

Dancing on the White Page



Black Women
Entertainers
Writing
Autobiography

Kwakiutl L.
Dreher

DANCING ON THE WHITE PAGE

T H E S U N Y S E R I E S

CULTURAL STUDIES IN CINEMA/VIDEO

WHEELER WINSTON DIXON | EDITOR

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on the
White Page*

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Writing Autobiography

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Cover photo: Eartha Kitt circa 1954. Courtesy of Photofest.

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Dedicated to:

My mother,
Mrs. Tyratha Patricia Bellamy Dreher
“Learn to type and sew; you’ll always have a job.
Someone will need something typed up and you can
take in sewing on the sly.”

My father,
Mr. Ulysses William Dreher
March 4, 1928–October 30, 2002
“Get your education so you won’t have to ask a soul
for a !@#\$ thing!”

*My parents who gave me the gifts of industry and
diligence, and who developed in me the strong will
to work and to learn about the world.*



Reverend Roscoe C. Wilson, Pastor Emeritus
St. John Baptist Church, Columbia, South Carolina
Reverend Wilson issued a mandate to the congregation to
mentor its youth. I am a product of that mentoring.

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Introduction

Are We Listening to the Footsteps of the Dance on the White Page?

On June 30, 1995, Phyllis Hyman, one of the most talented soulful jazz/R&B vocalists of the twentieth century, commits suicide in her one-bedroom apartment in New York just hours before her scheduled performance at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem. July 6 of that year would have marked her forty-sixth birthday.

In the assessment of this Phyllis Hyman moment, I ask, dear reader, your patience, because emphasizing the various ways in which black female entertainers go to great lengths to tell us their stories is crucial. More important, I really want to underscore the urgency of listening to each of them. We cannot allow what happens to Phyllis Hyman's call to be heard to happen to the women in this study: Lena Horne, Dorothy Dandridge, Eartha Kitt, Diahann Carroll, Mary Wilson, and Whoopi Goldberg. "It is in the end," Alice Walker reminds us, "the saving of lives that we writers are about. . . . We do it because we care" (14). We save lives by listening . . . We have to care.

The news of Hyman's death overwhelms me as poignant memories of her concert performance and television appearances flash in my mind. I attended her concert December 31, 1991, at the Fox Theater in Atlanta, Georgia. At the Fox, her voice drapes lyrics in deep maroon velvet with the grace of a teardrop, and the crowd assembles in the palm of her hand. She catches the spirit of the night, and the six-foot one-inch

diva takes her shoes off to feel more at one with the audience. A year later, on November 4, 1992, Hyman appears on *The Arsenio Hall Show*. She talks with Hall about having lived a life filled with loneliness, but she remains hopeful of finding someone with whom to share it. She is working on the production of new songs, and their lyrics reflect the interior health she has come to realize after years of isolation. Yet, in 1995, she is dead.

The words “Fans and Friends Mourn the Tragic Death of Singer Phyllis Hyman” became a blur as I read excerpts of her obituary in the July 24, 1995 issue of one of the most popular black periodicals, *Jet* magazine. Through teary eyes, I wonder: Phyllis, with all that you had—a successful career and a voice as fluid as honey that told me how to feel during my most desperate times—what in the world would enter your mind and convince you to take yourself out of here? Her voice whirls through my head as does the dance of her words on the white pages in previous issues of *Jet*. I realize then that Hyman has given me all along her *own story* for almost fifteen years in *Jet* and, more revealing, through her music. *I just was not listening*.

In an October 1981 *Jet* article, “Phyllis Hyman Wants Love to Match Records, Stage Success,” the singer brings to light that her professional success belies the absence of a personal life. She says:

I try to avoid even thinking about it . . . [b]ecause there is nothing to balance. There’s only the professional. . . . And I really want people to know that what they think and read about entertainers’s [sic] lives being so glamorous—hell, no! That is far from the truth and *especially for female performers*. Men seem to be in awe of you and feel you can’t be approached. (62, my emphasis)

Hyman discerns early in her career how the circulation of the glamorous image in the mainstream of popular culture compromises the private life. The compromise forms a tension between the public and private spheres. The act of performance, she also recognizes, mandates a separation between performer and spectator. The spectator, in turn, marvels at this untouchable phenomenon doing something beyond the everyday. This separation, according to Hyman, frustrates the performer’s efforts to form viable nourishing communities and partnerships. Hyman believes, moreover, the weight of the tension falls more heavily on the shoulders of women in entertainment. *Were we listening?*

The album *Living All Alone* (Capitol Records, 1986) is the song stylist’s siren call to her audience that all is not well in her “glamorous”

world. In the song “Living All Alone,” for example, the listener enters an apartment once shared by two lovers. Now, a single voice echoes throughout the rooms. Hyman wails for five minutes and fifteen seconds that she just cannot stand living all alone, especially after having been somebody’s baby. She mourns the times she was held tight and loved right. Who will mend this devastating break in her life accompanied by long and lonely nights? With a glass of milk in one hand and a pint of chocolate Häagen-Dazs in my lap, I nod. I know what you’re talking about, girl. “You Just Don’t Know” continues the theme of unbearable loneliness and chronicles the tears she cries planning her nights by the *TV Guide* as well as how the telephone becomes her partner while she waits for a call. Do you know what being lonely feels like? You do not know; I do not know. Girl, sing your song. *But I just wasn’t listening.*

In 1991 she again confided to *Jet*, “[t]here is a deep connection between part of my loneliness with my music *if you listen* to some of the words to my songs. I sing about a lot of pain, which is something I know a lot about” (“Phyllis Hyman Says” 58; my emphasis). *Did we listen?*

Finally, on June 29, 1995, she allegedly confesses to her former boyfriend before taking an overdose of sleeping pills, “I’m unhappy. The only bright light is to die. . . . I have no personal life and no energy. All I want to do is go” (“Ex-boyfriend of Phyllis Hyman” 60). *Did he listen?*

The CD entitled *I Refuse to Be Lonely* is a posthumous release and is just as revealing as Hyman’s dance on the white page. Her haunting interpretation of these lyrics, her disconsolate feelings, and the story she tells on *The Arsenio Hall Show* and in *Jet* magazine are pieces of her autobiography that affirm not only her internal suffering, but also verify the story of Hyman’s extreme isolation and her lack of a nurturing community, the one she fails to realize in the culture of celebrity. *I just was not listening.*

In a way, I did listen but those glamour shots of Hyman on the cover of *Jet* magazine distract me from her narrative dance. She *looks* good. She *looks* radiant. She *looks* healthy. The inside photos show her laughing heartily and having a grand time with fans and other entertainers such as Bill Cosby, Natalie Cole, Barry Manilow, and saxophonist Ronnie Laws. The dance on the white page accompanying those photos, nevertheless, speak of “fear of rejection,” “living alone,” “withdrawal from the social scene,” and destructive impulses. Hyman’s suicide charges me with the responsibility to listen to the voices of black female entertainers.

Dancing on the White Page, then, pays attention to the written narratives of six acclaimed black women in entertainment. Each woman beckons to us to listen to her dance on the white page. Dancing is

performance art no matter the venue, and it requires the body, coordination, rhythm and style, choreography and practice, and moments for improvisation. Dancing, according to Eartha Kitt, “set[s] the spirit free[; it is] a celebration of life and of the soul” (*Alone* 63). As we listen to each woman’s story, we can hear the dance steps of her narrative on the white page. We ascertain how each woman improvises the choreography of her life to survive and thrive in the formidable film, television, and music industries with their attendant celebrity cultures. We also can see the black community as an important aspect of how well each woman thrives.

The title of my book, *Dancing on the White Page*, refers to the written record of the life Phyllis Hyman left as well as that of each of the entertainers in my study. The dance on the white page by black female entertainers explored here offers us the opportunity to grasp each woman’s full meaning in American culture at large and in American entertainment culture in particular. *Dancing on the White Page*’s study of black female entertainers writing autobiography coaxes us to see them through myriad lenses, rather than through a single lens fixed on the glamour image of popular culture. Using autobiography as a tool for discovery, as a lens for seeing, we can learn the real stories of Horne, Dandridge, Carroll, Wilson, Kitt, and Goldberg as wife, (single) mother, widow, world traveler and wanderer, battered child/battered woman, divorcee, drug abuser, banished and exiled woman, activist/renegade and, ultimately, storyteller. They are our griottes carrying the history of our visual culture. By recounting their life stories via the written word, each of these black female entertainers asks to be recognized as a storyteller in the community of black women writing.

Herein I combine a personal voice and the academic as in the spirit of three black feminist cultural critics: Patricia J. Williams, bell hooks, and Alice Walker. Academia generally directs the trained scholar to close off the personal from examination of a chosen subject matter to not compromise the scholar’s “authority.” The writing styles of Williams, hooks, and Walker, as well as my own style, challenge the parameters of this traditional scholarship. Each of these Black writers takes advantage of everyday life occurrences and her feelings that form around them to unearth the stealth elements of racism and sexism and to critique race relations, class issues, and women’s rights and domestic matters. Patricia J. Williams, a critical race theorist and attorney, for example, uses autobiography to critique traditional legal scholarship. Williams considers the ways in which legalese deployed by the power majority is exclusionary, and inevitably muffles the voices of those without access to the “magic words” legal discourse requires. Williams believes the intermix-

ing of her own life story with the legal discourse she has mastered allows her to “highlight . . . factors that would otherwise go unremarked [and to] describe a community of context for those social actors whose traditional legal status has been the isolation of oxymoron, of oddity, of outsider” (7). To that end, Williams anecdotally highlights her own everyday life occurrences, family, and subject position as a black female lawyer to give voice to those community contexts and voices “othered” by traditional legal scholarship.

bell hooks works in a similar fashion. Although widely known as a scholar of critical theory, hooks liberally references her own daily battles with racism and sexism with language that is direct and personal. In her book of essays, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (1995), hooks analyzes the ways in which the presence and denial of racism can drive a black woman to extremes, even to think of committing murder. An airline refuses to acknowledge a mistake in a seat assignment, for example, which results in hooks’s friend being forced to give up her seat to a white man. The very first line of hooks’s opening chapter, “Militant Resistance,” reads, “I’m writing this essay sitting beside an anonymous white male that I long to murder” (8).

On a related note, the critical scholarship of *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* is based on Walker’s growth as a black woman coming of age in the South during the 1960s as a feminist and as a mother. In this collection of essays, speeches, and letters she relays a particularly telling personal anecdote to discuss the challenge of writing and motherhood. She writes:

Another writer and I were discussing the difficulty of working immediately after the birth of our children. “I wrote nothing for a year,” I offered, “that didn’t sound as though a baby were screaming right through the middle of it.” “And I,” she said, [. . .] “was so stricken with melancholia whenever I tried to think of writing that I spent months in a stupor.” (66)

This very personal conversation between two writers who are also mothers launches Walker into an inquiry and critique of “traditional Western ideas about how art is produced” (69).

These excerpts demonstrate the writer’s presence in the composition of her professional work for these three critics, an approach very much like my own. Williams, hooks, and Walker tell us the writer never is isolated from the world around her. *She is listening*. In this book, as well, my personal voice interacts with the dance on the white page of black female celebrities by making each woman’s choreographed story more

audible, especially discernible to audiences unfamiliar with her. It also enables me to extend my academic voice for a more inclusive analysis of my chosen subjects. The combination of these two voices—the academic and the personal—in *Dancing on the White Page* creates a hybrid dialogic that extends my range and reach as an academic so I can go beyond the prescribed limits of my profession. I increase my latitude because the personal helps you and me to see black female entertainers not just as *objects* of study—not just as *spectacles* or *things*—but also as *people* like all of us who suffer failures and successes, joys and moments of depression, laughter, and tears. In reality, when you peel back the glamour image, the black female entertainers in this narrative are no different from the rest of us when it comes to *living* the personal life. They certainly have an economic advantage over most of us (at least that is what the glamour shots imply), but that leverage is not much, and I will demonstrate. The fusion of voices I create in this study removes the economic distance between stage/star and audience while constructing a window for that audience to see and hear more clearly the dance on the white page.

Recalling the black female entertainer's place in our popular culture assists the engagement between star and audience. Generally, entertainers are tossed aside and forgotten as the whims of the mass audience, as well as the popular press and the entertainment industry, determine who is worthy of attention. The ephemeral nature of celebrity, moreover, is more pronounced when it comes to black female performers who battle a mélange of issues (for example, domestic abuse, intra-racial politics, economic disparities) within popular culture. This dismissal is what popular culture historian Donald Bogle experiences when he sets out to do a feature story on Butterfly McQueen (Prissy in *Gone with the Wind*; dir. Victor Fleming) while working as a staff writer for *Ebony* magazine in Chicago. “[The editors] dismissed the old-time actors as toms and mammies,” Bogle recalls, “and spoke of them with boredom, disgust, and contempt, and even condescension [. . .]” (*Toms, Coons* xxii). What we have to refute the editors' dismissal is Bogle's major contribution to the genre of black film studies: *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (1973) and *Brown Sugar: Eighty Years of America's Black Female Superstars* (1980). Dorothy Dandridge is one of the many black actresses he exhumes, and a major star brought to life by Academy Award winner Halle Berry in her HBO special *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (1999). Berry's Golden Globe win for that project helped to solidify a place in our memory of the late great actress.

In essence, *Dancing on the White Page* endeavors to do what Spike Lee, Quentin Tarantino, George Clooney, and others have done for veteran and contemporary black actresses, and to enlarge what Donald Bogle already has accomplished. Lee's films *Do The Right Thing* (1989) and *Jungle Fever* (1991) recover for a savvy hip-hop and rap community civil rights activists and theater and film actors, Ruby Dee and the late Ossie Davis. Similarly, by casting Pam Grier as the lead in his film *Jackie Brown* (1997), Tarantino renews interest in the actress and her work as a black female action star in "blaxploitation" films such as *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974). More commendable is the honor Hattie McDaniel receives from Academy Award winner for Best Supporting Actor George Clooney at the Seventy-Eighth Annual Academy Awards, televised March 5, 2006. During his speech, Clooney remarks:

[the Academy] talked about civil rights when it wasn't really popular. And we, you know, we bring up subjects. This Academy, this group of people gave Hattie McDaniel an Oscar in 1939 when blacks were still sitting in the backs of theaters. I'm proud to be a part of this Academy. Proud to be part of this community.

Journalist Diane Sawyer asks in her post-Academy Award interview with Clooney, "I went back and read Hattie McDaniel's [Academy Award] acceptance speech. What do you think she would've thought where this industry has come?" "It must've been a fascinating thing in 1939 [. . .], answers Clooney"; cut to McDaniel, sans the mammy outfit, lovely in a crepe gown decorated in white flowers and sequins; she wears a flower in her hair, also. McDaniel, the first black woman to win an Academy Award since the Academy handed out its first Oscar May 16, 1929, stands tall and proud behind the podium. She begins with tears in her eyes, "I sincerely hope I shall always be a credit to my race and to the motion picture industry. My heart is too full to tell you just how I feel, and may I say thank you and God bless you." Contrary to Spike Lee's lambaste of Clooney's note of McDaniel ("To use [McDaniel's Academy Award win] as an example of how progressive Hollywood is is ridiculous. Hattie McDaniel played MAMMY in *Gone with the Wind*. That film was basically saying that the wrong side won the Civil War and that black people should still be enslaved"), the Oscar winner's interpolation of her in his speech makes evident the *actress*—really, an ancestral colleague he apparently feels had been overlooked ("Spike"). Clooney's admiration and praise for the community within he works

may appear extravagant (McDaniel earned that Oscar); however, invoking civil rights, Hattie McDaniel, her Oscar, and segregation in the United States to his colleagues in this celebrated community and to the viewing audience make visible the black actress's presence in that community—regardless of her roles on the silver screen. Together, these historians, directors, and actors introduce a new generation of film audiences to forgotten or dismissed black actresses, to such an extent that Diane Sawyer went back to review (black) Hollywood history. *Dancing on the White Page* encourages others to follow.

Although this project complements these cinematic (re)introductions, career revivals, and scholarly gestures, *Dancing on the White Page* departs from these important recovery efforts. First, it launches an inquiry into *both* the literature black women in entertainment write *and* the visual images of these women as seen in popular culture. In addition, I incorporate personal anecdotes not only to reveal my own introduction to these women, but also to discover the ways the visual, the literary, and the personal coalesce to produce a more holistic evaluation of black female entertainers and the world in which they and I live(d). For example, much is known of the (international) impact the music of Motown has on popular music during the 1960s. *Dancing on the White Page* foregrounds the influence Mary Wilson and the Supremes—a girl group with attractive and refined eighteen- and nineteen-year-old young adult black women—has on black girls on the elementary school playground when blue-eyed blonde women in popular culture loom large on the landscape as *the* standard of beauty.

Another contribution I make to the resurrection of black actresses filmmakers, scholars, and actors already have begun is to (re)open discussion of what counts as literature. Whether a narrative told to a hired pen by the author or a story written solely by the author herself, the genre of black women's autobiography—beginning in the eighteenth century with "Belinda, or the Cruelty of Men Whose Faces Were Like the Moon" (1787) as black feminist critic Joanne Braxton tells us (2)—is an integral part of the African-American literary canon. The autobiographical narrative black female celebrities write assumes a place on that continuum of written black expression in that black female celebrity autobiography is a formidable subgenre in its own right. *Dancing on the White Page*, furthermore, draws out an awareness of the autobiographical voices silenced in an iron-clad African-American literary canon that authorizes the inclusion of only a particular chorus of black literary voices, namely the beloved autobiographies of Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, and others.

If some critics overlook black celebrity autobiographies for inclusion in the African-American literary canon, for various literary reasons, I

must admit that I initially harbored my own misgivings about black female entertainers' writing. My apprehensions toward these black female entertainers have to do with the sociocultural political lens through which I viewed them. *Batman* and *Julia* air in 1966 and 1968 respectively; *Sanford and Son* in 1972. The black actresses on television clash discordantly with the black women I witness marching, singing, and raising fists in the name of freedom and equality in the civil rights and black feminist movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. Like Phyllis Hyman, Lena Horne and the other women in *Dancing on the White Page* enter my life in a problematic way long before I conceive of a scholarly project on them. Horne appears to me first as a guest via television on the popular 1970s black sitcom *Sanford and Son*. Her appearance as a black singer waltzing through Fred Sanford's junkyard door at first, however, does not awaken in me a desire to know more about her. Horne seems to overact; hers is a hyperperformance. Later, on the silver screen, I watch and listen to her sing good luck wishes to Dorothy (Diana Ross) as Glinda, the Good Witch in the forgettable 1978 box office disaster *The Wiz* (which Sidney Lumet, Horne's son-in-law at the time, directed), and I remember feeling relieved when she finishes her number. Three years later, the broadcast news and print media make so much hoopla over her 1981 one-woman show on Broadway, *The Lady and Her Music*, that I rush to buy the album, thinking I would hear a different sound. The award-winning show is the longest running one-woman show in Broadway history at that time, and Horne wins a Grammy for the album. As the vinyl disc rotates on my turntable, however, I only can think of Glinda, the Good Witch—nothing has changed. I promptly give the album to a friend, who looks at me like I just have lost my mind. "You don't know what you're doing or who you're giving away," she remarks with a furrowed brow. But I have cut my teeth on the buttered biscuit, collard greens, and black-eyed pea R&B song styl-ists such as Gladys Knight, Tammi Terrell, Minnie Ripperton, Stephanie Mills, and Chaka Khan; I cannot appreciate the unfamiliar gourmet sound from a past era of Horne's voice nor the history behind it.

Eartha Kitt, too, receives a shrug from my shoulders. Yes, she keeps Batman (Adam West) on his toes, but her antics fail to keep me interested. She seems obsessed with this masked white man, always trying to outsmart him as she rides around in that tawdry Catmobile of hers. She runs with crazy-looking white men dressed in embarrassing fashions; she even allows them into her flamboyantly distasteful home. What an alley cat! I have no use for her. On a Saturday afternoon trek to a used record store, however, I happen across an old *Eartha Kitt Collectible* album. I buy the album because I admire Kitt's hairstyle and white sequined gown

on the cover, and the album costs only 99 cents. I never had heard her sing—only purr like a cat in *Batman*. Imagine my surprise when that same catlike voice floats out of my speakers! What the . . . ? What kind of voice *is* that? Who would want to record a voice like that? I double-check my turntable speed—fine. I check to make sure the name on the album matches the name on the album cover—it does. These sounds are most peculiar—unlike anything I ever have heard in my music listening experiences. Kitt sounds like a gurgling cat singing in the rain with a vibrato that could rival a California earth tremor. And what kind of song is “Uska Dara” anyway? Why would a black woman even think to—no: why would a black woman even *want* to—sing a song in Turkish?

If Horne and Kitt fail to impress me, Diahann Carroll really bites the dust. I hated *Julia*, the television sitcom in which she stars. I curl up in front of the television set to view the premiere episode in 1968, and I am turned off from the sitcom forever. Julia sleeps on a sofa bed in her living room before the entire television viewing audience. On her way to a job interview, this registered nurse leaves her young son, Corey (Marc Copage), in the care of her neighbor, Marie Waggedorn (Betty Beaird), a white stay-at-home mother and her son, Earl (Michael Link). “What black mother would do that?” I ask myself. “Where are Julia’s black friends?” I wonder. Suppose Mr. Waggedorn (Hank Brandt) comes home and finds a young black man in the apartment with his wife? What is more, when Julia opens her mouth, her voice comes across as starched and pressed flat to the point of excruciating sterility. Her lips appear partially glued together, and she acts like a robotized black Barbie doll. With the exception of her expression of love and admiration for her son, I conclude in my adolescence that the whole world of *Julia*, especially Julia Baker, is a fake.

The popular culture movement to pique my interest in the black actress and singers of previous eras is the arrival of the peerless *and* single *and* wealthy Dominique Deveraux in 1984, played by none other than Diahann Carroll, who transforms from black Barbie to the first “black bitch” on the most popular, the most glamorous, and the most sensational nighttime soap opera of the 1980s, *Dynasty*. When the perfectly coiffed Miss Deveraux struts through the door of the *Dynasty* mansions (and into my family room) wearing lynx furs, gloves, and red lipstick, when she practically spits out Alexis Carrington’s (Joan Collins) “burned” champagne, and when she tussles with Alexis in her own bedroom for calling her a lounge lizard, I fall in love with Diahann Carroll, and by extension, the black celebrity of the past. Lavish! Bodacious! Alexis meets her match. It is about time! Goody-two-shoes blond blue-eyed Krystle Carrington (Linda Evans) just does not cut it.

To add intrigue to the story, in the episode “The Will,” Thomas Fizzemint “Tom” Carrington (Harry Andrews), grand-patriarch and Blake Carrington’s (John Forsyth) father, admits to an interracial relationship out of which Miss Deveraux is born. On his deathbed, the senior Carrington affirms his “indiscretion,” claims Dominique as his daughter, changes his will, and divides his estate among his son Blake, Alexis and Dominique. Get this: he names Dominique executor. Astonishing! Miss Deveraux unglues Julia Baker’s lips and hands, and enters corporate America (indeed a white environment) as a wealthy equal standing on her own merits, not as a clipped-wing Barbie doll. In the episode “The Verdict,” for example, she offers CEO Blake Carrington \$25 million for control of his company, Denver-Carrington *before* her inheritance from Tom Carrington. Blake counters for \$30 million and 40 percent of the share, and forms a Deveraux-Carrington partnership. When his debt to Alexis threatens to crush him, Miss Deveraux offers a \$50-million loan to untrammel him from Alexis’s monetary stronghold (“Focus”). Powerful! Additionally, she owns *Titanian Records*, her record company. I never have seen such a bold black woman on television act in the ways of Dominique Deveraux. Stunning!

Who is *this* Diahann Carroll? Carroll’s groundbreaking *Dynasty* role opens my mind to the multidimensionality of black female celebrities. Over time, the life stories of such celebrities fascinate me. The publication of Mary Wilson’s *Dreamgirl: My Life as a Supreme* summons me to *read* black female celebrity autobiography rather than just scan the pictures therein. Wilson’s book is of great importance because *Dreamgirl* popularizes the genre of black celebrity autobiography. Halle Berry’s successful project *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* brings back memories of my own introduction to Dorothy in the hallway of my high school in the 1970s.

My high school classmates and I inherit from the black arts and civil rights movements the courage, the freedom, and the *permission* to challenge our white teachers’ expectation that dead white men and their culture will be the focus of written assignments. Our black history, literature, and culture are the heart of our attention: Frederick Douglass, the Harlem Renaissance, Marcus Garvey, Ralph Ellison, Maya Angelou, and, as I learn in 1974, Dorothy Dandridge. “I’m going to write about our very first black real movie star,” my friend Valerie declares with an air of pride. “Who?” I ask trying to align the white notches and numbers with the indent on the silver face of my combination lock. “Dorothy Dandridge . . . our first black movie star. Haven’t you heard of her?” As we slam the tin doors of our lockers, hoist our books under our arms, and proceed to study hall, this Dandridge person fails to appear among