, and Nottage. Kristen Jackson’s 2014 dissertation, *Making the Invisible Visible*, is a treatise on the post-Black aesthetics of two particular Broadway plays by Black women playwrights. One of the plays Jackson examines is Katori Hall’s *The Mountaintop*, which focuses on the last night of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s life. Jackson identifies post-Blackness and Black feminism in Hall’s text and notes how Hall empowers Black female subjectivity and creates richer characters in her work (5). However, in Jackson’s conclusion, she dismisses the post-Black potential of jukebox musicals. “New contemporary post-black drama is also noticeably absent [from the Broadway stage]” Jackson argues, “In its stead we have *Motown: The Musical*” (73). The off-hand and

dismissive nod towards a jukebox musical is typical of the critical relationship to the form<sup>2</sup>.

Going even further, Warren Hoffman's monograph, *The Great White Way*, argues that bio-musicals such as *MJ*, *Tina*, and *Ain't Too Proud* are indicative of a nostalgic bent towards white supremacy. Hoffman argues that despite "the stereotype of the genre as a whole is that musicals are fanciful, silly, throwaway entertainments that have nothing profound to offer," musicals remain potent, insidious vehicles for racial assumptions and prejudices (3). In the wake of Donald Trump's election in 2016, Hoffman released a second edition of the original 2014 volume that, among other things, highlights the nostalgic nature of bio-musicals in a new epilogue. In this epilogue, Hoffman argues that the same kind of nostalgia that motivates slogans like "Make America Great Again" is also pushing Broadway to engage in the development of bio-musicals (228). Hoffman's new epilogue also explicitly names *MJ*, *Ain't Too Proud*, and *Tina* as shows that, while good economic opportunities for Black artists, are "resolutely trapped in the past" and are determined to be oversimplified and nonthreatening to white audiences (229). Hoffman engages in a different type of oversimplification by painting jukebox musicals of Black artists with the same brush as those made about white artists. *Ain't Too Proud*, *Tina*, and *MJ* all portray the effects of racism in key plot points that put their main characters into impossible situations and motivate their actions. *Ring of Fire* and *Jersey Boys* do not.

Furthermore, Hoffman argues that jukebox musicals, relying on music catalogues from the past, have little to offer contemporary musical theatre makers and audiences "without always questioning the racial

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<sup>2</sup> Since Jackson's dissertation was written five years before Hall's production of *Tina* opened on Broadway, it's not immediately clear how her perspective on Hall and bio-musicals might respond to the more recent work, but she is unambiguous about her distaste for *Motown*.



politics that accompanied certain shows” (228). Hoffman’s belief that jukebox musicals “embrace the past rather than the future,” and create a “self-sabotaging” style of musical theatre that “makes the focus of the musical, this most American of art forms, a backward looking one,” underestimates the value of shows set in the past (228-229). Even if the racism portrayed in the work of Hall, Nottage and Morriseau is rooted in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, the shows still ask audiences to become aware of racist practices happening in the present. As Emily Hawkins says in her review of *Ain’t Too Proud* on her Youtube channel, *To See Or Not To See*, “I know that Dominique [Morriseau] wanted to illustrate that [*Ain’t Too Proud* is] not just set in that time period, but that this story is everlasting. This is a story we’re facing today.” Performance studies scholar Sam O’Connell presents this idea in a different way in his analysis of *The Wiz* as an African diasporic drama. “Black music *speaks* blackness, as a shared sense of collective experience,” O’Connell argues, “while also shaping how one hears the multiplicity of black positions, diasporic layers, and historical traces of the local or the individual” (85). In this way, music embedded in Black culture works to illuminate a range of experiences, feelings and historical awareness, both historical and contemporary. In their writing, Morriseau, Hall, and Nottage are aware of central Black feminist epistemologies around history and weave together emotion, history, and other ways of knowing that encourage the making of a productive kind of memory that influences our understanding of the present.

While critics and scholars seem united in their dismissal of bio-musicals as largely lacking in cultural or intellectual substance, Morriseau, Hall, and Nottage use the form to create Black feminist cultural memory. Black feminism, informed here by the work of Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought*, is a framework that gives agency to Black women in the articulation and performance of their own truths and

more highly values their knowledge and experiences. “Epistemological choices about whom to trust, what to believe, and why something is true are not benign academic issues,” writes Collins, “instead, these concerns tap the fundamental question of which versions of truth will prevail” (252). Cultural memories, the second part of my framework here, are defined by endarkened feminist scholar Cynthia Dillard as “...memories that change our ways of being (culture) and knowing (epistemology) in what we call the present” (12)<sup>3</sup>. Using the definitions offered by Collins and Dillard, we can understand Black feminist cultural memory in a bio-musical context as performances of iconic Black musicians of the past that transform their pain and struggle into opportunities for new futures. Exercising Black feminist cultural memory is, as performance scholar Harry Elam Jr. writes, “this working through and against the past that allows its practitioners and audience to contemplate the present” (xiv). Tina Turner put it another way in her opening night speech on Broadway’s Lunt-Fontanne Theatre stage. “This musical is my life, but it’s like poison that turned to medicine,” Turner said, “I can never be as happy as I am now” (qtd. in Araujo). The transference of a painful past into a restorative present is at the heart of both Black feminist cultural memory as well as these three shows.

In determining the intention and value of *Tina*, *MJ*, and *Ain’t Too Proud* as Black feminist cultural memories, it is helpful to place additional context around the work of their three authors. In an interview with *The Detroit Hustle Podcast*, Morisseau discussed her development as a student at the University of Michigan, where she realized that “we weren’t studying writers of color...And I didn’t like that. So I was like, ‘I’m gonna write my own

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<sup>3</sup> Scholars Kynard and Pritchard (2022), among others, use the terms “endarkened feminism” and “Black feminism” seemingly interchangeably. Cynthia Dillard identifies as an endarkened feminist, so when I refer to her work specifically this is the term I use. In general and in reference to Collins’ work or my own definitions, I use “Black feminism.”

show. I'm going to be in it.'" Morisseau discussed what Collins would describe as her Black female epistemology in writing *Ain't Too Proud* with Center Theatre Group's Artistic Director Michael Ritchie on *30 To Curtain*. "Even with *Ain't Too Proud*, I want to be way more truthful to events and time," Morisseau shares, "But as I'm writing, I realized that the truth—the facts get in the way of the truth. Facts will make me a slave to this day and this moment...I am not a slave to the facts. I'm a slave to the truth." As Collins describes, Black feminist epistemology offers a more empathetic and individualistic way to arrive at "truth." In her willingness to differentiate between positivist notions of history and the usefulness of narrative as a way of diving into deeper meaning, Morisseau articulates a Black feminist framework in her construction of *Ain't Too Proud*.

Lynn Nottage is even more explicit in her placement of how her plays act as Black feminist cultural memory. "For so long, as an African-American woman, I was not allowed to own history because my narrative was consciously excluded from the public record. I think that my plays are trying to firmly place women of color, in particular women of diaspora, in key historic moments so that we can reclaim history," Nottage argues, "And therefore, reclaim ourselves in the present tense" (qtd. in Buckner 183-184). Katori Hall's work on *Tina* also reflects a desire from the book writer to use Black female subjectivity to claim space and history (5). In an interview with Joe Dziemianowicz of *Observer*, Hall describes the need to be truthful about Turner's lived experiences. "Still, when [Turner] and I sat down to talk," Hall says, "She wondered if people will be able to sit in the theater and see her truth and not be made uncomfortable. I was like, 'I think it's good to be made uncomfortable'" (qtd. in Dziemianowicz). Hall expounds on this point in Stuart Miller's profile of her for *Harvard Magazine* when she says, "If I am telling the story about how Black people have been resilient in this country, I have to use the healing power of music because that is how

we've been able to honor the mother tongue that was snatched away from us." Hall's and Nottage's commitments to creating Black feminist cultural memory through musical performance activates grief and trauma to reject myths about these icons in favor of memorializing their human achievements.

As written by Black feminist authors, *Tina*, *MJ*, and *Ain't Too Proud* are Black feminist musicals that humanize their subjects, give agency to female characters, and re-present histories of Black music icons based on close connection to the communities, artists, or estates they represent. In *Ain't Too Proud*, Dominique Morisseau uses the tools of Black feminism to tell the story of The Temptations, highlighting the roles of Black women in the story of those men while humanizing those musical idols. Otis Williams, the show's narrator, announces early on that there is a difference between the clean-cut image of The Temptations in their sharp suits and the way they behaved behind the curtains. The tension between Williams' ambition and his marriage to Josephine Rogers is a recurring theme in the show, with Williams consistently failing to be a reliable father. During "Ball of Confusion (That's What the World Is Today)," Williams asks about his son, to which Josephine responds:

JOSEPHINE: You can't keep raising him from a distance. He can feel it, you know?

WILLIAMS: You know I do as much as I can. We supposed to look out for each other on that!

JOSEPHINE: I do what I can while you're gone. It's not enough.

WILLIAMS: I'll spend every moment with him when I'm back. All right? Take him out to the field. Tell him to keep practicing that pitch.

Williams's suggestion that his son's need for a father figure will be fulfilled by a visit to a ballfield with his mother is a failure of parenting that Morisseau knowingly portrays. Morisseau also highlights Josephine as a character who, in a bio-musical about an all-men's group, sings featured numbers in "If I Could Build My Whole World Around You," and "If You Don't Know Me By Now." Josephine makes the decision to leave Williams for another man, exercising agency and responsibility for the well-being of her child. Morisseau also accentuates Black feminist elements of *Ain't Too Proud* by naming the Supremes as the musical group that was the elder sister band and primary competition of The Temptations as they ascended the rungs of the Motown ladder. In the "Supremes Medley," and "I'm Gonna Make You Love Me," the Supremes sing by themselves and then alongside The Temptations, respectively. Both moments are deliberate extensions of Morisseau's intention to carve out space for women, their success, and their strength in a story predominantly about men.

Of these three bio-musicals, *Tina* has the clearest hallmarks of a Black feminist show, with a story that centers around the Black female subjectivity of Tina Turner as she navigates the intersectional pressures of fame, racism and an abusive relationship with the man who also ignites her music career. As David Rooney notes for *The Hollywood Reporter*, Hall effectively depicts a "feminist survival ethos as the bloodied but unbroken Tina hits back and breaks free, singing 'I Don't Wanna Fight.'" In *Tina*, Hall also creates significant feminist communities around Tina's early life in Nutbush, Tennessee that continue to serve as nurturing places of recovery and focus when Tina experiences abuse or challenge. For Black women critics like Hawkins and Starr Jackson, the performances of these communities gave *Tina* "more depth, there was more meat, there was more resonance," than other bio-musicals they had recently seen. The show's finale, a combination of "Nutbush City Limits" and "Proud Mary," is a

moment of Black feminist triumph where Tina, now liberated, solo, and in control of her stardom, performs a song about her origins and a song about “rolling” through life with courage.

*MJ*'s relationship to Black feminism is equally present, albeit a bit more subtly. In the opening scene, a female ensemble member apologizes for two children who run across the stage during a rehearsal for *MJ*'s tour. “I’m so sorry,” she says, “my babysitter fell through.” This statement, which receives no acknowledgment from *MJ*, does the double work of illuminating the struggle of working mothers while placing performers onstage who will take on the role of young *MJ* and his brother. Furthermore, Nottage’s willingness to unflinchingly depict trauma as a way of understanding the past is a Black feminist trait that appears in *MJ* in *MJ*'s relationship with his father. The performance of this trauma also complicates the audience’s relationship with *MJ*'s mother Katherine Jackson. While Katherine Jackson physically intervenes when *MJ* is assaulted by his father, she also gaslights young *MJ*. “It may not feel like love now,” she tells a young *MJ* recovering from his father’s abuse, “But it is.” After this dialogue, the two characters segue into a duet of “I’ll Be There,” though she does not appear again in a meaningful way until the end of the show. The troubling roles that both of *MJ*'s parents play in his life is part of an authentic Black feminist remembering of *MJ*'s life that acknowledges his own human frailties and familial scars.

Additionally, in a story that focuses on the life of a man, Nottage inserts a woman protagonist (Rachel) who is both a reporter and a proxy for the audience, alone in her determination to uncover the darker aspects of *MJ*'s psyche and actions. Shortly after introducing her to the narrative, Nottage includes this exchange between Rachel and her cameraman, Alejandro:

ALEJANDRO: We're just making a fluff piece about Michael Jackson.  
That's it.

RACHEL: Yeah, but it doesn't have to be...we've got the chance to get  
inside his head.

Rachel is attempting to achieve something in the show that eludes real reporters today. Under constant pressure to conduct interviews with MJ that present him as a heroic, albeit eccentric, creative genius, Rachel perseveres in pushing for the truth, willing to expose MJ's painkiller abuse. In her conversations with MJ and his entourage, she is the only character willing to ask tough questions like "Is it really possible to separate your life from your music?" and "What if someone gets hurt?" in reference to MJ's erratic behavior. Nottage places a woman, albeit a white one, at the center of a male-focused narrative as a truth seeker, undistracted by MJ's star power or charisma.

When these musicals are seen by critics as flimsy fluff pieces, some of the feminist, traumatic, or spiritual elements seem out of place or strange. Analyzing them through the lens of Black feminist cultural memory begins to clarify the intentions of the shows and acknowledge their worth. For example, in his review of *Ain't Too Proud*, Ben Brantley of *The New York Times* is perplexed and off-put by the "bizarrely perfunctory" portrayal of David Ruffin's abuse of the singer Tammi Terrell, and describes the connections the musical draws between The Temptations and the Civil Rights movement as "strained." I see these moments as necessary, Black feminist depictions of trauma. Not only does the scene of abuse between Ruffins and Terrell de-idolize Ruffins, but that scene also highlights a moment of intersectional oppression. Ruffins only hits Terrell in *Ain't Too Proud* after she makes the decision to leave him; exercising her agency is what results in her abuse. The "strained" connections Brantley describes

around The Temptations and Civil Rights provide necessary context about The Temptations and their fraught temporal location. The ambition The Temptations had for crossover success and awareness of their responsibility as Black leaders informs their music and causes the audience to reflect on the complexity of how Black artists express themselves.

Similarly, in David Rooney's review of *Tina* for *The Hollywood Reporter*, he finds himself "rolling [his] eyes every time Gran, Little Anna Mae and the Nutbush folks wandered back out onstage accompanied by more chanting." Rooney, perceiving the bio-musical form as inherently rickety, sees the Nutbush scenes in *Tina* as unrelated to the larger work. Black women critics Emily Hawkins and PennyMaria Starr Jackson, who are able to analyze the musical through a Black feminist lens on their Youtube channel *To See Or Not To See*, argue that Katori Hall's largest contribution to *Tina* was the way her book focused on Tina Turner's early life and familial connections, particularly with her grandmother and mother. Starr Jackson said, of the Nutbush scenes, "I felt transported to another dimension...I loved the feeling that it gave me." Rooney's perspective on *Tina* as a bio-musical does not seem to allow for deep reflection on the spirituality, personal life, or familial connections of an artist, especially if those reflections are not connected to Tina Turner's greatest hits. Black feminist critics and perspectives encourage a more sustained appreciation for the different pieces that make up an artist's life and memories.

This trend in misunderstanding the Black feminist work of bio-musicals is also present in the reviews of *MJ*. Writing for *Theatrely*, Juan Ramirez's traditional perspective on bio-musicals leads him to describe Rachel, the investigative reporter in *MJ*, as "a familiar villain, a nosy tabloid creature who cares less about MJ's music than about getting the scoop on his front-page scandals." Rachel, arguably the most independent and fleshed out woman character in *MJ*, is also the only character interrogating



the complicity of those around MJ in abetting his bad behavior. “Do you ever question the role you’re playing in all this madness,” she asks MJ’s tour manager, Rob. When watching the musical with an awareness of Black feminist thought, Rachel becomes an important heroine and provocateur, not the villain. Understanding that these shows are bio-musicals informed by Black feminist practices with the goal of creating cultural memory is a necessary framework to seeing *Ain’t Too Proud*, *Tina*, and *MJ* as more than commercially-driven and superficial bio-musicals and capturing aspects of the works that would otherwise be misinterpreted or lost.

What contemporary critical aversions to *Ain’t Too Proud*, *Tina*, and *MJ* also often miss are the historic opportunities present in the creation of Black feminist memory through jukebox musicals for Black creators. There is some precedent for jukebox musicals as opportunities to stretch Broadway sensibilities in ways that innovate the form and diversify creative teams. Performance scholar George Rodosthenous in *The Oxford Handbook of the British Musical* argues that *Mamma Mia!* was a turning point in the development of a model for feminist musical production whose “all-female team of producer, writer and director...resorts to objectifying men as peripheral entities to a quartet of women seeking to live their lives in an unorthodox way” (624). However, *Mamma Mia!*’s advancements were primarily centering white women. While the Broadway musical venerates women as performers and has created meaningful *roles* for Black women in the past, as Wolf suggests in *Changed for Good*, creative control of musicals has often been beyond the grasp of Black women writers and composers (12). “A white patriarchal capitalist space,” Kristen Jackson concurs, “Broadway has historically considered the work of racial minorities and women to be risky business” (1). *Ain’t Too Proud*, *Tina*, and *MJ* represent three new significant commercial projects undertaken by Black women playwrights of massive reputation for their nonmusical plays. Each of these

shows, however, went largely unrecognized as being part of a greater shift in Broadway representation. *Ain't Too Proud*, *Tina*, and *MJ* all offer dozens of roles for Black performers in each company, with multiple tours and productions as the shows find homes on the road, in the West End, and in yet-to-be-announced productions across community theatres, colleges and high schools.

Black women writers of Broadway musicals have been vanishingly few, with Micki Grant, and Vinnette Carroll serving as the only primary historical models that Morisseau, Hall, and Nottage could follow as librettists on Broadway musicals. As Alice Walker reminds us in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*,

The absence of models...is an occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behavior, in growth of spirit and intellect—even if rejected—enrich and enlarge one's view of existence. Deadlier still, to the artist who lacks models, is the curse of ridicule, the bringing to bear on an artist's best work...only a fund of ignorance and the presumption that, as an artist's critic, one's judgment is free of the restrictions imposed by prejudice, and is well-informed, indeed, about all the art in the world that really matters (4-5).

In other words, Black women creators of Broadway musicals have struggled to find their place, without many clear precedents to draw from; of course this lack of precedents is symptomatic of the structural racism and oppression faced by generations of Black women who might otherwise have created musicals of staggering beauty. For a new generation of Black women bookwriters, Morisseau, Hall, and Nottage are creating models with their bio-musicals that might open the Broadway musical as an art form that is welcome and appreciative of their distinct visions for the world. Critics and scholars interested in the diversification and resiliency of the Broadway

musical should take great interest and care in supporting the creative visions of these model-makers.

Dominique Morisseau, Katori Hall, and Lynn Nottage work as Black feminist cultural memorializers and creators of new models for the Broadway musical through *Ain't Too Proud*, *Tina*, and *MJ*, respectively. In their shows they create a way to actively remind contemporary audiences about the abuse, racism, violence, and sexism faced by some of the most widely celebrated Black music icons in history. Separately, Morisseau, Hall, and Nottage dedicated themselves to the work of dedicating new living monuments to The Temptations, Tina Turner, and Michael Jackson, to celebrate their achievements, honor them as part of a rich diasporic tradition, and acknowledge their flawed humanity. Critics dismiss the shows' cultural value and demonstrate a predisposition against bio-musicals and their writers that range from the condescending<sup>4</sup> to the gross<sup>5</sup>. The contributions of *Tina*, *MJ*, and *Ain't Too Proud* to the Broadway musical extend beyond their commercial success or virtuosic performers. They deserve recognition as Black feminist cultural memory projects that help connect audiences to pop music's past while helping contextualize the present in which they live. Broadway critics and audiences of these musicals should take the time to hear and see these shows as monumental and reflective cultural memories re-shaping musical theatre tradition.

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<sup>4</sup> Jesse Green's review of *MJ* includes the line, "Not all strangeness is bad, of course, and within the confines of the biographical jukebox genre, *MJ*, with a book by Lynn Nottage, is actually pretty good—for a while."

<sup>5</sup> Frank Rizzo in *Variety* writes that the producers of *Ain't Too Proud* were smart in "tapping hot playwright Dominique Morisseau" for the project. The euphemistic nature of the words "tapping," and "hot" in the context of Morisseau's career accomplishments is at best misguided and at worst lascivious.

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