Searching for Soul, Reframing the Pursuit of Capital:

A Comparison of Kahlil Joseph's and Derek Pike's 'I Need A Dollar' Music Videos

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Abstract

Two music videos were commissioned for Aloe Blacc's breakthrough song 'I Need A Dollar' (2010). The Harlem, New York version directed by Kahlil Joseph adopts a split-screen technique, depicting an unnamed man negotiating the city's busy streets while, at the same time, framing Blacc as a directionless musician singing wistfully at the window of a dilapidated flat. Derek Pike's Las Vegas, Nevada version, on the other hand, portrays the singer as a struggling musician traversing the desert before – unexpectedly – winning the jackpot at a casino. This article explores two main lines of argument. Firstly, I explore how institutional and industrial contexts result in two distinguishable music videos, suggesting that although both versions are created in similarly professional and commercialised settings one video is produced within a more 'independent' environment. Secondly, I explore how two different music videos can emphasise or de-emphasise certain elements of a song's content

and meaning, drawing from Emily J. Lordi's theorisation of 'soul' to suggest that the 'soul music' qualities of Blacc's 'I Need A Dollar' record are emphasised when practitioners adopt a more 'soulful' approach to music video creation (Lordi, 2020).

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Two music videos were released to accompany Aloe Blacc's song 'I Need A Dollar' (2010), the theme song of the HBO series *How To Make It In America* (2010–11). The second version, which was set in Las Vegas, Nevada, was published via the YouTube account of skateboard apparel vendor LRG Clothing on 17 March 2011, and prolific music-video specialist Derek Pike was credited as the project's director. The original Harlem, New York version of the music video was directed by Kahlil Joseph. Featuring an excerpt from Blacc's soul song 'Life So Hard' (2010) as well as the eponymous 'I Need A Dollar' track, Joseph's version was released on 4 April 2010 and publicised on both YouTube and Vimeo by the What Matters Most media production collective. While the Harlem edition is available for account holders to view in the USA, it is currently blocked across YouTube UK on copyright grounds by the song's current licence-holders, Sony Music Entertainment. However, despite Sony Music Entertainment prohibiting the video's content being played in Britain, it is possible to locate the blocked YouTube version of Joseph's 'I Need A Dollar' on Stones Throw Records' account and note that the video managed to accumulate approximately thirty-four million views. A similar video listed in the UK as 'Private' on Carosello Records' channel has more generated over a million views, and further evidence of the Harlem version's existence remains on a handful of incomplete music blogs with broken links, redirections to Vimeo's website, or empty digital spaces. An enduring teaser trailer for Joseph's version has accumulated 3,800 views on What Matters Most's YouTube channel and a pirated 'lyrics edition' of the video parading as an official version has been uploaded by YouTube user blainemilesss, accumulating fewer than 1,500 views. In March 2021, Pike's

version of 'I Need A Dollar' had accumulated approximately 75 million views on LRG's YouTube account whereas Joseph's accessible and playable version of the video on What Matters Most TV's Vimeo account had approximately 162,000 views.

Blacc appeared in the 'look-book' marketing campaign for LRG's 2011 Spring Collection and became an ambassador for the brand, yet no interviews exist of him discussing Pike's version of the music video. Blacc does touch on Joseph's Harlem version briefly in an interview with music news site *Gigwise*, acknowledging that the idea to set the project in Harlem and capture 'the grit of the hood but also leave a bit of mystery' was ultimately the 'brainchild' of Kahlil Joseph and his production team What Matters Most (Lavin, 2011). Notwithstanding cursory mentions of Kahlil Joseph's directorial input within this particular interview, no publicised statement has been made by Joseph, Pike, LRG or What Matters Most TV regarding the decision to remove the Harlem version from YouTube UK, and neither of these parties have explicitly revealed any reasons for commissioning and releasing two music videos for the single in the first instance.

Although Blacc was originally signed to the independent hip hop label Stones Throw Records when he released 'I Need A Dollar,' the singer signed a new contract with Sony Music UK and XIX Management's newly-formed hybrid label Sign Of The Times shortly after releasing

the song.[1] Blacc's manager, Dougie Bruce, was appointed head of Sign Of The Times for his 'very strong all round business acumen' and 'track record for delivering hit acts' (Fuller & Gatfield, 2011). This implies that releasing a secondary video and banning the original in certain locations may have been a calculated business decision when the rights to 'I Need A Dollar' switched hands, and the widespread silence surrounding these actions may be a savvy attempt on the part of the new stakeholders to preserve Blacc's popularity rather than running of risk of mishandling of the musician's public relations by being open and frank about the decision to suppress the original YouTube release. Precise and detailed accounts of these projects' respective geneses thus remain concealed from the general populace. However, while certain similarities and overlaps connect the two videos, their differences and divergent content reveal a great deal about the ways in which different industrial contexts affect and nuance the encoded meanings of a music video.

In this article, I compare the 'I Need A Dollar' videos of Joseph and Pike, drawing two main strands of argument from the various characteristics that both connect and separate the two audiovisual screen texts. Firstly, I explore how divergent institutional and industrial

[1] Christopher George Manak, the founder of Stones Throw Records who performs under the moniker Peanut Butter Wolf, states that: 'Stones Throw might not have been in business anymore had it not been for the success of Aloe Blacc' (Manak, 2014). Despite being one of their most successful breakthrough artists, Blacc declined to appear in *Our Vinyl Weighs A Ton: This Is Stones Throw Records* (2014), a documentary tracing the label's establishment and development.

situations result in two very different music videos as the directors negotiate our complex and contradictory world order of neoliberal capitalism. Secondly, I focus on the ways in which two distinguishable music videos created within these contexts can emphasise or de-emphasise the content and meaning of a song: one video emphasising the resistive elements of the original song when produced within an 'independent' context; the other illustrating how music videos can overlook opportunities for emphasising the music's subversive or countercultural qualities when produced within a more commercialised context, and, in turn, becoming more palatable or consumable for worldwide audiences. While I emphasise the focus on professionalism in Pike's approach to music-video construction, I draw from Emily J. Lordi's theorisation of the 'soul' in 'soul music' as 'an intellectual tradition of encouragement and critique, which music plays a key role in advancing' to strengthen Joseph's precarious yet nonetheless powerful mantra of maintaining 'integrity' when he attempts to produce art under the conditions of our contemporary economic framework (Lordi, 2020, p.154). In turn, I illustrate how a 'soulful' approach to music-video construction – while possessing certain contradictions, paradoxes and flaws – offers opportunities to unlock, support and amplify the elements of 'soul' imbedded within certain musical products: namely, in this case, the 'soul' roots of Blacc's original pop song.

Although the question of music-video authorship is a contentious issue because the medium itself is an innately collaborative one, debates frequently centre around the director as a 'controlling creative hand' or, contrastingly, 'the figure of the performer as the artistic

centre' (Railton & Watson, 2011, p.67). Although a range of film and music industry figures (from cinematographers and actors to runners, location scots and set and costume designers) contribute to the overall creation of a music video and its encoded sign and significations, I mainly focus on the contributions of the primary musician, Aloe Blacc, and the key directors, Kahlil Joseph and Derek Pike. As Vernallis (2013), Shaviro (2017) and Arnold et al (2017) contend, the music video is a chameleonic, hybridized form of artistic expression, positioned 'on a series of fault lines between music, sound and the visual, between high and popular culture, between dominant and alternative representations' (Arnold et al, 2017, p.3). While developing the research of contemporary music-video and new media scholars, I explore the formal 'fault lines' on which the two music videos rest, assessing the outcomes and effects as various institutional forces and the contributions of Blacc, Joseph and Pike compete, contest and overlap, attempting to draw out the distinguishable moments when, on the one hand, 'soulful' authorship manifests in the music videos or, on the other, such creative goals are transformed, blurred or even wholly unsuccessful.

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Selling Soul? Directing Music Videos in the Twenty-First Century

In a fashion similar to the ways certain directors of feature length films adopt recognisable styles and traits to carve out their own artistic identity, one can distinguish Joseph and Pike's respective approaches to making music videos through their projects' amalgamations of sound, music and moving images. While studying at New York's Tisch School of Arts, Pike became one of the youngest directors to have a music video featured on MTV. Now an experienced director of over 100 music-video projects across various genres, Pike has collaborated with a vast array of high profile musicians, including RedOne, Waka Flocka Flame, XXXTentaction, Wiz Khalifa and Enrique Iglesias.

Pike's version of the 'I Need A Dollar' video portrays Blacc hitchhiking across the Nevada desert until the singer stumbles across a casino in Las Vegas, landing a jackpot on the slot machines using a coin rescued from the floor. Joseph's music video, on the other hand, uses a split screen effect to follow a young man's fruitless attempts to find employment on a harsh wintry day in Harlem in the wake of the financial crisis while, simultaneously, juxtaposing black and white footage of Blacc crooning melancholically from the comfort and shelter of an apartment's room, the larger screen foregrounding the unnamed character's ineffectual activities as the smaller screen depicts Blacc's performance and in turn underscores the larger screen's visual content with tensions encoded in his song's lyrical and musical content (see Figures 1 and 2).

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Figure 1: The Nevada version of the 'I Need A Dollar' music video

Figure 2: The dual-screen Harlem version of the 'I Need A Dollar' music video

While both music video adaptations for 'I Need A Dollar' have garnered widespread popularity, the reflective mood of Joseph's original version might be said to communicate the vulnerability of Blacc's lyrics and his soulful sound more delicately than Pike's screen text. This, instead, likely appeals to a broader audience, drawing from music-video genre tropes yet in certain ways lacking or de-emphasising some of the politicised undercurrents of Joseph's Harlem version. Thus, Pike's version is more popular than Joseph's in terms of viewing figures: to reiterate, Joseph's version of 'I Need A Dollar' has approximately 162,000 views on What Matters Most TV's Vimeo account whereas Pike's version has generated approximately sixty-eight million views on LRG's YouTube account. However, Joseph's YouTube version did produce approximately thirty-four million views, and may have accumulated more had Sony Music Entertainment not limited the video's accessibility to certain regions.

Pike suggests that aspiring music-video directors should 'just keep on shooting… as much as you can' in an unselective fashion because this was how he gained 'exposure,' working with a range of famous names that eventually 'legitimized' his status as a video director (Yeoh, 2010). He thus endorses developing one's reputation through an efficient turnover of projects and clients in lieu of choosing creative partners systematically or solely on the terms of their art. Indeed, Pike's professional approach to video-making is conventionally

commercial in the sense that he openly admits that the direction of his videos is ultimately dictated by his clients. Tellingly, his use of the word 'client' when articulating his creative process illustrates a transactional approach to music-video production dependent on establishing the providing and receiving ends of service, a thorough and effective professional approach to building one's status as a reliable music video director within the highly competitive and predominantly unstable industry (Edwards, 2018; Stubbs, 2019). When asked about his creative process directly, Pike responds: 'This usually depends on the client. Sometimes a label will get in touch and say we need an idea for a video by tonight... And I sometimes I have a week to turn in the treatment, a couple days to shoot, and a month on the edit.' However, when pressed about his favourite music video, Pike illustrates entrepreneurial nous by adopting a coy, neutral stance: 'I usually don't like this question because I don't want any of my clients to feel left out, so I generally just say this… my favourite is always my next video' (Yeoh, 2010).

Operating within the global economic framework of neoliberal capitalism, Joseph must similarly establish effective working relationships with clients and in turn produce income through his art to sustain a livelihood. Paul Dallas notes that Joseph oftentimes acts as 'an independent filmmaker' and yet, as a result of the formal complexity of the director's artworks across film, music video, advertisement and installation formats, he concedes that Joseph's works 'are rarely thought of in that context' (Dallas, 2017, p.145). The word 'independent' in the phrase 'independent cinema' is loaded with many overlapping and contradictory significations, thereby complicating the potential framework(s) within which

one may situate certain products of Joseph's artistic oeuvre. However, James Snead and Colin McCabe raise the important observation that 'No filmmaker is *independent* in the way that, say, a poet is… [because] filmmaking, both capital- and labour-intensive, is the most *dependent* art form' (my emphases) (Snead & McCabe, 1994, p.125). While most artforms are woven into the uneven oscillations and unpredictability of neoliberal capitalism's volatile market environments, independent filmmaking is especially tied to its ability to remunerate the work of various different parties and departments, from actors and cinematographers to distributors and salespeople. When positioned alongside the complicated situations and circumstances that contemporary artists must continuously negotiate, music videos such as 'I Need A Dollar' are thus connected to the complex and paradoxical relationships and contributions of both film *and* music practitioners as well as the complexities and paradoxes of their visual *and* sonic content.

Joseph outwardly claims that his processes for determining future collaborators are particularly selective, declaring that his preference for partnerships with predominantly black clientele such as Blacc is driven by a thirst for artistic development and success based on the merits of the collaborators' work, a competitive yet passionate meeting of minds whereby 'Black talent is exponentially propelled by other black talent… Steel sharpens steel' (Abraham, 2017). Although the vast majority of Joseph's collaborators are black, the filmmaker has worked with the predominantly white band Arcade Fire and one of his most regular cinematographers, Matthew J. Lloyd, is white. While his artworks often 'display a set of experiences that are intimately tied to blackness' (Sarantis, 2018), Joseph thus shares

with Pike the propensity to work with collaborators beyond any rigid notion of colour lines *despite* the predominantly Afrocentric focus of his work.

Joseph states publicly that his motives are not entirely dictated by securing profits. When multimillionaire Beyoncé contacted him for assistance with her project *Lemonade* (2016), the artist was adamant: 'It wasn't until she really came at me and said: "I wanna collaborate with you, versus you work for me," then I was, like, let's talk' (Abraham, 2017). Although Joseph's approach is underscored by a willingness to collaborate on mutually-respectful terms (creating working relationships that at least *feel* more profound than a hierarchical, transactional partnership between two business parties devoid of connection) one should process Joseph's claim with an element of incredulity because the need to generate money is an inescapable aspect of existing within our economic framework, and all artists – including Beyoncé, Joseph and Pike – must engage with the market system out of necessity *despite* their ideological positions, *regardless* of their resistance to or compliance with our dominant economic framework.

While Joseph initially struggles to find terms to articulate his mindset, he ultimately suggests that his approach is grounded on 'integrity' rather than 'radicality,' reasoning that one of the main reasons he would never include the final outcome of the 'Lemonade' visual project in one of his own exhibitions is because 'For me, there's a clear distinction between my own work, and work for hire' (Lissoni, 2017). Problematically, however, the creation of working relationships based solely on this loose definition of 'integrity' seems naïve or unrealistic

given the dominance of ruthless competitiveness within our contemporary epoch, and staunch anti-capitalist commentators may criticise Joseph for 'selling out' to and thereby perpetuating the demands and prevailing infra/supastructures of neoliberal capitalism's world-encompassing economic frameworks (Gastil, 1971; Harvey, 2007; Woodhouse, 2009). As Paul Gilroy argues, influential figures and organisations within the cultural industries are willing 'to make substantial investments in blackness provided it yields a user-friendly, house-trained, and marketable "reading" of the stubborn [black] vernacular that can no longer be a called a counterculture' (Gilroy, 2004, p.242), thus Joseph's approach to filmmaking in 'I Need A Dollar'– while in some ways more sensitive to the complicated dynamics of cultural pluralism *and* more critical of whiteness's hegemonic status than Pike's video (and other similar approaches conducted by directors black, white and beyond) – does not challenge the status quo in particularly radical terms. It remains a commodified and consumable packaging of black experiences, adhering to and thereby perpetuating the free market's prevalent dehumanising and racially-biased logic (Sidianius and Pratto, 1993; Mason, 1996; Bhattacharyya, 2017).

In terms of understanding how Joseph negotiates the flows of our global financial framework as an artist bound to such an economic system by necessity rather than choice, elements of the director's 'integrity' conceptualisation may generate fragile yet valuable avenues for characterising the artist's creative processes, offering a compassionate humanist's lens through which to process and understand our oftentimes harsh, frustrating and divisive world order. As Gayle Wald observes, 'one can *have* soul, *be* soulful, and play

soul music' (Wald, 1998, p.147). Thus, it is possible to develop overlaps between Joseph's idealistic form of 'integrity' and more frequently-constructed notions of 'soul' and 'soulfulness,' encompassing elements of Blacc's music *as well as* the artistic 'integrity' that Joseph claims is a fundamental component driving his creative processes.

Drawing from Wald's arguments, Emily J. Lordi theorises 'soul' as 'a logic constituted through a network of strategic performances… meant to promote black thriving, if not liberation,' illustrating how similar understandings of 'black thriving' may account for and even commend the high number of digital views that Joseph's projects of self-defined 'integrity' have accumulated (Lordi, 2020, p.5). Joseph's delicate yet potentially useful notion of 'integrity' is thus strengthened when informed by Lordi's more robust conceptualisation of 'soul.' Understanding 'soul' as a mindset or logic of resilience and resistance rather than an essence or quality innately imbedded in the artistry of certain black performers allows us to negotiate clichéd situations (such as Joseph's) wherein the artist's resistance to commercialisation and the influences of external industrial contexts is based on anecdotal self-praise. Instead, this conceptualisation of 'soul' grounds such passionate and heartfelt (yet nonetheless precarious and unstable) ruminations on artistic intent within a longstanding tradition of resistive performance, striving to articulate and preserve the racial-spiritual 'self-consciousness, self-realisation and self-respect' at the heart of black music, black art, black souls (Du Bois, 1987, p.2).

Joseph's filmmaking activities, then, take place within 'an era of targeted precision marketing' and the size and scope of his audiences affirm that 'the appeal of black faces and styles need no longer be restricted to black consumers' (Gilroy, 2004, p.242). However, while one must sceptically and diligently digest and process the conveniently self-constructed 'integrity' concept shaping Joseph's creative processes, one must not completely dismiss the tone characterising Joseph's approach when collaborating with likeminded artists, especially if, crucially, Joseph's interpretation of 'integrity' is regarded as rhizomatic offshoot stemming from 'soul' and its popular discourses. When exploring his inspirations for partnering with and dedicating a piece of work to the singer Alice Smith, palpable enthusiasm is evident when Joseph declares that Smith shares with jazz musician Alice Coltrane 'this really deep soul thing… [which] isn't really interested in the marketplace' (Dallas, 2017, p.143). By facilitating alternative pathways for existence within our present economic framework that 'preserve principles of social collaboration and interdependence' (Harvie, 2013, p.193), Joseph seeks from his co-authors those elusive and somewhat fanciful elements that are grounded in emotions and sensations, yearning for something closely resembling 'soul.' Although such characteristics communicate Joseph's clichéd wishes to imbue his artistic process with a self-defined and therefore problematic understanding of righteousness, at the same time his preoccupations with 'integrity' illustrate a sensitive, humane approach to creativity rooted in the resistive tradition of certain black performances and art forms. The mechanics of what Joseph determines as Smith and Coltrane's 'deep soul thing' thus signify a subtle shift from a Du Boisian conceptualisation of 'soul' as 'a deep spiritual-racial consciousness' to something which might be better

understood as 'the special resilience of black people… surviving the historical and daily trials of white supremacy' which, in turn, bestows through artistic expressions and collaborative projects '*worldly gifts* such as emotional depth and communal belonging' (my emphasis) (Lordi, 2020, p.5).

In a problematic, paradoxical world system whose economic grounds are at times alienating, schismatic and altogether dehumanising, these 'worldly gifts' are thoroughly welcome. Again, while attempts to theorise such complicated notions as 'integrity' or 'soul' with tools as inadequate as language-based theories are littered with semantic hurdles that consistently undermine the endeavour, the physical, empirical outputs that emerge in our spacio-temporal universe in such forms as co-authored media works indicate that pedagogical rewards await if critics and commentators treat such precarious ideations seriously, scrutinising their creations thoroughly. Even if Joseph is merely motivated and influenced by the convincing *illusion* of an abstract 'integrity' notion rather than the precise (im)material existence of this force or substance somewhere within or between the heart and mind, the effect that this concept has on the physical production of 'I Need A Dollar' offers a pathway through which to develop our understanding of contemporary music video direction, demonstrating how an artist's negotiation or understanding of the current world order can affect the meaning of, or encode a particular message within, a media form.

There is a long history in American popular culture of ascribing politics to forms of African-American cultural production, thus the manner in which Pike's video offers entertainment

should be recognised on its own terms. At the same time, however, one must not dismiss the ways in which Joseph's video attempts to amplify the soul qualities of Blacc's song, attempting to communicate in visual terms certain signs and significations imbedded in the original record. Without creating a simplistic dichotomy that frames Pike's and Joseph's videos on opposing ends of the same spectrum, I will now consider the content of the two 'I Need A Dollar' music videos, exploring the ways in which the music-video directors balance commitments to their clientele on the one hand with audiovisual articulations of Blacc's interpretation of a soul music song on the other. In what follows, I argue that visual depictions of the videos' distinguishable settings nuance the significations of Blacc's music in starkly different ways, at times emphasising the resistive qualities of the soul music tradition or, in other moments, creating entertaining material predominantly for the sake of promoting the singer's work and, in turn, depriving soul discourses within the song of their potentially resistive and resilient elements.

Soul Settings

Blacc's song is a complex hybrid of various musical styles and forms: driven by choral rhythms and soulful keys, the 'call-and-response' structure of his plaintive vocals in 'I Need A Dollar' echo John Lomax's field recordings of chain gang members and farm workers 'down on their luck… making a plea for help' (Green, 2011). Both the Nevada and Harlem music videos channel these sonic themes by exploring the fortunes of two young black

figures searching for ways to generate money in contemporary America. Pike presents a suited singer traversing the desert without any immediate signs of danger or hardship and thus augments the playful dimensions of Blacc's soul music interpretation; whereas Joseph depicts his protagonist's journey as a rushed, intensified attempt to secure financial stability, which, when the outcome goes awry, has problematic, dangerous repercussions that emphasise the resilient and resistive elements of the soul music tradition.

Many of the great paradoxes at the heart of both Blacc's music and Joseph's and Pike's music videos stem from the notion that Afrodiasporic experiences are rendered more complex by states of limbo, the relentless oscillation between cultural states and affiliations engendering a precarious and challenging existence for certain sections of the African-American population who lack sustainable income for food and shelter, and who are commanded to adhere to societal expectations without certain opportunities and advantages that innately form within America's societal framework(s). The settings of the music videos are thus similarly loaded with both contradictory *and* common signs and significations. Famed for its vibrant nightlife and lax betting laws, Las Vegas is a historical site of friction between the dominant Nevada State Government and the ancestors of indigenous Native Americans as the two factions compete for control of natural resources, landownership and gambling rights (Thornton, 2005). The self-defined 'Gambling Capital' or 'Entertainment Capital of the World' perpetuates the glamorous aspects of casino lifestyles and pleasure-seeking in clubs without addressing the social frictions that simmer beneath

the city's surface, tensions between government and indigenous people on which Las Vegas's modern environment of indulgence is founded (Macarthur, 2016; Liu, 2019).

Las Vegas's governing bodies have also clashed with black citizens throughout the years. Racism's prevalence in the area fluctuated in tandem with 'economic recessions and times of prosperity,' meaning that Las Vegas experienced a shift from 'cordial relations' between blacks and whites c1905 to 'an acrimonious state of affairs' in the early thirties (White, 2004, p.71). Gambling in Las Vegas casinos became legalised in 1931 yet white tourists and workers did not want to engage with local black citizens who had recently migrated to the area in search of new employment opportunities (Gray & DeFilippis, 2015). Racist city officials would only issue licenses to black businesses if they moved themselves away from the most popular parts of Las Vegas to the Westside of the newly-built railroad tracks; thus, the local black community sought new opportunities from the enforced dispersal (such as replicating businesses and services already provided in the downtown area) as they prepared 'to live a different social, cultural, and economic lifestyle' (White, 2004, p.76).

Over the years, racism and inequality continued to mar the city's self-idealisation as an American utopia. Although top artists earned large sums of money as white consumers began to enthusiastically purchase the influx of black records in the 1950s, Las Vegas developed a reputation as 'the Mississippi of the West' as a result of its strict and unjust segregation policies – for example, black entertainers were oftentimes prohibited from staying overnight at the hotels where they performed (Pearce, 2014). Pike's Nevada music

video depicts an improbable get-rich-quick scheme, which plays on interpretations of Las Vegas as a hedonist's playground, a space where the rich congregate to (further) escape their social responsibilities, rather than a site of tumultuous and complex race relations. Although Blacc is captured hitchhiking through the Nevada desert and across the historic railway lines in his search for financial security, the neatness of his ironed shirt, chino trousers and trilby hat undermine the plausibility of his march through the desert's inhospitable conditions while attempting to hitchhike, missing opportunities to draw connections between the precariousness for black workers in the city at present and the Jim Crow period of Las Vegas's rich and complex history. While visual representations of Blacc In Pike's music video depict a struggling African-American man attempting to procure financial stability in the same manner as Joseph's video, Pike's combination of music and moving images packages the protagonist's quest for money in an improbable fashion, stripping the 'I Need A Dollar' song of the potentially sincere and emotional energies with which it was originally charged, and, in turn, characterising Blacc as a contemporary performer unable or unwilling to reconcile the historical past of his ancestors with the status of the black community in the present.

In Joseph's video, the unnamed protagonist wears a warm hat and large puffer jacket to combat the iciness of Harlem's external environment, whereas Pike's video dresses Blacc in a sharp red jacket and black turtleneck as he enters the casino *before* having won the jackpot, exhibiting a level of material wealth that Joseph's protagonist does not possess (see Figure 3). Incongruously, it is implied that Blacc's character was carrying across the desert a

set of expensive clothing in his bag. His red attire, normally reserved for professional performances, now represents a newfound veneer of confidence when he enters the casino as a self-assured punter rather than a struggling musician. The protagonist's transformation from unlucky troubadour stranded in the Nevada desert to suave and sophisticated gambler parading in the heart of Vegas's casino district metaphorises the safety of the wager enacted by Blacc beyond the screen. Although, on the surface, Blacc appears to take a significant gamble by entering the precarious and intensely-competitive music industry as an artist, the manner in which his song draws from the countercultural legacies of soul music yet, paradoxically, packages these resistive qualities into a consumable popular form, becomes a savvy business strategy rather than a speculative risk or genuine attempt to process and understand hardship for African-American workers. The complex history of race relations in Las Vegas is thus reduced to an imbalanced narrative wherein pleasure-seeking for white people becomes foregrounded at the expense of the region's historical racism and problematic Jim Crow laws, failing to augment the resilient qualities at the core of Blacc's soul music interpretation.

Figure 3: Aloe Blacc's Nevada-based character celebrates a jackpot win

Harlem is as complicated and paradoxical a site as Las Vegas, loaded with overlapping histories and contradictory legacies of race relations. On the one hand, Harlem has long been characterised as the 'Cultural Capital of Black America' by historians and commentators since the advent of the Harlem Renaissance (Schoener, 2007; Gill, 2012;

Taborn, 2018). From writers Langston Hughes, Richard Wright and Countee Cullen to musicians Duke Ellington, Ethel Waters, and Billie Holiday, photographers Gordon Parks and James Van Der Zee to politicians Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Adam Clayton Powell Jr., numerous powerful and inspiring black figures demonstrate and articulate aspects of the 'spirit of play and optimism' (Huggins, 1995, p.10) that defined the Harlem Renaissance's exceptional period of intellectual, social and artistic output across the 1920s and 1930s. Problematically, however, certain Harlem Renaissance figures became reliant on white systems of patronage, meaning that Afrodiasporic voices were forced to perform in a manner that adhered to white values and tastes in order to receive money (Story, 1989; Parascandola, Bone & Wade, 2010).

Joseph's 'I Need A Dollar' video is inextricably tied to the significance of Harlem's relationship to its Renaissance period, thereby further emphasising the resistive and resilient 'soul' qualities of Blacc's music through its lineages with a key moment of African-American cultural expression. At the same time, his video subtly critiques a one-dimensional understanding of the area through the (in)actions of one its solitary white characters. The video features the aged owner of a 'hipster' bookshop conversing and sharing literature with the jobless man, implying that a figure born with the privilege of whiteness controls avenues that black people must negotiate for financial stability. While the protagonist's engagement with the shop's patron illustrates a lust for knowledge and a willingness to circumvent Harlem's localised social hierarchies, Joseph subtly imbues the exchange with undertones of dissatisfaction, reflecting the racialised inequalities of our

global world system's economic framework. The young black man's desperation to learn and, simultaneously, his inability to translate his access to knowledge into shared success with the owner thus indirectly allude to the broader social divisions with American society that Joseph's video attempts to address. Beneath the spirited visage of America's robust entrepreneurial mindset, the detrimental effects of Harlem's gentrification outprice and marginalise local populations in favour of building and business reformations tailored to the wants and tastes of middle-class demographics. Although the pair briefly interact, the business-owner remains paradoxically unable (or secretly unwilling) to offer the protagonist concrete security in the form of money or sustainable employment; the maintenance of the bookstore-cum-coffee shop remains his primary concern despite his tokenistic engagement with the young man within the property.

Author Teju Cole argues that the 'white saviour industrial complex' stems from the ways in which a white volunteer from America or Europe can travel to Africa and act as 'a godlike saviour or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied' through short-term, low-impact volunteering programmes or unpaid work (Cole, 2012). In recent years, however, the rapidly shifting ideologies of white voters in America have likewise resulted in similar manifestations of such racially-imbalanced 'saviour' complexes, whereby liberal campaigners 'act like white saviours who must lead the rest of the country, including the racial minorities whose interests they claim to represent,' pursuing on their own terms a 'vision of justice' that marginalised groups might not necessarily choose or accept for themselves (Goldberg, 2019). While the white patron's brief engagement with the young

African-American man in the video expresses a fleeting and precarious sense of solidarity at the surface-level of their relationship, the nation's underlying social schisms emphasise that both within the coffeehouse and beyond its doors the two men lead distinguishable existences and must face very different obstacles in their day-to-day lives. Harlem, then, is a site through Joseph's music video can explore the complications that arise for labouring African-American citizens seeking financial stability in the present day, a multidimensional location that once offered a Renaissance setting for black people yet now flounders, presenting a cold, inhospitable environment lacking opportunity and security for its black citizens.

Getting to Work: Audiovisualising the Hustle

Blacc's 'I Need A Dollar' is an amalgamation of many sonic influences, several of which are shaped by Bill Wither's 1971 song 'Ain't No Sunshine'. While both musicians adopt a baritone singing voice, Withers's song is written in A Aeolian whereas Blacc's work is A-flat Aeolian, thereby reflecting their lyrics' respective explorations of the pain and desperation surrounding pursuits of money and love. Although the melodies of both 'I Need A Dollar' and 'Ain't No Sunshine' have similar shapes, Withers's song tends to hold the note as though letting his articulation of personal anguish linger a little longer for cathartic purposes, whereas Blacc's phrasing is more purposeful and upbeat, reflecting his determination to secure economic stability by diagnosing the main issues of his misfortunate character, directly reaching out for assistance.

During the middle-eight section of Blacc's song, Blacc explores the higher register of his voice as though the musician begins to reach heavenwards for help, forming a desperate prayer in the face of worldly tribulations and relentless uncertainty. At this point in Pike's video, Blacc's neatly-dressed hitchhiker sings atop a desert rock formation and reaches into the air, before catching a ride into the heart of the city's brightly-lit gambling district. In Joseph's version, however, the protagonist takes a break from negotiating his urban environment, meeting an acquaintance to smoke something while sitting on a snow-covered bench in the middle of an icy park, quickly fist-bumping in such a way that could be interpreted as both innocuous greeting and illegal exchange (see Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4: The protagonist in Pike's video hitches a ride into the heart of the Las Vegas gambling district

Figure 5: The protagonist of Joseph's version meets an acquaintance in snowy Harlem

Although the prayers of Pike's protagonist are answered by the anonymous car driver, the immaculateness of his style of clothing throughout the ordeal undermines the severity of this situation, suggesting that the character is grossly inconvenienced rather than forced to face the sort of extreme social or financial hardship that underpins Lordi's 'soul' logic of resistance and resilience. Contrastingly, in Joseph's video the higher octave of Blacc's voice reflects the temporary 'high' achieved by pausing to inhale the undefined substance. Whether drawing from a joint or cigarette, or sitting with a friend or business contact, the

character's relief in momentarily halting the day's activities communicates the underlying stress of his daily routine, implying that near-constant states of tension in Harlem's wintry citified landscape are temporarily alleviated by the comfort of such brief yet thoroughly welcomed moments of reflection and reconciliation. Through subtle depictions of both smoking and selling an unknown substance, the 'soul' logic of resilience imbedded in Blacc's song is emphasised by Joseph's visual allusions to the underlying presence of illegal activities. Although both videos explore the pressures that their protagonists' respective lines of work entail, the moment of respite in the middle-eight section of Pike's version results in a drastic reversal of fortune, whereas the undercurrents of tension apparent in the same section of Joseph's video continue to broil and are never satisfactorily resolved.

Sam Cooke's 'Chain Gang' (1960) and Lee Dorsey's 'Working in the Coal Mine' (1966) exemplify the tradition of the 'work song' in black music wherein lyrics detailing the hardships of toil are accompanied by harmonious and upbeat music to form a bittersweet reflection on black society's relationships to the hegemony of whiteness or, in the words of Lordi, 'a kind of virtuosic survivorship specific to black people as a group' (Lordi, 2020, p.5). Although Blacc attempts to construct his '*own* chain gang song (my emphasis)' (Green, 2011) through a lyrical representation of hardship whose musical features are rooted in the early 'call-and-response' field songs of America's African slave population, Pike's video incongruously concludes with the unlikely event of Blacc's character winning a large jackpot after finding a single dollar on the Las Vegas streets. Rather than emphasising the grittiness of the opening lyrics' plea for money and the soulful qualities of a song that explores a black

character's resilience in response to socio-economic hardship, Blacc's performances in Pike's video, in both the bar and the desert, entertain the music video's viewership. This is achieved through the contagious enthusiasm of his professional vocal delivery, and his emphasis on the song's playful musical elements underminine the fundamental countercultural and resistive qualities of 'soul', which otherwise charge the song with its emotional weight. While both music videos capture the 'soul' roots of Blacc's bluesy musical and lyrical styles through frank accounts of their protagonist's struggles to negotiate modern societies, the tongue-in-cheek moments of Pike's video thus flirt with but never reach convincingly such levels of sincerity, only communicating in part the 'unabashedly sentimental' feelings of heartful emotion at the core of soul music (Landau, 1976, p.210).

Joseph's and Pike's music videos for Blacc's contemporary interpretation of the work-song tradition showcase modern forms of 'hustling.' Although the term 'hustler' in the late sixties and seventies referred to 'someone who tried to as little work as possible to make ends meet,' Lester K. Spencer argues that the word has since been transformed by the rapid expansion of neoliberal capitalism and now signifies 'someone who consistently works… [exalting] the daily rise-and-grind mentality black men [and women] with no role in the formal economy need to possess in order to survive and thrive' (Spencer, 2015, p.2). While the conclusion of Pike's video frames Blacc as a 'hustler' in its original sense by rewarding his attempt to accumulate wealth by the easiest possible means with an unlikely victory on his first slot machine spin, Joseph's protagonist is represented as the hardworking 'hustler' who traverses the city all day with little to no reward. Pike's visual depiction of the quest for

money playfully emphasises the jubilation of this unlikely win in the video's final shot, whereas the ending of Joseph's version taps into the familiar realities of Harlem's residents struggling to make ends meet on a day-by-day basis, foregrounding harshness and emotional weight at the core of soul music discourses from which Blacc's song draws (see Figures 6 and 7).

Figure 6: The final shot of Pike's video

Figure 7: A still from the final sequence of Joseph's video

Joseph spends the entirety of 'I Need A Dollar' depicting the protagonist negotiating the streets. Although it is unclear whether the character antagonises an undercover police force or a group of gangsters, the unseen act that initiates the chase at the video's denouement communicates the precarity of 'hustling the streets' whether within or beyond the limits of the law (Di Nunzio, 2019), thus the unsettling implications of incarceration and violence simultaneously emerge from the sudden conclusion of the protagonist's quest for a sustainable source of income. The Harlem video's music is cut short prematurely by a cliff-hanger ending, capturing a moment when the resilient qualities at the core of Blacc's music as well as the character's existence are, respectively, visually and sonically overpowered by emptiness, the abrupt and harsh conclusion capturing in Harlem a silent and soulless void.

In Joseph's version of the 'I Need A Dollar,' the filmmaker utilises two screens, two principle characters and two songs in a manner that draws attention to the song's explorations of

Afrodiasporic 'double-consciousness' as the unnamed protagonist attempts to negotiate Harlem 'without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face' (Du Bois, 1897, p.1–2). The second segment of Joseph's version also features an excerpt from another piece of music written and performed by Blacc, the soul song 'Life So Hard.' As this secondary song starts to play in the music video, a stationary camera films Blacc exiting the frame while a hot drink's steam billows in the cold winds beside his apartment's open window. The second screen depicts the protagonist revealing his face for the first time, seeking shelter in the underground bar. Lit with unusual dark red lights as though at once entering a hellish, seedy den as well as an unearthly paradise offering respite from the freezing evening's unwelcoming streets, the character walks to back of the bar to find Blacc performing an impassioned rendition of 'Life So Hard:' revellers order drinks and converse over the music, ignoring Blacc's agonised writhing and heartfelt conduct.

The juxtaposition of the unenthused crowd with the efforts that the struggling bar singer pours into his performance accentuates the brutality of the day-to-day hardships denoted by Blacc's lyrics, the fundamental aspects of the blues which characterise his song. 'The key to everything, everybody here in America/Is the money,' Blacc croons in a high-pitched tone, shortly before the protagonist is inexplicably hounded down the street by the disgruntled group of men. The lyrics to Blacc's soulful voice fused with choral chanting declare: 'Some say [money is] the root of all evil,' before shortly adding: 'He don't care and she don't care… / Because they don't know / What it's like to be left out in the snow.' The mirth with which Blacc's character celebrates his winnings in Pike's 'I Need A Dollar' music

video contradicts the singer's soulful lamentations and the anguish of the 'Life So Hard' lyrics.

In Pike's music video, the director adheres closely to a straightforward definition of the music-video form by using audiovisual material to promote a single song which, in turn, contributes to the transformation of Blacc's song into a more conventional music video, diluting the screen text's resistive and subversive 'soul' features. Visual representations of duality in Pike's Harlem video draw attention to the dualistic structural parameters of Joseph's audiovisual artwork. A sense of stability is foregrounded by the rigid structural parameters of the former, which, in turn, counteract the precarity of Blacc's character and indeed his song's rebellious and impassioned 'soul' qualities as he negotiates the desert and searches for a change in fortune. Pike's approach to the music-video form limits his version to strictly featuring one song, whereas Joseph's inclusion of the lamentations from 'Life So Hard' channels the spirit of black independent cinema by attempting 'to discern or depict the full spectrum of black American life and culture' through experimentation with audiovisual forms (Sne, 1994, p.115). For example, a few months before his music video's release, Joseph frames a teaser trailer for 'I Need A Dollar' on Vimeo with an audio recording of black activist James Baldwin discussing his childhood experiences of inhospitable sections of Harlem. Baldwin details: 'I was born in Harlem, Harlem Hospital… we used to play on the roof and – I can't call it an alley but near the river – it was a dump: a garbage dump…' as the trailer's unnamed protagonist walks across frozen water. The camera is flipped upside down to mirror the precariousness of the ice underfoot,

communicating the fragility of Baldwin's upbringing in Harlem's twenties and thirties as well as precarity and insecurity of the nameless protagonist's social situation in the present day as he navigates the contemporary Harlem cityscape across the ice and into the streets.

In refusing to develop promotional material that reduces Blacc's music to an apolitical form of audiovisual entertainment, Joseph's music video and its trailer attempt to capture the frustrations of black existence within predominantly white societies through complex combinations of music and moving images. As well as drawing from black musical resources whose lyrics foreground the relationships between poverty and urban racism such as Marlena Shaw's 'Woman of the Ghetto' (1969), Oscar Brown Jr.'s 'Dime Away From A Hotdog' (1972), Donny Hathaway's 'Little Ghetto Boy' (1972) and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's 'The Message' (1982), the 'retro' sound of Blacc's music explicitly echoes the 'soul realism' that characterises the oeuvres of Curtis Mayfield and Marvin Gaye. The sombre, gritty content of Joseph's visual content thus connects ideas about 'soul' and contemporary Harlem through its sonic *and* visual features. Joseph subverts conventionalised conceptualisations of the music video form that Pike chooses to follow, adopting instead an oscillatory, shapeshifting filmmaking style that plays on the duality of 'double-consciousness' and, in turn, moves between what Houston A. Baker Jr. defines as the dualism of 'mastery of form' and 'deformation of mastery' (Baker, 1987, p.49). While Pike's music video adopts tropes and styles associated with popular music-video conventions to promote Blacc's music, Joseph attempts to frame Afrodiasporic 'double-consciousness' in a way that mimics the structural flexibility of his screen text, oscillating

between divergent states and conditions as a sophisticated, multi-layered media text. In this sense, Joseph 'masters' a variety of forms in 'I Need A Dollar' as means of strategically melding the politicised nature of his work within a range of popular media traditions. At certain moments, then, the video performs 'like a trickster butterfly in order to sting like a bee,' blatantly criticising American's imbalanced racial relations and, simultaneously, promoting the release of Blacc's music through the same racially-imbalanced infrastructures and flows of global capital that the video otherwise challenges and critiques (Baker, 1987, p.50–51).

The conclusion of Joseph's video takes an unexpected turn when the protagonist runs from the bar, flees from the chasing men, and hurtles into the unknown. Whether the chase is prompted by the protagonist's rejection of an illegitimate job offer from the men at the bar, or his charging run through the cold streets results from committing a desperate crime somehow related to the conversation at the bar, Joseph's 'I Need A Dollar' video captures in sonic and visual terms the conundrum of African-American existence in contemporary Harlem amidst the underlying dangers and vices of city environments. Pike's music video concludes with Blacc's character implausibly finding a lucky coin on the floor, using it to win a large jackpot on the slot machines which, in turn, reduces the emotional weight of Blacc's music. Joseph, on the other hand, utilises a series of ambivalent moving images to remind his viewership that African-American experiences are loaded with paradoxes and complications in contemporary America, moments of joy *and* instances of heartache. The racially-charged imbalance of Harlem's precarious social framework creates a network of

obstacles that even those who do not seek violence struggle to escape, perpetuating a paradoxical cycle for black citizens forever running *from* and *through* the streets, exploring the ways in which one's 'piece of the pie' as an African-American citizen amidst the nation's hierarchical racial structures 'ain't free.'

Conclusion(s): Searching for Soul under the Conditions of Neoliberal Capitalism

Although the two videos represent Blacc's music in similar fashion through explorations of a 'hustler' figure negotiating contemporary American environments, key differences between their content and formal parameters illustrate Joseph's and Pike's distinguishable processes of music-video creation. While Pike's music video is a professional interpretation of the song's musical content largely emptied of controversial subject matter, Joseph's gritty and darker portrayal of an unemployed wanderer searching through wintry Harlem in the music video and its trailer draw attention to America's dire social schisms. In doing so, Joseph's work focusses on the resistive qualities latent in Blacc's music, augmenting certain properties/features within the song that are momentarily explored – or altogether ignored – by Pike's video. When attempting to articulate feelings and sensations that transcend the impersonal logic and mechanics of the marketplace, Lordi's 'soul' definition, Joseph's 'integrity' mindset and indeed other theoretical and volatile components in the original 'I Need A Dollar' song are amplified by Joseph's video and his multi-talented musical and acting co-author Aloe Blacc (if, crucially, the singer did not play a key role in blocking the

original music video in pursuit of money, fame and glory). At the time when the original version was made, Joseph and Blacc worked as two mutually-respectful collaborators attempting to create art. Whether the singer resisted restricting the final outcome of this collaboration in the interests of his own hunt for capital and fortune, or, in fact, supported the decision after buckling to Sony Music Entertainment's pressure, remains – for now – unknown.

As Blacc's original track draws from the musical tradition of the 'work song' to communicate the precarity of black labour in modern times, Joseph's music video reminds its viewership: 'all that glitters ain't gold.' Curiously, then, the inconclusive ending to the 'I Need A Dollar' video saga echoes the unresolved fate of the protagonist's plight at the denouement of Joseph's screen text. After tirelessly chasing sufficient capital to support himself as a member of contemporary American society, the character finally finds himself cornered and caught, exhausted and defeated, cryptically engulfed by Harlem's darkness, harsh winds, and snow. Reading the music video's conclusion as an inadvertent allegory for the singer's journey to stardom in the spatio-temporal realm beyond the screen, perhaps something dark and cold unexpectedly swallowed Blacc along the way, too. Joseph's 'integrity' approach therefore represents a delicate phenomenon within *and* beyond the music video's diegetic screen world, capable of supporting and augmenting the 'soulful' qualities of the singer's music while, at the same time, offering alternative strategies for audiovisual artists who must negotiate complicated working environments that might otherwise commodify, nullify, and distort such precarious concepts and beliefs. 'All that glitters ain't gold' for

filmmakers and musicians negotiating the myriad obstacles and opportunities of the creative and cultural industries, which makes recognising, scrutinising, and understanding the unlikely moments that do shine all the more valuable – for practitioners and scholars alike.

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