When *Moonlight* was released in 2016, music critics praised the film for its inventive soundtrack. Composer Nicholas Britell famously drew from Southern hip-hop’s chop and screw tradition to slow down the orchestral strings for dramatic effect. That approach was complemented by pre-existing popular music recordings culled from a deep catalogue of soul and hip-hop. Barry Jenkins, who directed and co-wrote the screenplay, specified many of the pre-existing songs that shape the film’s narrative world; both as source music and within the score, or as diegetic and non-diegetic music respectively (and spanning the blurry space between them). In so doing, he joined a growing tradition of auteur directors attempting to position themselves as DJs as well and, like other Black directors before him, Jenkins uses his position to highlight popular music worlds mostly left untouched by white filmmakers. In this sense, Jenkins’ approach is closer to that of a hip-hop DJ, featuring rare cuts and manipulated samples rather than that of a radio DJ who plays all of the hits – an approach much closer to what white directors have generally taken. Each song featured in the soundtrack has a deep history and can be read at multiple levels of interpretation, providing depth for those who pay attention to the film’s sonic aspects.

This chapter discusses two of the songs in *Moonlight* that link into different strains of Black queer identity during the climax of the final act, ‘Black’: Aretha Franklin’s ‘One Step Ahead’ and Caetano Veloso’s ‘Cucurrucucú Paloma’. These two tracks appear back to back, with ‘Cucurrucucú Paloma’ preceding ‘One Step Ahead’. Through their
example, I argue that pop music cues can link a film’s themes to other minority filmmaking traditions, translating them across cultural contexts. While these references may seem innocuous to a general cinematic audience, they do important affective work for publics for whom these musical codes are much more meaningful.

Tracking minority identities in film music has been best theorized by Anahid Kassabian, whose *Hearing Film* and *Ubiquitous Listening* demonstrate some interpretive possibilities for understanding what different audiences might bring to a mass medium such as mainstream or art-house cinema. As Kassabian notes, film music is at least as significant to the narrative of a film as the visuals in the way it ‘draws filmgoers into a film’s world […] It conditions identification processes, the encounters between film texts and filmgoers’ psyches’. However, one major lacuna in English language scholarship is how placing a rare track by a well-known artist, or a vaguely familiar recording entirely in a foreign language, in a prominent soundtrack can transform the meaning of that recording among differing publics across different markets. The result is an iterative process where each text (film and song) informs the reception of the other. The meaning-making in films using pre-existing music occurs at different registers depending on the audience member’s familiarity with the musical text in question. What happens when we take account of minority readings and interpretation? Through performance, fan engagement and the expansion of niche tastes in digital media more generally, it has become increasingly clear that audiences are identifying with film music from multiple vantage points, sometimes coloured by mistranslations across national lines, and sometimes due to the strength of subcultural codes separating ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ – a distinction that, although blurry, still holds sway in how demographics and subjectivity influence interpretation. This seems to be the case even when talking about transnational affiliating identifications. When talking about transnational queerness, in particular, the discussion tends to be about the tension between reaching a large-scale international audiences and localized understandings of musical codes. As I show in the rest of this chapter, that tension is at play in some of the musical choices in *Moonlight*.

Film music studies have had a productive discussion of well-known musical tropes and the collapse of musical referents. In the case of art-house films (and prestige television) with explicitly queer content, the circuits of meaning change due to the niche tastes of the community. At the most experienced and knowledgeable register, the depth of references to a well-known song or artist has the potential to elicit the pleasure of recognizing other uses or settings within that tradition. It also has
the potential of being so successful as a musical placement as to realign the values attached to the song. In those cases, the original context of the song (and sometimes previous recordings of the same song) lessens in influence compared to a famous placement in film and television. What occurs is not only a type of translation but also redefinition for viewers tracking the use of music in queer film.

This chapter analyses two songs that appear prominently in the climax of *Moonlight*. I base these interpretations in my own subject position as a white, queer, gender non-conforming scholar with an investment in how filmmakers working in independent and art-house cinema choose to represent sexual and gender minorities. Above all, I am interested in how the messages in a film soundtrack convey meanings at different registers and to different niche audiences. I ask: what kind of cultural translation is at work when audiences unfamiliar with the web of meanings attached to the song see the same scene? What aspects of this should be understood as insider knowledge? This chapter is an extension of my previous work on how soundtrack choices translate differently depending on the knowledge of the audience. It is part of a project that has developed out of my interest in the role that the intermediation of music and sound plays in minority community identity. It builds off my research into what happens to musical codes in contexts when audience attention is pulled in multiple directions. What interests me about the music in *Moonlight* is that all evidence points to multiple routes for Jenkins and audiences finding a queer meaning in musical codes based in popular music.

**Black queer temporalities and Aretha Franklin**

The strains of Aretha Franklin’s ‘One Step Ahead’ serve as diegetic music at two crucial moments in the narrative for *Moonlight*. The first instance occurs in the opening chapter, ‘Little’, when the audience first learns that Chiron’s mother has a drug problem. The second instance is in the final chapter, when Kevin and Chiron lay eyes on each other for the first time in twelve years. The significance of Franklin’s song is tied up in both how these two scenes are edited as well as the legacy of Franklin’s music in film.

In cinema, Franklin’s music has generally accompanied scenes of joy and celebration geared towards a white, mainstream audience. From the 1980s through the early 2000s, for example, it was common to see characters enjoying her big hits like ‘Respect’ and ‘Natural Woman’ on-screen. In the highest-grossing versions of these, the characters are white and
straight, speaking to the crossover success that her music has achieved, to the point that it no longer indexes Blackness in film soundtracks. Given that, what does it mean to queer the Queen of Soul? Given her broad popularity, placing Aretha Franklin’s music in scenarios that often do not get represented on film and television, especially Black queer ones, is a bold statement. Most audiences would hear Franklin’s placement in a film soundtrack as an everyday occurrence. Indeed, judging by Franklin’s 287 soundtrack credits, many of them since 2015, hearing the Queen of Soul is a mainstream affair. In Moonlight, however, Franklin’s music is part of the world of two queer men, making it function in a fundamentally different manner.

Aretha Franklin’s ‘One Step Ahead’, first released as a single in 1965 (two years before her first full-length album and crossover success), plays as diegetic music when Chiron and Kevin see each other for the first time as adults. The first notes of the song start when Chiron walks into the diner where Kevin is working, just as the bell above the entrance rings. There are many clues that this song is supposed to be playing on a jukebox in the diner. It is at a relatively low level in the mix compared to ambient sounds, in what film sound scholar Michel Chion describes as off-screen on-the-air sound: the source of the music is not in the frame but we, as audience members, presume we can hear it along with the characters. There are a few hints that this song is playing in the diner – the fidelity of the song muffles the low- and high-end frequencies, making the chicken scratch guitar accompaniment and backing vocals harder to hear.

Since this is the first music in the soundtrack following the long-shot of Chiron entering the diner after parking his car, it is also disorienting. While time in the film was previously suspended by the unaccompanied long shots, the song is moving things forward again. However, that progression of time stops again as Chiron and Kevin pause to look at each other. First, we see a close-up of Chiron gazing at Kevin, followed by a close-up of Kevin gazing back. The audience hears Kevin say, ‘Chiron?’ without actually seeing either of them move their lips. It is the audiovisual equivalent of a gasp before the tension breaks with dialogue. ‘Damn, man! Why you ain’t say nothin’?’ Kevin says with a laugh. And then later, ‘There you go with that damn nod again. You ain’t changed one damn bit. You still can’t say more than three words at a time, huh.’ Nicholas Brittell’s score re-enters as Kevin goes to the diner’s kitchen to make Chiron a ‘Chef’s Special’. Franklin’s voice provides an important emotional foundation for this interaction, giving it the expressive depth that neither character is saying aloud. That it is also part of the film’s diegesis gives the song’s relative rarity added heft in the narrative. Indeed, the
off-screen on-the-air sound sutures it to the everyday lives of these two Black men, and both are made more vulnerable by its appearance.

The only referent for this song is earlier in the film, in the first chapter, ‘Little’, when Chiron comes home after his swimming lesson with Juan, the local drug dealer. The opening strains of the song are manipulated to sound like they are coming from a portable stereo as his mother, Paula, clears what sounds like a glass pipe before disappearing into her bedroom with a male guest. This is the first time that the audience learns that Paula is a drug user. It is the only song in the film that appears twice and indicates that Jenkins used it to punctuate two important developments in Chiron’s story.

There is something queer about the diner setting and the music played there that links to what many queer theorists have described as a type of queer temporality. Scholars and critics speak of the ways queer time is different from straight time, especially as regards how queer people have different expectations for the future and how that translates to representations of queerness in film and television. Often these representations defy linearity or ‘fail’ in presenting successful narratives in a traditional sense. In this instance, the rare Aretha Franklin record from 1965 on a jukebox seems at once entirely improbable – how many traditional jukeboxes have rare singles? – and in keeping with the ways that Black artists push the bounds of what is possible in art. This is especially the case when discussing the intersection of Blackness and queerness. Cinema studies scholar Kara Keeling extends queer temporalities to anti-colonial and anti-racist possibilities in Black art, especially with regards to futurity (future speculation). In this example in Moonlight, the combination of the play with time and the rupture with what is probable in the ambient music of the diner scene opens up the potential that the music is actively repairing the damage committed to Chiron in his childhood. It opens up the potential for a misremembering of his childhood, or even a reremembering. Through its play with the expectations of linear time in film, the use of ‘One Step Ahead’ in this scene is not just in keeping with queer representation in cinema, but also Black queer cinema.

One major precedent for queering Aretha Franklin was when the Wachowskis featured ‘I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)’ – Franklin’s first major hit with Atlantic Records from 1967 – as diegetic music in Bound (1996). This is when the butch, Corky, visits a lesbian bar called The Watering Hole towards the beginning of the film. In that case, the song is rich in subtext, suturing on a lesbian meaning to the ‘you’ in the lyrics where it was never intended. Like the scene in Moonlight, the
music in *Bound* is diegetic in an explicitly queer reunion in a public place, albeit one that is much less joyful.

Of course, ‘One Step Ahead’ as a reference is also occurring at other registers. Some might recognize it from the world of hip-hop sampling, since the song memorably appeared in Mos Def’s ‘Ms. Fat Booty’ from his 1999 album *Black on Both Sides*. Or there is the possibility that the audience member in question is a lover of Aretha Franklin’s music, including her pre-1967 singles. The interpretive possibilities vary widely, but it is clear that the scene is more meaningful in part because the track is not among Franklin’s most familiar recordings. Jenkins chose a deep cut from her back catalogue, which means that audiences are less likely to attach the song to previous cinematic scenes featuring her music. In that way, he has detached Aretha Franklin from her extensive history in film soundtracks and remade her in the service of Black cinema.

Like much of the film, this scene barely has any dialogue. Franklin’s voice provides the depth and ambiance for adult Chiron’s quiet and powerful emotional reactions to seeing Kevin, in an important build-up to the vulnerabilities expressed later in the film’s final chapter. That backtrack affords more emotional weight to the moment of connection and exposure. In contrast, the next section discusses how a musical choice explicitly connects the film to a broader world of transnational queer cinema through a cover that slows and turns down the volume of the film.

The transnational queerness of ‘Cucurrucú Paloma’

Unlike Aretha Franklin, Brazilian pop megastar Caetano Veloso has not regularly appeared in English-language film and television soundtracks. Yet, one of his recordings has had a profound impact on queer cinema. In this section, I discuss the links between the use of one of his recordings in *Moonlight* and other examples in transnational queer cinema. Since Veloso’s music is based in the music of Latin America, I take some space to elaborate on how this music works.

In keeping with the film overall, the third chapter of *Moonlight* is filled with emotion. In the sequence of events just before Chiron meets Kevin in Miami, he visits his mother at her rehab facility. The mother-son reunion is emotionally intense. She tries to apologize for how she raised him, repeating both that she loves him and that she had not loved him the way he needed. Chiron stands up to hug her, and then the opening strains of Caetano Veloso’s recording of ‘Cucurrucú Paloma’ function as a musical dissolve to Chiron driving on U.S. Route 41, the southernmost
east–west highway in Florida. After the first verse of the song, we see another dissolve, this time to children playing on the beach. The moment ties *Moonlight* to a rich tradition of queer cinematic uses of that song, a tradition so deep that sometimes scholars, filmmakers and critics talk past each other about what it means.

For example, in a 2016 interview published in the online music magazine *Pitchfork*, Matthew Schnipper asked Jenkins about the song in the context of the soundtrack. Schnipper was curious if it was a reference to Pedro Almodóvar’s *Talk to Her (Hable Con Ella)* from 2002. Jenkins responded:

it’s the same song used in Wong Kar-wai’s *Happy Together*. It’s a direct homage. Even the way we framed the car driving down the highway is the same. I remember watching *Happy Together* a long time ago. It was the first movie I would say that I saw that was outright a queer film. One of the first films I saw that had subtitles, even. *Moonlight* is worlds away from *Happy Together*—it’s a movie about two Asian men living in Argentina, and here we have these two black men from fucking Liberty City, Miami. The world is very big and also very small, because they’re experiencing the same things. I feel like film has given so much to me and I just wanted for 30 seconds to show how small the world is. It doesn’t carry any thematic impart, but hopefully it will introduce a certain audience that has been going to see this film but who has maybe never heard Caetano Veloso—the same way that when I watched *Happy Together*, I got to Asia by way of Argentina and discovered Caetano Veloso.16

This was clearly not the response that Schnipper was expecting, and it reveals an important layer to how the use of pre-existing music can operate at multiple registers; in this case, different references to transnational queer cinema.

It turns out that many people, especially queer people, have much to say about this song. Early in 2019, I saw it performed live as part of my effort to alleviate some culture shock I was experiencing on a preliminary research trip to Portugal. As a gender non-conforming foreigner in a country with progressive LGBTQ policies paired with conservative cultural expressions, I was elated to learn about Fado Bicha, a local duo that queers famous fado songs as a form of social activism. Over the last few years, Fado Bicha has become the literal poster group for Lisbon’s gay circuit. I attended a January show at a hotel that caters to gay tourists in Lisbon. Imagine my surprise when Fado Bicha chose to close their
performance set with the same song, ‘Cucurucucú Paloma’, as a type of lullaby. In fact, when they began to play it, a man in the audience said in English, ‘This one is my favourite!’ Indicating that, at least for him, it was familiar enough to hold that kind of elevated status.

When I talked to the musicians about that choice in an interview later that month, they mentioned Almodóvar’s *Talk to Her* as their inspiration, but they mentioned that they did not really like how the song was used in the film (including Veloso’s cameo). They described the film’s aesthetic as rather aggressive, even too butch for their liking. However, the film introduced them to a song that they liked for its emotional tone, that they then felt free to adapt to their set. Like many musicians who change, translate and adapt songs they like, Fado Bicha’s initial exposure to the music was less important than what they thought they could make of it as artists. While they were happy that I recognized the connection to *Moonlight*, they were explicit in their love of Almodóvar. Spanish cinema is popular in Portugal and Almodóvar appeals to the LGBTQ community. Regardless of my reaction, they did not see the song as especially remarkable for its queer content and seemed to think my knowledge of it was cool since they understood me as a queer music scholar. Yet, the next time they played the song, they happily announced its queer connections to the audience. They were proud.

Since the late 1990s, scholars, critics and music fans have taken note of the particular affective power of Caetano Veloso’s recording of ‘Cucurucucú Paloma’ in international queer cinema. Veloso recorded the song in question in 1995 as part of *Fina Estampa Ao Vivo*, the live album from the tour for his 1994 album-length tribute to Spanish-language songs from Latin America. While the recording has appeared on a few international compilations, it has reached a much wider audience through its use in award-winning films and that have had an extended life in the LGBTQ film festival circuit. What is more, the creative choices that have gone into featuring the song in key moments of emotional gravitas on screen are often latching onto fragments of the song’s extended meaning in audiovisual media, one that functions differently to what happened with Aretha Franklin’s ‘One Step Ahead’.

What interests me in the song’s use by Barry Jenkins in *Moonlight* (as well as its use by Fado Bicha, Wong Kar-Wai’s *Happy Together* and Pedro Almodóvar’s *Talk to Her*) is that the song’s transnational queerness was explicit in the song’s selection while also being multivalent. Yet despite that multiplicity, the emotional effect of the song does not change. In the case of the Caetano Veloso recording, I believe that there is something
unique about the combination of Veloso’s interpretive choices, especially how he chooses to use his voice, and the important work of homage in filmic citation.

In soundtrack choices, filmic citation is especially complicated for pre-existing music. Elsewhere I have shown how film music is especially complicit in the perpetuation of musical stereotypes through a case study of the uses of the Brazilian song ‘Aquarela do Brasil’ (published as ‘Brazil’ for its English translation) in film soundtracks and trailers. Sometimes film music does this work by taking a musical sign that previously conveyed one idea and transforming it through memorable repurposing. This repurposing changes in context, depending on audience and filmmaker strategy. Sometimes this occurs when a purportedly serious song is used to elicit extreme affect in context – such as soundtracking something utterly ridiculous or, by contrast, something deeply emotional – which can go on to mark the music in question. In soundtrack use, in particular, filmic citation is far from straightforward, which is perhaps why so many musicians and filmmakers disagree on how they came to Veloso’s recording in particular.

It is curious that Caetano Veloso transformed this song into a ballad. It was originally composed by Mexican musician Tomás Mendez in 1954 as a song of lost love using the metaphor of the cuckoo dove weeping in sorrow. The song appeared one year later on screen when iconic Mexican Golden-Age actor and musician Pedro Infante sang it for the film Escuela de Vagabundos (1955) as an up-tempo serenade to his love interest. Stylistically, the Mexican recordings of this song treat it as a mariachi canción ranchera based in the huapango. Ranchera songs are topical in nature and often address themes of love, patriotism and the natural world. The huapango is a rhythmically complex style with a compound metre and switches between duple or triple metre. For readers unfamiliar with this kind of switching, imagine a song switching between a waltz rhythm (in three) and a straight-ahead march (in two). Its Mexican roots are clear in the lyrics when Infante sings ‘ay-ay-ay-ay-ay-yi’, a common melodicization of the mariachi’s cry. All of these features are common to the rancheras that appeared in Golden Age Mexican cinema, and many of the films from this period had an extended cultural life in Mexico when they were broadcast on television decades later. This song was so popular that it appeared in another Mexican film just ten years later as the finale with the same name sung by Lola Beltrán. The extended circulation of these Golden Age Films after their heyday has lent songs like this some campy appeal.
Caetano Veloso did not include ‘Cucurrucú Paloma’ when he made the studio album tribute to Hispanic songs, *Fina Estampa*, in 1994. Rather, he first began playing the song as part of the tour for that album. Like the other songs in the *Fina Estampa* project, Veloso uses the string quartet to accompany his voice and guitar. He also chooses to use his highest register, way up in his falsetto, when singing the chorus – well above the range that Pedro Infante and Lola Beltrán used in their versions for Mexican film decades before. The metre for the song is strictly in a duple feel which leaves the only traces of the mariachi roots of the song in the ay-ay-ay-ay-ay-yi chorus. Because he uses his falsetto, it is perhaps too tempting to reduce his vocal approach to a type of queering of the song. Of course, some gay men who love Golden Age Mexican cinema could argue that the song does not need queering since Mexican Golden Age cinema is already rife with queer readings of Mexican masculinity. Or even that Lola Beltrán’s version is the essence of an iconic diva performance. However, due to the limits of media circulation from Golden Age Mexican cinema, it seems that those codes do not reach beyond the Mexican and Mexican–American queer counterpublics that watched these films on television. And, like other non-Portuguese songs in Veloso’s repertoire, he does not translate it for his audience. Veloso’s recording begins with the sound of audience applause, maintaining the connection to liveness that is so prized in Brazilian live recordings. Notably, most audiovisual uses of Veloso’s recording remove the sound of applause that opens the track, opting instead to begin with the steady rhythm of the string quartet. That has the effect of removing the traces of live performance tied to a time and place from the recording, rendering it more timeless and pliable.

When Wong Kar-Wai’s *Happy Together* was released in 1997, it made a big impact in the film festival circuit. Wong Kar-Wai won ‘Best Director’ at the Cannes Film Festival and competed for the Palme d’Or, becoming the first director from Hong Kong to achieve such a feat. The film centres on a dysfunctional relationship between two displaced men from Hong Kong, Ho Po-Wing and Lai Yiu-Fai, who have relocated to Argentina to ‘start over’. ‘Cucurrucucú Paloma’ appears in the opening scene which begins in black and white. In a flashback, we learn that two men have gotten lost on their road trip to Iguazu Falls. Once Lai Yiu-Fai realizes that things are over, he covers his face with his hand. Then the palette switches to colour as we see Iguazu Falls and the strains of Veloso’s recording take over. Wong gives the waterfalls and Veloso’s voice ninety seconds, an evocative and sentimental gesture. On a narrative level, the use of this song in an early scene makes a big impact as the representation
of an attempt to rekindle their love that never materializes due to the two men breaking things off. Wong’s choice to show the strife in black and white helps to communicate that it is a flashback while also contrasting with the colour of the waterfalls.

In contrast, Pedro Almodóvar did not have to work to communicate a queer aesthetic in *Talk to Her*. He is well known for portraying women, especially hysterical women, in his films to dramatic and comedic effect. His work is inherently portraying a gay aesthetic. ‘Cucurrucucú Paloma’ appears in the film when Veloso himself performs in the film. Apparently, the choice to feature him had nothing to do with Wong Kar-Wai. He was already Caetano Veloso’s friend, and the story goes that he received an unedited version of the song. Almodóvar also said that he was trying to bring some more ‘masculine’ energy into the world of his films. In fact, the film was his attempt to *not* feature hysterical women or campy subject matter and instead approach more serious topics. It is in many senses his least overtly gay film, which is likely why the musicians in *Fado Bicha* loved the song and not the setting.

*Talk to Her* brings this discussion back to the question of emotion, intelligibility and sentiment. *Talk to Her* is the only filmic setting of the song where the primary audience is likely to understand what the song is about. In the rest of these contexts, the lyrics go unknown and untranslated and their sentimental significance is instead expressed by the context of the film.²⁴ In that sense, then, it seems that untranslated, falsetto vocals help communicate the emotional rawness of a fragmenting relationship that is far from being about semantic meaning and instead zeroes in on effect. The aesthetic comes from an attempt to portray queer sentimentality from a director who, by all accounts, is not gay.

That same lack of shared gay identity between director and filmic subject is also a factor in Barry Jenkins’ biography. Yet, in the case of *Moonlight*, the music comes just after Chiron leaves the home where his mother is convalescing to drive to Miami. In contrast to the heartbreak of *Happy Together*, the use of the song in *Moonlight* conveys hope and beauty, as visually expressed by footage of children playing in the sea. The choice of these two directors to use this song to soundtrack such emotionally weighty moments is an investment in transnational queer sentiment. That Jenkins chose to index this aspect is simply remarkable and pushes the story of *Moonlight* beyond the setting of gay Black men surviving in poverty to a much broader, hopeful, transnational vision of queer solidarity.

In that sense, Veloso’s recording has turned into the type of cover song so influential that it is now the new referent for other performances
rather than the ‘original’ settings that made the song famous in the first place. In a new twist on the queer connections among different settings of this song, a version by the Guatemalan pop musician Gaby Moreno appeared in the final sequence of the series finale for *Orange is the New Black*, the most successful TV show to feature queer women to date. Moreno’s recording emulates nearly every aspect of Veloso’s recording, from the tempo to the arrangement. The choice to complement the resolution of many of the stories within the show, including the love story between the main protagonist and her female love interest, with that song further reinforces the song’s queer meanings.

This chapter opens new avenues for discussing the different ways that Black directors can position themselves as soundtrack DJs. In this case, Jenkins’ deep knowledge of Black music and music with transnational queer meanings demonstrates a deft hand. In just those two scenes, he uses music to play with audience perceptions of time and space, affording a wider bandwidth for audiences to consider how they relate to Chiron and Kevin’s relationship with sound and time. While many Black songs from the past appear on the soundtrack, Arethan Franklin’s ‘One Step Ahead’ stands out for being a song with few available cultural references. The lack of previous iterations of this song in popular culture gives Jenkins a blank canvas on which to suture queer meanings; in this case, meanings about Black queer temporality. In an opposite move, Jenkins’ use of ‘Cucurrucucú Paloma’ deliberately taps into a lengthy tradition of using that song in queer audiovisual contexts. The previous references are the point.

Through these two vivid examples, I have attempted to show how pop songs in film soundtracks can express multiple layers of meaning and identification for different audiences. Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight* (2016) is an excellent case study in how these different readings develop. Through my discussion of ‘Cucurrucucú Paloma’ specifically, I attempted to show how that meaning is palpable even when different people disagree and there are contrasting interpretations. There were many opportunities for these two songs to get lost in translation or to inspire readings at the most basic registers for a general audience. Even when the politics behind such a choice rely on repurposing existing material and on perhaps knowing a completely different reference, such a placement does not lose its community building power so long as community members are familiar with one reference or another. In fact, in the case of both of these songs, whatever baggage the audience brings to the song’s performance can only lend the song more power in forging a broader community.
Notes

1. This happens most memorably in the scene where young Chiron learns to swim in the first act of the film. Chop ’n’ screw is a technique most associated with the hip-hop scene in Houston, Texas, originating with DJ Screw (Robert Earl Davis, Jr) and later becoming one of the defining techniques of Southern hip-hop.

2. This is a critical shorthand for describing whether the characters ‘hear’ what the audience hears as part of the film’s diegesis. There has been considerable scholarly debate about the utility of these two concepts since many filmmakers deliberately blur the lines between the two. That blurring happens in Moonlight. For the most cogent critique, see Robynn J. Stilwell, ‘The fantastical gap between diegetic and nondiegetic’, 184–202.

3. In recent decades, white directors such as Wes Anderson, Cameron Crowe, Martin Scorsese, Quentin Tarantino and many others have staked a claim to being tastemakers in music as well as in film. Many Black directors have a patented approach to soundtracks. For example, Ryan Coogler always works with the same composer (Ludwig Göransson). Spike Lee has long directed films that have been guided by music. For a good discussion of the ‘director as DJ’ phenomenon, see Todd Decker, ‘The Filmmaker as DJ: Martin Scorsese’s Compiled Score for Casino (1995)’, 281–317.

4. Anahid Kassabian, Hearing Film; Anahid Kassabian, Ubiquitous Listening.

5. Kassabian, Hearing Film, 1.

6. Here, I borrow from Michael Long’s discussion of how familiar classical music works at differing registers depending on the experience of the audience. Michael Long, Beautiful Monsters.

7. K.E. Goldschmitt, Bossa Mundo, 52–75; Melanie Lowe, ‘Claiming Amadeus’, 102–19. See also musicologist Alex Ludwig’s catalogue of the ‘Dies Irae’ trope in film music, best summarized in Vox, Why This Creepy Melody Is in so Many Movies.


9. As of this writing in early 2022, Aretha Franklin has 287 soundtrack credits on film and television, according to the Internet Movie Database (IMDB.com). ‘Respect’ alone has eighty-four credits, including Bridget Jones’ Diary (2001), Two Weeks’ Notice (2002), Forrest Gump (1994), and a 1998 episode of Sex and the City. ‘Natural Woman’ appeared in The Big Chill (1984) and on numerous television shows in the 1990s such as Northern Exposure (1991) and twice on Murphy Brown (1988 and 1991).

10. Michel Chion, Audio-Vision.

11. In an interview with Michael Boyd Gillespie, Jenkins asserted that the progression of time from the first two chapters is deliberately suspended for the third. Michael Boyce Gillespie, ‘One step ahead’, 52–62.

12. For the most widely cited examples of this, see Lee Edelman, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive; Jack Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place. The best discussion of Black queer temporality is Kara Keeling, Queer Times, Black Futures, although that text is mainly concerned with how these issues intersect with Afro-Futurism.

13. See Jack Halberstam’s discussion of queer failure in The Queer Art of Failure.


15. Special thanks to Lauron Kehrer for helping me think through this point.


17. In his interview with Lorraine Leu, Veloso contextualized his Fina Estampa project as part of the context in which he wrote his memoir, Verdaðe Tropical (Verdade Tropical) and his desire to record a similar album of popular songs from the United States. See Lorraine Leu, Brazilian Popular Music, 156.


20. Sergio de la Mora, Cinemachismo.


22. In her book-length study of Veloso’s album of the United States songbook, A Foreign Sound, Barbara Browning argues that Veloso’s resistance to translation is part of a career-long trajectory. See Barbara Browning, Caetano Veloso’s A Foreign Sound.

23. In Brazil, ‘ao vivo’, or ‘live’, recordings outsell those of the studio albums on which they are based.

24. Rey Chow’s discussion of Wong Kar-Wai’s style has focused on the intense sentimentality of Happy Together. See Rey Chow, ‘Sentimental returns’, 639–54.
Bibliography


