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More Than Just a Kiss: Finding the Black Sexual Image in Classical Hollywood Cinema 1929-1941

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More Than Just a Kiss: Finding the Black Sexual Image in Classical Hollywood Cinema 1929-1941

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfactory of the requirements for the degree of Philosophy in Film and TV

by

Krista Shanita Jones

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

More Than Just a Kiss: Finding the Black Sexual Image in

Classical Hollywood Cinema 1929-1941

by

Krista Shanita Jones

Doctor of Philosophy in Cinema and Media Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Ellen Scott, Chair

The kiss has played a large role in filmic narrative in American Cinema since the medium's beginning. Yet, mainstream cinematic representation of romance between African Americans has been limited. Just prior to cinema's Classical age, Hollywood self-regulators (i.e. the Studio Relations Committee) determined that white actors were not likely to want to see black actors kissing. There was no prohibition on kissing, Black or otherwise. However, there was a restriction on displays of black-white "sex relations" (i.e. miscegenation), instituted by the president of the Motion Pictures Directors and Distributors of America, Will Hays, and within his 1926 list of "Don'ts and Be Carefuls." Notwithstanding, major Hollywood studios limited the "romantic" depictions of Black characters in Classical Hollywood to instances of infidelity, licentiousness, and even violence in films made between 1929 and 1941—and even these depictions were few and far in between. While Black sexuality was focused on far less often than

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white sexuality, Black sexuality was predominantly depicted as deviant behavior harmful to American society. Still, Black sexuality was used to help define, contrast, identify, and aid not only concerns about white sexuality's function in the American society, but was systemically utilized to help solve societal concerns about class, gender, and race, all the while working to uphold depictions of whiteness as a standard to strive toward in terms of behavior and values. `

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The dissertation of Krista Shanita Jones is approved.

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2024

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Dedication

Dedicated to Amani, Jejuan, Charles, and each person that poured into me during this endeavor, provided a safe space, and was an example of the love that I strive to embody and share each day.

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Vita

Krista Shanita Jones is a doctoral candidate in the field of cinema and media studies. She attended San Francisco State University where she received a B.A. in Cinema with a concentration in Cinema Studies. She received her master's and PhD degrees in Cinema and Media Studies at UCLA. Her research interests include Classical Hollywood, race and representation, Critical Race Theory, Audience Studies, and American film censorship.

Introduction: "You Make Me Black"

"You! It's cause you're Black! You make me Black. I won't! I won't be Black!"

Imitation of Life (Stahl, 1934)

The declaration that begins this dissertation is an oft-quoted line from *Imitation of Life* (Stahl, 1934). Though this film has appeared in several scholarly texts, I wish to talk about how the scene is meant to make us, the spectator, feel. William James argues in relation to film and affect, that "emotions occur in relation to stimuli that matter to the organism."[1] The ways the spectator is led to react becomes the lens through which we can understand much of the motivations of *Imitation of Life's* Black leads, Delilah and Peola. Peola's declaration is a peculiar thing to say, but an even more peculiar idea to unpack. At its heart, the phrase is meant to be decoded from a starting point of a surplus of assumptions. Yet it is through a history of racial identities constructed in films like *Imitation of Life* that this array of assumptions can be intuitively grasped by audiences who have a shared history with these images. Moreover, these racial constructions that steer how we are to think about, treat, and value racial identity allow for us to both automatically understand its intended meaning, as well as confirm it as proof that these assumptions are valid.

Let's set up the scene: Peola Johnson (Fredi Washington) is the only daughter of Delilah Johnson (Louise Beavers). Delilah, a single mother, and Peola live in the home of Bea Pullman (Claudette Colbert) and Jessie Pullman (Rochelle Hudson), whom Delilah works for as their maid. Though the film rarely states the age of the four characters, it is implied that Delilah is a

[1]William James, "Movies and Emotions" in *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience*, ed. Carl Plantinga (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 11.

couple years older than Bea and that Peola is a couple years older than Jessie.[2] Peola is fair skinned and tries to pass for white from the moment we meet her as a small child. When Peola says, "You make me Black," we are to understand the term "Black" as a contemptible phrase. Peola is a child, crying to her mother, who is a dark-complected Black woman, because Jessie calls her what is to be understood as a pejorative name, "Black"--though originally in the book, Jessie calls Peola "nigger."[3] While the cries of the child are meant to make the audience identify with and pity the situation, the particular signifiers associated with Blackness within the scene ultimately sway the audience to accept these signifiers as facts—not just variations--of Blackness. The aim of this dissertation is to interrogate the ways that Hollywood used fear, lust, and projections of sadness to underscore Black sexuality as deviant, establishing whiteness as its redeemable opposite. This binary of representation served as a means to justify and systemically invest in racial hierarchies within the United States. Miscegenation, presented as a symptom of Black deviance, was one of many ways that Black sexuality was used to center white stories.

In the aforementioned scene from *Imitation of Life*, Peola's cry represents the complexity of stories involving miscegenation. For example, the sight of a little white child crying was often used as a means of persuasion. Shirley Temple, who was rumored to be able to cry on cue, cries in *Now and Forever* (Hathaway, 1934) persuading her father to return a necklace he has stolen. In *The Little Princess* (Lang and Seitler, 1939), Temple's cries move her injured father out of a

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[2]This scene stars child actresses Dorothy Black, who is credited as 10-year-old Peola, and Marilyn Knowlden, who is credited as 8-year-old Jessie. Delilah seems to be older than Bea because of the wisdom she offers Bea, though it was not uncommon for Black women to be shown as experts on love because of a presumed inherent promiscuity that served to be most useful when they could counsel their white women bosses on the proper ways of love, even if these Black women were rarely seen as proper. There will be more on this idea later in the chapter.

[3]Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1933), 147.

catatonic state, allowing him to recognize her as his daughter. Tears do not only persuade within the world of these stories, but they also persuade the viewer to invest in the child's desires to be comforted and eased of their sorrows. In *Kentucky* (Butler, 1938), Peter (Bobs Watson) and Thad Goodwin Jr. (Thelmar Watson) persuade audiences to pity their characters and family when Union soldiers come to take horses from the family plantation and their father is killed by John Dillon (Douglass Dumbrille). The two boys are shown in a series of shots crying from the window of their home, then crying over the body of their father, and again crying as Peter demands that Dillon stop and fight him. The boy's tears direct the viewer's sympathy towards whom the film calls (from the point of view of the Union soldiers) "rebel sympathizers," Southerners who believe Kentucky should secede from the U.S.

James speaks of emotions like fear, suspense, and pity as concern-based construals—intentional mental states that require both a concern for the object of the emotion, and a way of thinking about the object that directs a person toward the particular emotion they are experiencing–a resolution.[4] He also contends that even experiencing an emotion through watching a film, which a viewer knows is fictional, can emphasize the need for resolve. E. Ann Kaplan states that melodramas "endlessly repeat family and war traumas and recoveries, bringing audiences back time and again by ensuring closure and cure at the film's end."[5] Though Peola was considered Black because of the one-drop rule, she (played by Black actress Fredi Washington) appears to be white while calling out her emotional plea.[6] Susan Courtney writes of

[4]James, 10.
[5]E. Ann Kaplan,"Melodrama, Cinema and Trauma," in *Screen* 42 2, Summer (2001), https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/42.2.201.
[6] The one-drop rule is a metonym for the many de facto and de jure regulations against any person that appears white but is found to have even "one drop" of black blood within them. In such cases

the closure to trauma in this scene, a type that Kaplan references and Williams alludes to. Courtney argues that the image of Delilah holding Peola after her emotional outburst works to visually recontain the child, as do her words that end the scene, "It ain't [Jessie's] fault, Miss Bea. It ain't your'n, and it ain't mine. I don't know exactly where the blame lies."[7] Delilah helps to restore Peola to her rightful place; she is used as a narrative device time and again, to make Peola "Black." Yet, this same containment, is what allows for whiteness to exist in a liminal space, to test the social boundaries of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

This scene's visual dynamic goes beyond the music and the melodrama geared to get us to feel. Before we are meant to feel, we must first connect to the message being put forth in a way that leads us to the intentions of the filmmakers. Our feelings are reactions culminating from previous prompts that have led us to the same or similar reactions. In the case of *Imitation*, the prompts are set forth to deny the urges of Peola to go against social constraints. We are prompted to be sympathetic to the little girl crying, and her proximity to whiteness helps, but not enough to break the social rules underscored within this film. In fact, the rules of society call for us to react quite intentionally to protect the systems it sets up, and as this dissertation will prove, films have had a pivotal role in the instruction of this rule. Peola can be pitied not only because she is a child, but because she values whiteness, even to a fault.

Courtney makes reference to Delilah's image as she simultaneously comforts Peola and alludes to the social inequality she and her daughter face as Black women. This same image, Courtney states, is used to subsume both Peola's anxieties about being Black, as well as Bea's

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the one drop requires the person to be treated as a Blwhiteerson in the eyes of the law and by white society.

[7]Susan Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender and Race, 1903-1967* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 162.

anxieties about being a working mother–one who cannot properly look after her household and work at the same time.[8] In the opening scene when Bea is getting young Jessie ready for daycare so that she can work to make money for the household (after her husband has died), Delilah shows up at her house in search of work as a maid. Though Delilah has come to the wrong address, she asserts herself as helper of the household, finishing the task of making breakfast before it burns on the stove as Bea is busy attending to Jessie. Courtney writes that the image of Delilah as she arrives at the door and assists Bea with getting ready, is mirrored in the immortalization of Delilah that becomes the face of the Bea's pancake and syrup empire— a empire bolstered by Delilah's secret pancake recipe and her commitment to work only for room and board as well as the action of Delilah giving away the rights to her image for use of the company. This in turn, Courtney offers, allows for Bea's success–at work, at home, and before the camera," because it "allows Bea to function as both scheming capitalist and erotic spectacle."[9] Courtney makes it clear that the presence of Delilah, and her constructed image "casts Bea's gender transgressions in a racialized light that sees her as a 'properly' masterful white mistress rather than improperly masterful woman."[10] In this way, Delilah is used not only to recontain Peola's Blackness and her anxieties about that identity, but to recontain Bea's role as mother and woman within the film. Delilah's liminality, defined by her being coded as sexually deviant due to her Blackness, yet still having some good in her because she devotes her life to her white mistress, lends not only to the liminal space that Bea is placed in as breadwinner in the

[8]Courtney, 161.
[9]Courtney, 161.
[10]Courtney, 161.

household and eventual suffering mother, but is made possible because of the cinematic relationship of Delilah and Bea.

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore how audiences have been prompted to not just view, but react to Blackness, and specifically, to Black sexuality as it has been constructed. Even in *Imitation,* where Delilah has no love interest outside of the mention of her husband, she is coded with a knowledge of sexual matters when she tells Bea, "You needs some lovin' honey child." Later, when Bea is considering the man that she ends up dating and falling in love with, Delilah gives Bea the following advice: "If he makes a move in the right direction, you don't have to slap his hand." While I do not refer to *Imitation of Life* in the same way that I refer to other films in this time frame (as will be discussed in my third chapter), there are similarities in the ways that Delilah is coded sexually and the service that she provides to her white charges, that mark an important point in the utilization of Blackness to solve, or "recontain," questions of racial and gender difference through its categorization of difference when compared to whiteness. This will be examined in films such as *The Great Lie, Jezebel,* and *Gone with the Wind* in Chapter Three.

Without analyzing all the ideas of the phrase from its original intended meaning, the fact that Peola sobs while pleading with her mother, claiming it is her mother that "makes" her Black, is telling of the ways that race is supposed to be understood in the given context. In the story, as she would be in the real world, Peola is considered Black, but this is a rule set up by white society. While her mother may be the cause for her African ancestry, the connotations of Blackness, ideas about Blackness that become seen as acceptable in society, are not the result of lineage; these associations are a result of a hegemonic structuring that is meant to ultimately and primarily serve the hegemony. This ideological structuring is the focus of the dissertation: how

the structure of race took on topics of Black sexuality, and how Black sexuality became its own structure onscreen during the Classical Hollywood Era– itself a product of society whose own conventions would be shifted at the response of social activism and foresight based on how it could be used to promote whiteness. This study looks to track the shifts of onscreen portrayals of Black sexuality, and portrayals of romance where available, as prevailing Hollywood depictions of Black intimacy went from being something to be feared, to more titillating and visceral aesthetics that evoked lust, to the emotive aesthetics of melodramatic sadness. These discreet types of depictions were utilized in varying degrees based on gender and not only made the point that Black was wrong, but were used to reinforce that systemic inequalities were justified–not just because it was shown in a setting where it could work (barring any diegetic objections by Black characters within the film), but the construction of Black sexuality has been helpful in the construction of whiteness. As such, a Black character was rarely allowed the autonomy over his or her own body within the story because it was not deemed safe for society and its racial hierarchy. Instead, Black sexuality in film was something that could rarely be owned by Black characters during the Classical Era of Hollywood and rarely used to humanize the image of Black people based on its own merit. It is for this reason that we rarely see Black people kissing in Classical Hollywood films, and if we do, more often than not it was linked to nefarious conduct. Hollywood used Black sexuality as an othering agent, differentiated from whiteness and a more well-esteemed white sexuality, in order to not only justify systemic oppression of Black people, but to further promote the image and connotations of whiteness being seen as good and pure. Furthermore, when this differentiation was normalized in American cinema, Black sexuality was then employed to project the hysteria of whiteness when whiteness went against its own social constructs.

Discourse surrounding how films have contributed to social views on Blackness and Black sexuality is not a new topic in the scholarly literature on race or film. Stereotypes, harmful narrative tropes, character tropes and more have been debated since the inception of film, especially since most of them carried over from the tradition of minstrelsy, vaudeville, and album recordings.[11] In short, in any medium used in popular entertainment there was reference to race, which meant that film has simply become a continuation of a long practice of controlling the racial narrative of all subjects through creating or otherwise overseeing the story that was told about its subjects.

Waywardness/Deviance/Sinfulness and Hegemony

I will refer to concepts of waywardness, deviance, and inherent sinfulness throughout this dissertation. I use these terms interchangeably but waywardness especially–I invoke in a similar

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[11]Donald Bogle, *Toms Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 4th ed. (NY: Continuum Publishing, 2001);

Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993);

Ellen Scott, *Cinema Civil Rights: Regulation, Repression, and Race in the Classical Hollywood Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014);

Jacqueline Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), (Kindle).

Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film 1900-1942*, 1st ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1977).

Each of these scholars have written about race and representation in film as well as connected historical newspaper articles within the framework of audience reception to their writings on film, each discussing film's impact on society.

fashion to the way that Saidiya Hartman invokes the word in her book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiences* (2019).[12] Hartman's book inspired me to imagine an ontological deviation from the ways that words such as wayward, deviant and inherently sinful were weaponized against African Americans. Yet, Hartman designates a "counter-narrative liberated from the judgment and classification that subjected young Black women to surveillance, arrest, punishment, and confinement" in order to center the "insurgent" nature of these women who were deemed as problems in society.[13] This dissertation, instead, creates a counter-narrative of the depiction of Black sexuality in order to not only discuss its exploitation in Classical Hollywood, but to assert that while the cinematic construction of Black sexuality has been esteemed to be of little value in civil society, it has instead been referenced as integral to discourses of social obedience in Classical Hollywood.

In the films discussed in this dissertation, Black sexuality was often referenced as a threat against society that should be diegetically tamed within Hollywood narratives. Just as the Black women in *Wayward Lives* were deemed to be living wayward lives because of society's construction of them as wayward to begin with, many of these women continued to rebel in their self-assessment in order to continue to live life on their terms. In other words, they refused to value themselves based on the premise of lack that American society had placed on them. I also acknowledge that the characterizations of Blackness and Black sexuality in early and Classical Hollywood do not constitute an admittance of sexual depravity from my perspective, they instead exist to reach a deconstructed view of Black sexuality in popular American entertainment.

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[12]Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self Making in Nineteenth Century America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997)white.
[13]Hartman, *Scenes,* xiv.

Lastly, Hartman states the shift in representational perspective of the women she talks about seeks to untether waywardness from deviance. While this dissertation looks to untether the depictions it discusses, I do not look to untether waywardness from deviance since they seem to function similarly in the ways that society has opposed these ideas. Rather, I seek to untether the cinematic reference of Black sexuality as cause for social disorder from its actual function in the films I discuss as pertinent to instilling order in society. I wish to express the ways the construction of Black sexuality as deviant in American film is part of a larger preoccupation that does not devalue Black sexuality, but instead uses this "wayward" iconography to strengthen confidence in the hegemonic structures within the United States.

Writing about Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Joseph Femia states that Gramsci illuminated this concept while being imprisoned in Italy at a time when it had become clear that socialism would not be utilized by Western countries. Explaining why the concept was far less popular in the U.S., Femia quotes Gramsci's concept of political society as the "apparatus of state coercion which legally assures the discipline of those groups which do not consent."[14] Femia's account of Gramsci's hegemonic principles additionally states that "all organs of civil society coerce those non-conformists and rebels who come under their particular jurisdictions." Furthermore, this "ambiguous line between civil and political society…enable[s] the dominant social group to exercise power".[15] These distinctions of power and the way they are acted upon are relevant in the films interrogated in this dissertation. In *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Hartman writes of the type of coercion that is set up by the state and its subsequent

[14]Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process*, April 18, 1987, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198275435.001.0001.
[15]Femia, 4.

treatment of Blackness as a problem within American society. Hartman states, " savage encroachments of power…take place through notions of reform, consent and protection."[16] Hartman further states that after slavery, when slaves were no longer required by law to follow the dictates of their slave masters, the "laboring Black body remained a medium of others' power and representation."[17] This power and representation was not meant to help former slaves reach equal footing with the white enslavers, but instead placed them in a position of indebtedness. Seen as less than equal, what was instead proposed was to focus primarily on rules of conduct that would enable the freed to overcome the degradation of slavery and meet the challenges of freedom."[18] These practices, according to Hartman, are centralized on prohibition and punishment, which were relied upon in the fashioning of liberal individualism.[19] African Americans were brought into a system of coercion by the state through the emphasis of a story of their degradation, proven by their inferior social status, that incentivized them as well as whites to participate in the systems of inequality in order to receive protections from the state (government).

We can see this narrative of indebtedness, punishment, and promise of protection mapped out in many Classical Era films. In *Imitation of Life*, indebtedness is shown through the wrongful acts of Peola trying to pass as white. She lies, disobeys her mother, and worst of all, tries to thwart social order. In contrast, Delilah pays the ultimate price of Peola's sins with her life, her willingness to happily serve Bea and Jessie over and again to the extent of being exploited, gives Delilah protection from homelessness, the condemnation of the law, and from having to wrestle

[16]Hartman, 5.
[17]Hartman, 120.
[18]Hartman, 128.
[19]Hartman, 129.

with the inner desires of her personhood. Delilah's choice to serve whiteness saves her from much of the tragedy that often befalls Blackness. She can use her status of indebtedness (being shown as deviant) to assist her white mistress as seen in the aforementioned love advice given to Bea. Time and again this indebtedness—referred to as sin, deviance, and waywardness)—held the solution onscreen to give in to the existing power structures and help to replicate them. Other times this Black indebtedness led to becoming used to assist and promote whiteness.

Liminality and the Use of "We"

I refer to the idea of liminality a number of times throughout my chapters. The idea that I am looking to convey behind the use of this word is that Black sexuality represented freedom. At the turn of the century, in a time when there was a surplus of sexual charge in society, Black sexuality was an outlet that white society used to make sense of their own desires. Alice Maurice cites the often used theme of cities representing liminal space in *What Happened in the Tunnel* (Porter, 1903) (I will elaborate on her discussion later in this chapter). These cities could be seen as liminal spaces because they were just too big to control, which meant there were more instances of things being out of control as a kiss on a cheek of the Black maid from the white male train passenger in *What Happened in the Tunnel* suggests. I use my discussion similarly to explain that Black sexuality was seen as a liminal space of possibility to explore not just deviant sexuality, but a deviance in the matters of gender, race and class–all ideas that function as constructs or ideologies in society. While these "freedoms" were used as opportunities for white characters and audiences to live outside, albeit briefly, of the construct of these particular roles, they were usually used to also justify a character's punishment if one continued to stray. As such, even if used to administer dictates, Black sexuality, as depicted, became an important and often

used part of the equation of not only calling out disorder but restoring order, control, and function in society.

This dually-functioned use of Black sexuality, too, informs this dissertation's use of "we" as multifunctional in its activation of these discussions. Notwithstanding, when I use the word "we" to describe the spectator, this can describe an intended (white) general audience, from the perspective of the general audience, a subgroup of the audience whose perspective is not always considered to be part of the general audience such as African Americans, or it can refer to the perspective of the filmmakers or censors. This is not to confuse the discussion, but to add nuance to the multivalent properties of the practices of representation in Hollywood and to call attention to how it is not always easy to parse out these very important moments from a one-dimensional approach. We know that the general audience did not only include white people, just as it did not only include Christians, though the film's promotion of Biblical values was meant to assume that "we" to be people who wanted to be moral citizens. This "we" also implicated the participants of society who wanted to be free of the burden of always being associated with the moral. So while the use of "we" will differ in the way this dissertation will use it depending on the context it is used, its significance is supported by its ability to embody multiple perspectives, even simultaneously.

Thematic and Historical Overlay of the Chapters

I propose Hollywood used a set of signifiers to cultivate the meaning of Black sexuality in such a way that it could associate Black sexuality with waywardness, especially when Black sexuality was not associated with whiteness. Such renderings played a part in separating African Americans from the rest of society in everyday life precisely because these textual simulations

acted not only as instructions for, but models of and rehearsals for real life. These visual constructions were continuously built upon, tested, reinforced, and reimagined. We see it most reimagined, in fact, when outside pressure was exerted onto Hollywood and the Production Code Administration such as when the Office of War Information oversaw studio scripts and made suggestions regarding eliminating harmful Black stereotypes. The Office of War Information was a government-appointed agency that worked with studios to make depictions of film characters less negative (usually non-white) so that the United States would appear less racially biased in comparison to Nazi Germany. This address of previous harmful portrayals through an implementation of change also worked to strengthen allyship with these non-white groups while WWII was underway. Ellen Scott states that by 1941 when the OWI began to oversee film production, Hollywood had a history of refusing to heed to the requests of its African American audience over representation, however.[20] Historical documentation indicates that many Black filmgoers—layman and public figures— often wrote to studios and the Production Code Administration regarding the depiction of African Americans in upcoming films–-yet many times these concerns were ignored. It should be a surprise to no one that these Black characters engendered harmful stereotypes. This dissertation is meant to highlight how sexualized stereotypes of Black characters were created, while documenting the way sexualized stereotypes of Black characters led to different tropes within the films they appeared, and ultimately shifted the filmic discourse of how spectators should react to Black sexuality.

The first chapter will document how the institutionalization of Black sexuality was formed to emphasize difference and how this difference was meant to incite fear. The second

[20]Scott, 42.

chapter looks at how Black sexuality was linked to portrayal marking insatiable lust—normalized as othered from white standards of sexuality. The third chapter looks at how the formation of Black sexuality was employed as a tool to uphold whiteness through melodramatic sadness. These chapters offer a chronology of not only a change in supervision over the regulation of film content, but a change in strategy in the ways that morality and immorality was referenced in Classical Hollywood.

I assert that audiences—especially white audiences—were instructed by films on how Black sexuality should be viewed in American society based on its utility to whiteness. *Imitation of Life* is a potent example of the ways that Black sexuality is constructed not to be a desire that serves Black people but white people, epitomized through its alignment of Delilah's knowledge of sexual matters (and presumed act of miscegenation) with the relationship help she is then able to give Bea. In fact, Courtney makes the claim that the idea of miscegenation–an issue also referencing Black sexuality–was the main concern of the Production Code Administration when Universal was looking to make *Imitation of Life.* She notes that the sight of Peola, appearing as white, but being Black, aiming to live life as a white woman, "threatens to destabilize those hierarchies (of whiteness and Blackness) in domains of identity and belief."[21] By this measure, Courtney makes note of the PCA's interests in clearly defining white sexuality as different than Black sexuality. Yet, as can be seen with *Imitation of Life*, Black sexuality is not only framed as different than white sexuality but is used as a liminal space to allow for the sexual rebellion of white people that is ultimately recontained in its rightful place in society.

[21]Courtney, 146.

From the Silent Film Era to the early years of sound film, Black sexuality was often shown as threatening, both to the immediate safety of white people, and to the order of American society. This can be seen in *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915) where a Black character tries to rape a white woman, *Hoodoo Ann* (Griffith, 1916) where a white character is vexed by her connection to Blackness and cannot overcome this vexation until she marries, and in *Hallelujah!* (Vidor, 1929) where every reference of Black sexuality is coded with deviance. Donald Bogle notes that some of the earliest depictions of the tragic mulatto was shown in *The Debt* (1912), in which a boy and girl plan to get married up until the girl is found out to be Black and the boy's sister. Bogle notes the films *In Humanity's Cause* (1911), *In Slavery Days* (Turner, 1913), *The Octoroon* (1912) too, carry themes of the tragic mulatto.[22] Once the notion was set forward that the waywardness of Black sexuality could be tamed, it became something to be laughed at, used to taunt, to titillate, as innuendo, the antithesis of a proposed white sanctity used to inspire, and, eventually and at the zenith of its objectification, used to project sentiments of whiteness within textual narratives.

The Kiss (1896) and The Kiss

The first known instance of a romantic depiction on the American screen and first onscreen kiss can be seen in the film short titled *The Kiss* (AKA *The May Irwin Kiss*) (Heise, 1896). It featured actors May Irwin and John C. Rice acting out their respective roles from a scene in the Broadway play they appeared in, *The Widow Jones* (McNally, 1895). The play featured Irwin as lead Beatrice Byke, who moves to a small town and poses as the widow of Mr.

[22]Bogle, 9.

Jones, who was presumed dead a year before. When Mr. Jones (played by Rice) returns the two actually become love interests, and share amorous interactions onstage, part of which was reproduced in *The Kiss.* At the time the pair appeared onscreen, Irwin was the most popular female comedic performer in the country and was internationally known.[23] She was one of few actresses of the time who had a spotless public persona free from scandals of debauchery.[24] Yet, while the play received rave reviews from critics, there were some who were not enthusiastic about the onscreen kiss. Part of the controversy was over the act of kissing, itself. But for others, such as Chicago Critic John Sloan, the issue was not as much a visual display of kissing, as his perception that "…neither participant is physically attractive and the spectacle of their prolonged pasturing on each other's lips was hard to beat when only life size. Magnified to gargantuan proportions and repeated three times over is absolutely disgusting."[25]

[23]Sharon Ammen, *May Irwin: Singing, Shouting and the Shadow of Minstrelsy* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017), Location 2214, (Kindle).
[24]Ammen, Chapter Two (Kindle).
[25]Ammen, Chapter One (Kindle).

Fig. 1. May Irwin was a national star by the time she played *The Widow Jones*.

Fig. 2. Advertisement for *The Widow Jones*.

Fig. 3. Still from *The Kiss.* William Heise, Thomas Edison Inc., 1896.

The perturbed critic addresses filmic depictions according to how they make audiences react or the fear of how others might react. Though censorship boards would not begin to sprout up across the U.S. until 1907 to guard the public from objectionable and categorically obscene content (including overtly sexual content), it should be noted the controversy and ensuing response to construct the suitable image of onscreen sexuality can be seen to have always been an issue audiences and governing bodies have been interested in.[26] This may be why the earliest recorded onscreen kiss between Black characters has a title that immediately sets the tone for how the actions onscreen should be received – *Something Good, Negro Kiss* (Selig, 1898).

[26]Lee Grieveson, *Policing the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), Ch. 2 (Kindle).

Though not much is known about this recently discovered film, the contents of the film are not much different from what is seen in *The Kiss*. Yet, the title begs the question: what was good about it? Is it the fact that it is a positive portrayal of a loving couple, or is it the portrayal of the loving couple that the title is ushering you to receive as good? Whatever the case, no other early cinema film short centered on kissing has surfaced with an accompanying need to preface the kissing action as "good."

Fig. 4. Still from *Something Good, Negro Kiss*.

In the years to follow the *May Irwin Kiss*, the kiss would be a centerpiece of the scene for a number of films including *An Interrupted Kiss* (Edison, 1898), *Farmer Kissing the Lean Girl* (white, 1898), and *A Kiss in the Tunnel* (Smith, 1899), reflecting the audience's fascination with visual narratives of sexual attraction. *What Happened in the Tunnel* (Porter, 1903) offers us a narrative that further underscores not just sexuality promoted through the act of a kiss, but the racialized boundaries that are invoked within the fascination toward it. Alice Maurice refers to the plot (in which a white woman riding the train with her maid switches places with her when

the train goes through a tunnel, just as a would-be male suitor is looking to steal a kiss) as a filmic depiction that is "representing and enabling racial and sexual transgression."[27] Janet Staiger writes about the representation of the "New Woman" in early American cinema and the ways that topics of sexuality were used to warn against imminent dangers in urban spaces following unprecedented vast migration to big cities at the turn of the 20th century and an increased emphasis on consumerism.[28] In this way, *What Happened* can be thought of as a precursor to white slave films that began in the early teens of the 20th century. Yet, as both Staiger and Shelley Stamp have pointed out, intended warnings regarding the increased mobility of women within cities were often convoluted in their message and entreated unintended responses from women who often favored rather than feared the films.[29] Maurice highlights that the issue in *What Happened* is the liminality of an emerging city life that is fraught with determination to instill and maintain order—in this case, order around sexual conduct—even as this order is questioned time and again within the film.[30] The film's showcasing of sexual boundaries makes clear that with presence of Black bodies onscreen, images can at once be offered up for pleasure, while at the same reject imagery that is deemed different and inadequate. The inclusion of a Black woman being kissed by a white man was meant to be funny, but the underlying premise implied by this miscegenous kiss was that the Black woman was seen as a suitable substitute to participate in treatment that was unsuitable for young white girls, especially

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[27]Alice Maurice, *The Cinema and Its Shadow* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 48.

[28]Janet Staiger, *Bad Women (*Minneapolis, MN: University of. Minnesota Press, 1995). 5.

[29]Staiger, *Bad Women, 143;*

> Shelley Stamp, *Movie Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 97.

[30]Maurice, Chapter 1 (Kindle).

in cities where all kind of temptations abound. I further suggest that the space all three characters occupy is made liminal by the presence of the Black woman, in which the white man and the woman are able to use the sexuality associated with the Black woman to transverse boundaries of race—due to the miscegenous kiss.

The practice of displaying an oppositional sexuality between white and Black characters onscreen has allowed white audiences a voyeuristic way to address their anxieties of Black sexuality—in ways that create the practice of a consumption and rejection of the image, simultaneously. Furthermore, the repetition of demarcating this opposition in such a hierarchical manner has led to a cinematic codification of Black sexuality even when two Black characters are shown together. While miscegenation was banned in the Classical Era of American cinema, I believe there was pleasure gained by observing sexualized images of Black characters similar to Stamp's explanation that negative images of white women being abducted and forced into prostitution (referred to as white slavery) were enticing to the white women watching the films in the 1910s.[31] Even still, the image of African American work, play, and even rest has been codified as different from its Anglo-American counterpart. With an emphasis on difference, Black sexuality has been historically suppressed and manipulated to be different onscreen. The onscreen kiss – the primary issue discussed here, and what I consider the chief signifier of displayed sexual desire – is significant as it relates to sex and sexuality, romance, and procreation, as well as a blissful connection between couples. Because the onscreen Black kiss is mostly missing in Early and Classical American Cinema, I look to other ways that Black sexuality was expressed. Even in rare instances where the Black kiss is present, there is an

[31]Maurice, Chapter 1 (Kindle).

underlying presence of a deviant sexuality where white sexuality is assumed to be not only good but the standard.

Depictions of the Kiss and Black Sexuality

Black sexuality was a topic of discussion centuries before film was invented. These stories shaped the discussions that ultimately led to the types of imagery that would later be seen in early films. But first, I want to define what I mean by Black sexuality. Because this dissertation is speaking primarily about the Black filmic image in American society, by referencing "Black" I am speaking of persons who descended mainly from African people, or those whose social status in American society was such that their identity was inextricably linked to having any Black lineage relegating them to being treated in a manner designated by white American society toward Black Americans.

This study began with my asking the question, "Why don't we see more Black characters kissing each other in Classical Hollywood?" From there I watched a number of extant films that included the most well-known Black actors of the time, as these were the films that would most likely include scenes with Black actors having the most lines and would likely include any onscreen intimacy between characters, if there were to be any. Preliminary research on the subject yielded that the amount of kissing present between two Black actors was found to be lacking compared to kisses between two white actors, yet there was also a number of patterns uncovered regarding the ways that sexuality was referenced by Black characters, even when the Black kiss seemed to be elided. The main application of Black sexuality seemed to remain, however, as it was used as an othering agent that could only be acceptable under certain conditions. Before going into the conditions that lead to the construct of the sexualized Black

subject, it is important to understand the references to the Black kiss, sexuality, and how it is interrelated within this dissertation.

I identify an onscreen kiss as any contact one or both characters have with their mouth to another's mouth or other location on the face, visibly apparent or implied—irrespective of the length of screen time given to the occurrence. Though there is a relatively small number of Classical Hollywood films in which African Americans can be seen kissing each other, films such as *The Emperor Jones* (Murphy, 1933) and *Hallelujah!* (Vidor, 1929) show a brief kiss between characters to showcase instances of infidelity. The most commonly exhibited versions show these kisses occurring onscreen for only about a second, as compared to longer allotments for films featuring white leads under the auspices of the SRC and PCA. I look to this examination to ascertain how white audiences understood Black sexuality, why it was important to continue to construct the image of Black sexuality, and what roles using a signifier such as Blackness played in allowing white audiences to better identify themselves. It is important to note here that while there was not as many instances of Black people kissing in Classical Hollywood, there was very often imagery, language, character and narrative tropes that were used time and again to reference Black sexuality, thus instructing audiences how Black sexuality should be viewed and reacted to in society.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter *OED*) has three different definitions of sexuality I will incorporate in my discussion because they encompass much of the discussion about Black sexuality. The first definition speaks of sexuality as the capacity of sexual feelings. This definition relates to the idea that the depth of sexual feelings can inspire action—and the lack of sexual feeling can inspire a different set of actions. This model places sexuality within the mode of its potential, recognizing that feelings spurn action. The second definition of

sexuality references sexual orientation—a person's sexual identity in relation to the gender or genders to which they are sexually attracted. We will speak more about this later, but for now we can contend that a large part of this aspect of sexuality has to do with how gender norms affect the receptivity of arousal. The last definition references sexuality as the act itself, where a person can only be considered sexual if signs of sexual activity are present. Likewise, the type of person will determine what types of signs are represented in their sexuality, and because Hollywood specialized in creating character types, these different types reflected different types of sexuality.

With those definitions in mind, we can go further to define Black sexuality as the sexual feelings, sexual thoughts, and sexual actions of actual Black people, which in this dissertation is limited to the African American context. This is not to say all Black people experience sexuality similarly. But it is important here to consider that Black sexuality, like Black community, is not monolithic, despite both these categories being treated as such. Yet this is because Hollywood has a history of, at best, an inaccurate and an insincere and self-serving understanding of the sexual feelings, sexual attractions, and sexual actions of Black people at worst. I will add, too, that because the sexual feelings of Black people were usually misunderstood—intentionally or otherwise—that the sexual feelings that were often assumed to be that of Black people, were oftentimes the misunderstandings and projections of white audiences that were simply coded as being Black sexuality.

This practice was incentivized in a number of ways, but we will speak about this more in the following chapters. For the purposes of this introduction, I contest that the concept of Black sexuality has been built upon an unreliable foundation, its permutations in the realm of Hollywood film subsisted mostly on common beliefs formed through this unreliable foundation, making many of the subsequent shifts in the portrayal of Black sexuality equally void of most of

the concerns the Black community expressed when it considered its own sexuality, as was the initial rhetoric of Black sexuality originally popularized by early white colonizers.

Film Censorship and a Shifting (Black) Sexual Perception

These chapters are arranged to fit time periods that I have noticed a shift in style of representation of Black sexuality in Classical Hollywood. These shifts in depictions are consistent with important shifts in Classical Hollywood censorship. Chapter One focuses on early Hollywood cinema through the early years of the Sound Era and ending in 1931. Films I viewed up to this year reflected some idea about Black sexuality being threatening and very different from white sexuality. In 1931, the Studio Relations Committee also began to require Hollywood studios to submit their scripts before production began on any film, which I note as a partial cause for the shift in film content. From there, I created my second chapter, where I make mention of films made between 1932 and 1935 that had a more familiar undercurrent in its reference to Black sexuality, and showed a potent relationship between the Black servant and the white character they worked for. While Black sexuality was still very much differentiated from and devalued compared to white sexuality, films during this time frame featured Black sexuality as a liminal space for white characters to explore not only sexual boundaries, but the social boundaries regarding class, gender and racial roles in society. As such, 1935 coincides as being just one year after the Production Code Administration (hereafter PCA) was created to work with Hollywood Studios from being censored by government-sanctioned censor boards. The year 1934 is also when Joseph Breen became the head of the PCA, who worked tirelessly to uphold the rules and standards of the Production Code between 1934 and 1954. My third chapter marks films created between 1936 and 1941 where film depictions of Black sexuality existed to

entertain as well as was linked to performing emotional labor for their white employer. While Breen served the PCA over three decades, his office was not responsible for the oversight of film content between 1941 and 1945; it was the Office of War Information (hereafter OWI). As such, the change in depictions of Black sexuality picked up around 1936 and extended until around 1941 when the OWI took over for the PCA. The change in representation after 1941 will be a later addition to the works found in this dissertation, since it is a time where films such as *Stormy Weather* (Stone, 1943) and others were given to negotiating the past of keeping Black sexual depictions relegated to the background of the narrative, with a possible future of foregrounding Black sexuality within the narrative.

Representations of Black Sexuality in Silent and Early Sound Film.

By the time *Hallelujah!* was made in 1929 there was already a cinematic precedent set on how Black sexuality should be reacted to by audiences, especially when it is presented conspicuously. *The Birth of a Nation* was one of the first critically acclaimed feature length films and set the standard for cinematic conventions in its use of cross-cutting, close-up shots to emphasize emotionality, and panning. Its popularity was sparked by its combination of melodrama, use of new filmic devices, and overarching theme of white solidarity against African Americans who threatened to damage the country and social order. Woodrow Wilson (who was not only a former president, but an esteemed leader of the Progressive Era and supporter of eugenics) is famously quoted as saying: “My only regret is that it is all so terribly true," after viewing the film in the white House is emblematic of the film’s influence on audiences and their possessive investment in whiteness—if the leader of the country could be swayed by the

melodramatic scenes and ignore both historical and representational inaccuracies, others were sure to do the same. And they did, so much so that the NAACP worked tirelessly to campaign against the film both before and during its theatrical run. Anna Everett writes about the work of Black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* and *New York Age* who wrote about the harmful stereotypical representations set forth in *Birth*, often running articles about the increase of lynchings alongside news of protests condemning the film for its depictions of Black people.[32] In a time when censorship boards were created to counter Hollywood's impact on audiences and on their behavior, the African Americans, too, understood the impact that false and misleading characterizations had on white America's thoughts, feelings and actions toward African Americans. Yet, these characterizations of the innately immoral, sexually deviant (if not violent) Black person led to the discussion of how Black sexuality should be portrayed when the SRC considered the film *Hallelujah!* In this way, *The Birth of a Nation*, a film that was still showing in theaters well into the 1920s and 30s, set the cinematic precedence for how Black sexuality should be viewed and treated—as something dangerous, to be feared, and best left to be avoided.[33]

Not only did *Birth* lead the way in restricting how Black sexuality, and even intimacy, was alluded to, kissing itself, the signifier of intimacy between couples, was extremely limited in Hollywood films between African American characters. The reasoning seems to have been because of the response of general audiences who would oppose to watching African Americans act out what they deemed uncontrollable lusts. As we saw earlier, even in *Something Good-*

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[32]Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism 1909-1949* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 103.
[33]Everett, 103.

Negro Kiss, the intention of the title is to warm audiences that might have some sort of objection to Black people kissing or showing affection to each other and make this display of sexuality be acceptable. Yet, films like *Birth* enforced the idea to audiences that Black sexuality should be feared and controlled. This control extended to the depiction of Black sexuality, including the lack, thereof.

Historical Documentation of Black Sexuality

Early cinematic representations of Black sexuality can be traced back to narratives popularized during the Atlantic Slave Trade when Africans were seen as commodities. Stephanie M. H. Camp, who studied letters and journals contemporary to the period, writes about how early colonizers in Africa, starting with the Portuguese in the fifteenth century, wrote about life in Africa and the people whom they encountered. In the descriptions of Black bodies in early letters written by the colonists, emphasis is diverted between praise for the beauty of Black people, especially Black women, and how well suited they are for service to white slave masters would find these women—even down to their perceived sexual capacity.[34]

> ...Ligon surprised his sixty-plus-year-old self with the force of the admiration and desire he felt for some of the 'many pretty young Negro Virgins' he met later on his voyage. There were two 'Negro' women, in particular, who took Ligon's breath away. The two women were 'Sisters and Twins' and their 'shapes,' 'Parts,' 'motions,' and hair were 'perfection' itself. Indeed, they were works of art.[35]

> Charles Wheeler, an English trader who lived in Guinea for a decade in the employ of the Royal African Company in the 1710s and 1720s, shared Marees's perception of the ease

[34]Stephainie M.H. Camp, "Early European Views of African Bodies" in *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the* Americas, ed. Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie M. Harris (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 12-13.
[35]Camp, 11.

> with which African women produced children, as well as his regard for it. 'One Happiness, which those of this Part of the World enjoy before those of Europe,' Wheeler told William Smith, who later wrote about his travels, 'is their Labours. These are Times with them so easy, so kind, so natural and so good, that they have no Need of Midwives, Doctors, Nurses, &c. and I have known Women go to Bed over Night, bring forth a Child and be abroad the next Day by Noon.' [36]

> The Jaloff were, according to Georges Buffon, usually very gay, lively, and amorous. They 'are very fond of white men whom they exert every assiduity to please, both to gratify themselves, and to obtain presents which may flatter their vanity.' [37]

These accounts of their beauty were meant to entice the men, too. According to Camp, colonists stayed in African territories and worked with tribes to enslave and transport Africans to the Americas. These men frequently slept with African women who served as prostitutes to visitors as well as personal concubines who kept house with men away from their primary home and families for months and years at a time.[38] Camp's accounts are from the perspective of the slave traders, but their discussions about the women were based on their desire to persuade the men they were writing to pay for slaves. They painted a picture of Black women being sexually open, willing, and able to fulfill the desires of the white colonists. Any willingness, however, that African women exhibited from the perspective of the slave traders is rendered null because they were already slaves. These women were handed over to Europeans from Africans tribesmen who looked to capitalize from the slave trade and protect the girls and women in their own families by determining which African women were suitable to be enslaved and prostituted. So, while the sexual actions of these women were assumed to be consent in the letter, consent was impossible because, as slaves, they had no rights. We can only guess how they felt, even if the slave traders

[36]Camp, 12.
[37]Camp, 20.
[38]Camp, 21.

who wrote about them described them as happy to serve. Instead what we see is the projection of sexual feelings, attraction, and actions where it applies to the person writing the letter—ultimately stripping the subject of their agency, they are objectified. The practice of fabricating the sexual lives of Africans for the purposes and interests of European colonialists constitutes a type of pre-Cinema both in the practice and the ways that women are portrayed as beautiful and highly sexual. Just as African women did not have a say in the ways their sexual image was portrayed in the letters, so, too, did Black characters lack the agency to construct their sexual image in mainstream filmic productions.

The absence of agency goes hand in hand with the absence of determining one's own story. In "Reading the Specter of Racialized Gender in Eighteenth-Century Bridgetown, Barbados" Marisa J. Fuentes tells the story of a slave boy (his name and age are not given) who was arrested and placed on trial in October 1742 in Barbados for going to the home of a Daniel Moore with a hidden sword reports say he intended to use to kill Moore.[39] The boy was dressed as a woman so that anyone stopping him would assume he was a woman being loaned out for the purposes of prostitution, though he was likely sent by his slave master, Dudley Crofts. Crofts was having an affair with Daniel's wife, Agatha Moore (all but the boy sent to Moore's home are white, of course). In the end, the boy was acquitted, Fuentes states, because there was no proof that the boy was instructed to kill Moore, and even if he was, he would not to be able to refuse any directive given to him by Croft. Testimony by Agatha, who is on record stating that she was enticed by Crofts even after she tried to refuse him, was recited by lawyers so that even her agency has been rejected in the matter—either she couldn't say no to Crofts, or she had to go

[39]Marisa J. Fuentes, *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the* Americas, ed. Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie M. Harris (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018), Chapter 3 (Kindle).

on record saying she couldn't say no so that she didn't get in more trouble.

What's interesting about this case besides the lack of agency of the slave boy and Agatha Crofts, is that the only person who would have had *presumed* agency in their actions did not exist—namely the slave woman that the boy dressed up as. Though the account does not state the age of the boy, he was old enough to resemble a slave woman. Moreover, Fuentes points out that the disguise was meant to normalize the appearance of a young slave lent out to other households to perform sexual services.[40] If the boy had in fact been an enslaved Black woman not only would it not have been illegal for her to visit a home to perform sexual acts with a white man, it would have been assumed that she had no problem with it because she was born sexually wayward. Here too, we see that the absence of agency—for the young slave boy, the wife Agatha, and even the non-existent slave woman has led to their stories being told by those who hold the most power in the situation. Stories of Black sexuality have far too often benefited people who were not Black. Reclaiming these stories about Black sexuality and their meanings has been the task of scholars, filmmakers, writers, recording artists and more. There are numerous issues surrounding Black sexuality that have been discussed by scholars to date, yet few if any have focused solely on the romantic depictions of African Americans in Classical Hollywood. Alice Maurice states "the policing of sexual boundaries—defense against hybridity—is precisely what keeps a racial group a racial group."[41] It is precisely these boundaries that will be discussed in this dissertation. The representation of Black sexuality in Classical Hollywood has not been written about at length, yet many scholars

[40]Fuentes, Chapter 3 (Kindle).
[41]Alice Maurice, The Cinema and Its Shadow: Race and Technology in Early Cinema, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), Introduction (Kindle).

have discussed these topics at length separately, mainly in the fields of Black film history, Black feminist criticism, and scholarship of onscreen intimacies.

Blackness in Film History

Of the many authors whose scholarship has focused on Black film history, a plethora of authors have used textual analysis to explain the deep-seated racism that has often found its way to the big screen. Ed Guerrero examines how representations of Blackness in cinema have always been overdetermined but contests that such representations are ideologies that reflect a perceived reality that can always be shifted.[42] Guerrero's use of close textual analysis examines what can be immediately seen onscreen, but also examines the history of racism that has informed such depictions. Pooling a number of articles and publications to help him contextualize the racist depictions set forth in *The Birth of a Nation*, Guerrero notes how the history of onscreen representation of African Americans has evolved from antebellum origins and has persisted in one form or another until the emergence of Blaxploitation film.[43] This does not mean that racist depictions ended in the 1970s, nor that racist depictions were always a part of the narrative. But Guerrero notes a certain agency of Blackness that seemed to be lacking in the films prior to Blaxploitation films.

While Guerrero is concerned with how agency is partially regained with the intervention of the Black director as author, Donald Bogle addresses the impact of this in his typology of Black stereotypes beginning with the tradition of minstrelsy, continuing into early American cinema, and throughout subsequent decades. Bogle addresses how the creation and repetition of

[42]Ed Guerrero, Framing Blackness, 6.
[43]Guerrero, 40.

filmic stereotypes of Blackness has led to images like the Tom, coon, (tragic) mulatto, mammy, and the buck. From the "brutal Black buck" and mammy figures shown in *The The Birth of a Nation*, to the "pickaninny" youth in the *Our Gang* series of the silent era, to the coon figure performed by Stepin Fetchit throughout the thirties, Bogle gives examples of the characteristics that have been attributed over and again to Blackness. This trend carried into the 1970s, when Bogle notes that a shift in representation occurred when Hollywood films were actually created with Black audiences in mind. At this time, there was a redirection of the buck character, with even more agency onscreen than previously.[44] Bogle discusses a number of films that showcased a white male/Black male friendship that he believes originated from the master/slave relationship. Here the attitude of the "Tom" is reflected, but the emphasis is on a relationship that presents a symbiotic partnership—ownership is not otherwise acknowledged.[45] In this manner, Bogle draws a link between the narrative in films like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (any of the many filmic adaptations), *Judge Priest* (Ford, 1934) and others starring Will Rogers and Stepin Fetchit; as well as the *Lethal Weapon* franchise that began in the late 1980s.

Early Black film scholars such as Donald Bogle and Ed Guerrero emphasize how these portrayals sought to hurt the image of African Americans and direct the way society views this population. Yet, there are instances in Black film scholarship of praise for the Black performance for its aptitude to entertain and even subvert the power of such imagery. Charlene Regester takes up this practice in her examination of a number of Black female entertainers from the early days of American film with Madame Sul-Te-Wan to the dynamism exhibited by Dorothy Dandridge in the 1950s. Regester also reflects on the strength of Ethel Waters and Hattie McDaniel, who

[44]Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes*, 232.
[45]Bogle, *Toms,* 271.

helped open doors for representation of Black women onscreen, but whose image was promptly replaced by the mulatto Black woman.[46] While these tensions reflect a further "otherness" which can be linked, as well, to the roles of servant McDaniel and Waters were often tied to, it also exposes the skill these women exhibited that contributed to being typecast. By contrast, actresses Nina Mae McKinney, whom Regester says played a version of the tragic mulatta in *Hallelujah!* as Chick, found it difficult to secure roles, too, shortly after her breakthrough appearance.[47] Regester also notes the contemporary reception in Black newspapers that describe the importance and discourses held by Black audiences regarding these women as a way to offer an oppositional reading of these Hollywood texts.

While Guerrero and Bogle are concerned with analysis and interpretation of what could be seen onscreen, Thomas Cripps, like Regester, has extensively researched publications contemporary to the Classical era to assist in defining the filmic representation it commented on. Thomas Cripps utilizes textual summarization and invests his research in archival sources and primary historical resources such as trade publications and newspapers articles. He makes use of a number of archival documents to paint a picture of the emergence of *The Birth of a Nation* from its run as a theater play under the title *The Clansmen* (1905)—named after the book it was adapted from— to the response of the National Association of Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) prior to and after the release of the film *The Birth of a Nation*. As the NAACP campaigned city to city, through protests and supplications made to censorship boards to ban the film from exhibition, their efforts largely fell on deaf ears, and Cripps asserts that such protests

[46]Charlene Regester, *African American Actresses: The Struggle for Visibility, 1900-1960* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2010), 245.
[47]Regester, , 56.

not only riled up more interest in *Birth*, but that these protests might have been better served toward white institutions.[48] Whether or not this view is accurate seems as much to do with hindsight as it does with preference of strategy. As Cripps himself states, there was not one clear response from the Black community about how to obtain the rights that had already belonged to them. What is important to note, as Cripps implies, is that the work achieved by the NAACP and other organizations was the preliminary effort that led to impactful change in Hollywood when it came to representation of African Americans on film.

Jacqueline Stewart's *Migrating to the Movies* (2005) makes another important intervention into how we can understand audiences' interpretation of what is seen onscreen. Stewart is invested in detailing modes of Blackness, specifically those influenced by the Great Migration. The importance of her book is not limited to the nuance she has added to the narrative of newly migrated African Americans at the turn of the century, but that she is taking into account African American audiences to begin with. My interest in Classical Hollywood still identifies that most films created were done so with a general audience in mind who filmmakers conceived primarily through their whiteness. This is not to say that Anglo Americans are anymore of a monolith than African Americans. But history has shown that they were usually treated as monolithic and instructed in the filmic text to uphold what George Lipsitz would call a "possessive investment in whiteness,"—that is to act and think in ways that uphold whiteness as the apex of a social hierarchy.[49] I believe the work of Jacqueline Stewart can complement the

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[48]Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 42.

[49]There was often a distinction made in the Studio Relations Committee and PCA between suitable content within a film and what Southern audiences would have an issue with as white audiences of the South often contested any semblance of "social equality" displayed in the film between African Americans and Anglo Americans. This can be seen in a number of letters and is discussed by both Ellen Scott in Cinema Civil Rights and Allyson Field in Uplift Cinema. This does not and should not divorce us

efforts of other major scholars I have cited like Guerrero, Bogle, and Regester, by looking into the most important ways African Americans did contribute to opening the doors for more opportunities in Hollywood.

Ellen Scott adds to this practice as she explains the turmoil Black activists faced with the repression of civil rights issues by censors in the Production Code Administration as well as censorship boards. Scott looks at how the PCA has taken liberties beyond what the Production Code has laid out in terms of its written rules and regulations around sex, violence, and religion.[50] A number of scholars have looked at the reasoning behind common practices of censorship, and books have been written about the most influential single-handed censor between 1934 and 1954, Joseph Breen, including Thomas Doherty's *Hollywood's Censor*. In this context, Scott looks into the nature of the repression of the specific issue of civil rights. Additionally, Scott looks in depth at the structures of organizations such as the PCA and studios to show how they altered film content in attempts to appeal to general audiences, but she, like Stewart, is interested in the responses of the Black community to such practices.

While textual analysis, archival research, and reception studies have been used by many scholars to describe the detrimental imagery of African Americans onscreen as well as the triumphs made in history, the final trend I would like to discuss is narrative structure and the ways it is cinematically constructed around race. As mentioned earlier, Alice Maurice explains that Early Cinema often featured gags involving the replacement of a white woman with a Black

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from the idea that Anglo American audiences had more of a capacity for being racist in the South than anywhere else in America, as can be seen by the widespread popularity of *The Birth of a Nation* throughout the country.

[50]Scott, *Cinema Civil Rights*, Introduction (Kindle)

woman, typically in a subservient position, to explore the taboo of miscegenation in the seemingly safe space of the silver screen. One example of this occurs in *What Happened in the Tunnel* (1903), where a white woman is replaced by her Black maid while the train they are aboard goes through a dark tunnel. Here, the gag is not only the kiss, but that it appears partially in the dark, and the symbolism of a train going into a tunnel as a representation of sexual intercourse. Maurice further explains in *The Cinema and Its Shadow* (2013) that technological and cinematic advances such as the moving picture camera and the implementation of the close-up work to instigate racialized differences between white audiences and onscreen subjects of color.[51] Stewart notes that *Tunnel*'s switch between the Black maid and the white woman serves as a testament to the belief that Black people should be monitored, as they can be a threat to white social order. She refers to the train in terms of its urban modernity where newly migrated groups of people attended public spaces more frequently.[52] Rather than commenting on the way the Black maid was used in order for the gag to be performed, Stewart comments on the agency of the Black maid, focusing instead on her laughter as a sign that she found pleasure in pulling off the joke as well.[53] Moreover, Stewart addresses the closing action of the scene in which the maid, still laughing at the joke she just pulled off, looks up into the camera in a knowing gaze, briefly breaking the fourth wall. Conversely, Maurice explains this scene is indicative of the ways Blackness was explored not only to address miscegenation, but also to "play out titillating

[51]Maurice, Introduction (Kindle).
[52]Stewart, Chapter 2 (Kindle).
[53] Jacqueline Stewart, "What Happened in the Transition? Reading Race, Gender and Labor Between the Shots", American Cinema's Transitional Era Audiences, Institutions, Practices, ed. Charles Keil and Shelley Stamp, (Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 114.

scenarios and forbidden desires between white men and white women."[54] No matter the takeaway, there is an understanding that the presence of the Black maid and her being kissed by the white passenger is saying something that would have a completely different interpretation if the maid were white. Race complicates how audiences understand a scene because of particular beliefs about racial groups that audiences hold while viewing a film. Films also encode the actions, speech, costumes and experiences of characters based on race, and can often perpetuate false beliefs about members of a race.

Linda Williams describes how melodrama has been used to rationalize emphasis on racial difference throughout the history of American cinema. She explains that interest in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) was provoked by a melodramatic narrative to empathize with African Americans as they have lived through grave injustices. Williams refers to a potent contrast between the way melodrama is invoked in Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as opposed to Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. She notes that while Tom was a figure that could be seen to invite sympathy because of the actions of white people, *The Birth of a Nation* was created to encourage strong emotions in audiences who could be led to believe the safety and purity of white women were at stake if African Americans are not constrained in the ways that slavery required.[55]

While Williams describes the use of narrative structure as a device to further the discussion of the ways that racial difference has been highlighted, Allyson Field describes how African Americans created imagery grafted in a narrative of uplift ideology. In *Uplift Cinema* (2015), Field explains that uplift ideology was created as a method to "uplift" impoverished

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[54]Maurice, 57.
[55]Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and white From Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 110-114.

communities of African Americans who were still struggling to find a substantial footing in American society after the end of slavery against an onslaught of Jim Crow laws and traditions. Jim Crow policies and ideology kept large populations of Black Southerners from gaining social, economic, and legal equality.[56] This resulted in a number of responses from prominent Black figures in leadership organizations established to combat racism, Black newspapers, and any other persons or groups with a vested interest in Blackness debating the best strategy to gain equality. Field states the two main strategies were set on prioritizing social and legal equality (for example, the right to drink from the same water fountain as Southern white people and vote) and economic equality (. being given the same opportunities to education and work as Southern white people, for instance).[57] At the forefront of this debate was W.E.B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington who held to the beliefs of sociolegal equality and economic equality, respectively. Furthermore, Dubois believed in a "talented tenth," a group of the most able-bodied and thinking African Americans who could help guide the race toward the equalities they sought. Alternatively, Washington advocated for African Americans to gain education in practical trades that they could in turn use to teach members of the communities they returned to uplift.

Washington's ideas of uplift were employed in a handful of films created by Tuskegee Institute and Hampton College (now Hampton University), in part to appeal to white investors. Yet, a common refrain in these films was an emphasis on the return of newly educated students to their own community so as to tame conversations about objectives to achieve social equality—

[56]"Social equality" acted as a buzz word for many white Southerners, a dog whistle of sorts that underscored the importance of keeping Black Southerners not only socially, but economically and legally subservient to white Southerners.
[57]Allyson Nadia Field, *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Black Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015). 4 (Kindle).

a strategy used on both Southern and Northern white investors. The films often pronounced the possibility of fearful alternatives that were in line with racist beliefs regarding Black Americans.[58] This rhetorical strategy not only played into the beliefs of white people that Black Americans were lazy, unintelligent, and naturally inclined to be socially deviant, but presented would-be investors with the opportunity to rescue African Americans from impending doom, as the saving of a race from itself could ultimately stabilize the country as a whole. In an effort to make potential investors more willing to part with their capital, Tuskegee and Hampton both offered up their films with intermittent performances that often-included plantation songs. This example demonstrates how narrative structure can be used to appease different groups within a population. The representation in the films of Tuskegee and Hampton were structured in ways that would garner two specific goals: making conditions in the U.S. better for its Black citizens, and not making white people so nervous about progress for Black people that they would oppose it—-very difficult tasks to achieve simultaneously. It is with the same knowledge, sensitivity, and, oftentimes, concessions to racist ideology, that many films in Hollywood have been made.

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham explains that "by continuously expressing overt and covert analogic relationships, race impregnates the simplest meanings we take for granted. It makes hair 'good' and 'bad,' speech patterns 'correct' or 'incorrect.'[59] Sexuality, amongst other human traits, can also be deemed incorrect by order of this process despite what is shown. Higginbotham joins a number of scholars, including Teresa de Lauretis and Judith Weisenfeld, who borrow from Michel Foucault's explanation of technologies as a means to construct socially

[58]Field, 36-38.
[59]Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs,* Vol.17, No. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 255.

accepted ideas about people.[60] In the case of Lauretis and Foucault, these ideas of technology have more to do with gender and sexual binaries respectively. In the case of Weisenfeld and Higginbotham, both write about the technology of race that works to subordinate groups of people based on hierarchical designations. The "technology" portion of this idea includes the ways the meaning of race is constructed and weaponized to keep certain groups in power, while aiming to keep others subservient. Here we can see how the medium of film has been weaponized to inscribe meaning upon, amongst other traits, race. But the technology of race was not just a collective group of ideals that white people used to associate themselves with superiority. Michelle Mitchell talks about how even discussion of Social Darwinism and essentialist ethnologies used by scientists to degrade Black people in America and keep them socially subservient were disputed by Black intellectuals who created rhetoric that boasted of the innate ability of the African Americans to withstand the horrors of slavery and post-slavery tribulation. These scholars and laymen countered the rhetoric of Anglo-American ideals of "racial destiny" with their own ideas of an African American racial destiny that promised that the hardships they faced would reap prosperity just as sure as the Bible announced that the meek would inherit the Earth.[61] Still, in order to make claims on this racial destiny, Black Americans

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[60]Higginbotham, "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," p 255;

Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be They Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 4;

Teresa De Lauretis, Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 3;

Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol.1: Am Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 127.

[61]Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction (*Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 8.

understood there was work to be done to gain economic and social footing in order to "uplift the race." As such many in the post-Reconstruction era—a time when African Americans were 90% illiterate and struggled against systemic oppression to combat starvation, lack of education, and racial violence—"reached the conclusion that racial survival was especially contingent upon eliminating poverty, alleviating morbidity, promoting mainstream gender conventions, eradicating vice, reducing illegitimacy, and ensuring robust production of morally upright, race-conscious children."[62]

Though it is true that there were myriad of ideas springing from the Black intelligentsia about how Black Americans should progress, most understood that progress was needed and was to be achieved by Black people helping themselves. At the turn of the twentieth century, society denied African Americans from public spaces such as parks, libraries, restaurants, and meeting halls. In the face of this discrimination, many turned to the church to gather collectively for worship, for lodging, to attend theater performances and political rallies within what was deemed a "safe space."[63] It is no wonder, then, that the church "played the single most important role in influencing normative values and distinguishing respectable from non-respectable behavior among working-class Black people during the early twentieth century."[64] Even as African Americans became interested in upward mobility and enacted a plan to attain it, their alignment to middle-class sensibilities did not often reflect their actual socioeconomic status.[65] Still, the balance of these ideas were meant to tip towards progress as the denial of self, evidenced through

[62]Mitchell, 12.
[63]Higginbotham, 6.
[64]Higginbotham, 204.
[65]Gaines, 15-16.

strict moral codes and often back-breaking work, was believed to give way toward better opportunities—equal opportunities—in the not too distant future.

With such an emphasis on respectability for Black people in their everyday lives and onscreen, it seems unlikely that there would be much of a preoccupation with the onscreen depictions of sexuality, intimacy, or even companionship. While there was a desire from the Black community to be seen as wholesome and moral, the idea of the sexuality of Black men was often met with the threat of death. Conversely, the idea of the sexuality for Black women was too often met with sexual assault and violence.[66] As a result, African Americans may have been at the least indifferent, and perhaps even resistant to being concerned with onscreen displays of sexuality in Classical Hollywood. No matter how it was shown onscreen, it, too, was implemented as a technology of race— marred by racist overtones. This reworking of normative sexual behavior was prefaced by a history of abusive treatment and myth. And as myths are often used, the myths about Black sexuality were created to console and caution white people in a society of their own construction. These workings of how Anglo-Americans saw themselves and African Americans as they related to sex, as well as how African Americans saw themselves through survival, and even in some terms, internalized racism, interpolates complexity within the narrative structure of American film with regards to Black sexuality and its chief identifier, the onscreen kiss.

[66]Gaines, 56-58.

Black Feminist Criticism

While Stewart, Regester and Scott discuss multilayered responses of Black audiences to racist depictions onscreen, Angela Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998) discusses a multilayered response to Black sexuality in the Black community through the expression of African American blues artists. Davis notes that many blues scholars have overlooked the contributions of Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday. Rainey and Smith's music, Davis explains, speak out against racial and gender inequity, even within the African American community. What is more, she speaks of the importance of sexual freedom these blues women explore in their music that was a result of the sexual freedom Black Americans encountered when they were emancipated and were no longer required to sleep with whomever the slave master demanded.[67] It is important to note the sexual freedom that Black women were known for in blues genres was referenced, too, albeit for different purposes, onscreen. Depictions of Black male sexuality was far less frequent in Hollywood in the '30s and '40s than what was shown of Black women onscreen, and even these depictions of women were far less in number compared to white sexual (or romantic) depictions. I believe this was due in part, at least, to the popularity of early female blues artists, as well as Black femininity, itself, being valued in American society both for its capacity for sexual freedom as well as a capacity for domestic support. While actresses such as Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers were shown in roles that largely focuses on their domestic support, their increase in screen time and speaking roles by the late '30s led to more instances of their dialogue being sprinkled with sexual innuendo and suggestion.

[67]Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 4.

As Davis explains, these women expressed their sexual agency through song and spoke the truth about their troubled relationships and ambivalence toward the men they kept company with—to yield such agency was equal to freedom.[68] They also spoke truth regarding their desire to be desired, while subverting the gender roles of women in society. This was in opposition to Christian sensibilities that were in tune with respectability, a portrayal of piety was just about as pure of a depiction of respectability one could get. As Davis explains, attaching to Christian ideals was often done in extreme terms, invoking sentiments that all that was not of God was sin, thus labeling discussions of the sexual as ungodly.[69] This categorization of sexuality essentially relegated its discussion to the fringes of Black society and left it, more or less, as fair game to be interpreted in the ways white audiences preferred it to be. Though Davis is not referring to films in her book, she is talking about the existence of Black sexuality codified by African Americans for themselves. Moreover, where there is possibility for agency in storytelling in the blues, as Davis suggests, there lies the possibility for the depictions of African Americans to exist as they are and on their own terms, even sexually, when it is manifested in other mediums.

Jacqueline Bobo's work on deciphering opinions of African American women in *The Color Purple* (1986) works to decode responses of African Americans and understand that these responses vary based on the individual, as well as the negotiated readings that contribute to discourses within the Black community. [70] Bobo documents written responses from African American men and verbal responses from African American women that participated in a focus group she moderated for responses to the film. She also shares concerns voiced by her

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[68]Davis, 44.
[69]Davis, 122.
[70]Jacqueline Bobo, "Black Women's Responses to the Color Purple," in *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media no.33*, (Berkeley: Jump Cut Associates Press, 1988), 43-51.

participants regarding the negative depictions of African Americans in Hollywood in general. She notes how many of the women in her focus group processed the depictions in negotiated readings, that is they acknowledged harmful portrayals but were still able to find something in the depictions they liked. In such cases, these men or women understand these depictions are not perfect, but they can still find pleasure in the progress they have seen. I, in turn, seek to locate a more favorable perspective of the importance of Black sexuality and the role it has played in society.

Scholarship on Onscreen Intimacies

While there are a number of scholars who have addressed sex and sexuality in Hollywood, I am mostly concerned with the censorship of these subjects. Jacquie Jones writes about the repression in "The Construction of Black Sexuality: Towards Normalizing the Black Cinematic Experience," though through a different approach to the idea than I am proposing.[71] While both Jones and I engage in textual analysis, she concentrates on films made in the 1980s while my research is concerned with films from the turn of the twentieth century until 1945. Additionally, my research looks at historical context as well as archival documents in an attempt to expound on the practice of Hollywood's characterizations, especially through censorship practices. Lastly, though we both make the claim that Black sexuality has been intentionally left out of American cinema, Jones uses Foucault's idea of repressed sexuality to reference the elision of Black sexuality in film. I have used somewhat different language, though I do use Foucault's idea of repression. Foucault has made the case that repression of sexuality does not

[71]Jaqueline Jones, "The Construction of Black Sexuality: Towards Normalizing the Black Cinematic Experience," *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 247-256.

exist in society because the interests that society has in sexuality cannot be dismissed and voided.[72] In light of Foucault's distinction, I have referred to the lack of sexualized portrayals of Black Americans in Classical Hollywood as suppressed, continuing this distinction between repressed and suppressed. In terms of the emotions that informed the decision to limit the portrayal of Black sexuality, they were not unknown, therefore we cannot say that there was an unconscious effort or repressive aspect working to hide it onscreen. Instead, my research shows there was a very intentional effort to not only create a sexuality for Black characters that was different from white characters, but the very act of doing so makes the act of suppression a successive consequence of the idea of Foucault's repression because the attempts to hide Black sexuality through the means of limiting the onscreen kiss resulted in the reference of Black sexuality in other, more obscure but nonetheless differentiated, terms from that of the idea of white sexuality. The repression of Black sexuality did not quench the fascination that white people had with the construct they had in fact created. In this way it was both myth and mystery, and yet, still a fabrication made to strip Black Americans of their agency. The sheer number of parties compliant in the construction of Black sexuality--Hollywood studios, self-regulating organizations, and American society—points to the very nature of the ways the organization of this construct was systemic and used to reinforce racist ideologies.

In his book on Joseph Breen, Thomas Doherty writes about a number of occurrences that influenced the injunction of the PCA, including the rise of censorship boards in cities such as Chicago and New York City. In the Pre-Code Era, Breen had a brief stint in filmmaking where he worked to create content reflective of his Catholic values with members of the Catholic

[72]Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol.1: Am Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 127.

Legion of Decency. Additionally, while Breen was working to make the Chicago censorship board more accountable, the censorship boards were beginning to see the financial benefits of censoring films that they could then charge studios a fee on, which was helpful in times of a weakened Great Depression economy. Keeping in close quarters with his Catholic values Breen called the Production Code an "inspired" writing, something that held true to the spirit of moralistic and religious views.[73] His exact quote reads, "the more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me to be an inspired document," which hints just as much to his resolve in keeping in step with his Catholic upbringings as it does his justification for what he was upholding and requiring Hollywood studios to uphold. If the document itself was inspired by the Good Book, not only does the Code become divine in the eyes of Breen, but every impulse to defend the book becomes religious duty—including his defense against portrayals of miscegenation.

Susan Courtney states the miscegenation clause in the Production Code harkens at least as far back as concerns expressed with the exhibition of *The Birth of a Nation* and first became a rule of the SRC as a result of Will Hays consulting censorship boards and inquiring about the things they deemed censorable.[74] She states that issues of miscegenation have been used in early American films to re-inscribe white masculinity.[75] An unspoken result of this, then, based on Courtney's premise, is that if sexual difference falls along the line of racial difference in order to make whiteness and white masculinity visible, then the absence of a pronounced sexuality on the part of Black characters onscreen must effectively be done to render these characters metaphorically invisible. What is more, in cases where there are small hints of sexuality shown,

[73]Doherty, 46.
[74]Courtney, 19.
[75]Courtney, 16.

they are usually done so to reinscribe whiteness rather than call attention to itself or the one performing it.

Virginia Wexman refers to Griffith's use of the white female image shown in close-up and other cinematic gestures in the "rescue montage."[76] She argues that the image of the woman is reflective of men as well, that a difference in sex is often depicted by prescribed gender roles. So, too, is the focus of plots regarding miscegenation, in which a "racial difference plays a significant role in the conceptualization and administration of the law." Here, Wexman explains the symbolism miscegenation plays out in western genre films, in which land is treated as property similar to the ownership implied in a heterosexual relationship, namely marriage.[77] As a woman was implied to be the property of a man in film—a conquest who is the prize for the man who endures long enough to earn it—she was considered property by law and in practice in the US, Wexman asserts the land so often defended by white men in westerns is, too, considered a conquest that must be won over and against indigenous peoples. This assertion pinpoints the implied threat (indigenous people) as those who wish to metaphorically seize land from white men, just as miscegenation allegations stem from a perceived threat (people of color) who want to seize women (property) from white men.

Constructions of Black sexuality have led to the glaring omission of the Black kiss in Classical Hollywood, and such omissions do not happen by accident. An essential component of the missing kiss has to do with the way Black sexuality was referenced. These filmic references defined Black sexuality essentially as one dimensional—Black people were seen as deviant, and

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[76]Virginia Wexman, *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage, and Hollywood Performance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 49.
[77]Wexman, 101.

especially sexually deviant, and there did not seem to be any reason for this other than *because* they were Black—and because they were different their treatment in society should be different. Yet, there is rarely a case in film where it is explicitly stated that African Americans should be treated differently because they were different, rather, certain tropes are used repeatedly so that the difference in treatment was implied. For this reason, I include Critical Race Theory (hereafter CRT) in my discussion about filmic racial constructions because concerns regarding racial partiality in the American educational and legal system, the two main systems CRT scrutinizes, can be extended to racialized representations in the mainstream media. In fact, the media can be seen as a tool or extension for educating the masses on proper ways to view and treat based on race.

Critical Race Theory looks at the core issues of inequality at its root and how such issues are perpetuated in society, as well as how such practices are shown to enact harm on others. CRT began as a set of contestations regarding how the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s had failed to continue, and how in some ways political reactions to the movement often reversed the progress that was thought to be made with the legislation that came out of the movement.[78] While others have added and focused on additional core ideas, Jean Stefancic and Richard Delgado's *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (2001) determine the first three tenets of CRT as emphasizing: 1) that racism is ordinary; 2) that any improvements to the problems of racism rest on the alignment of interests of those in society (interest convergence); 3) that definitions and views on race are constructed by society.

[78]Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, Critical Race Theory: An Introduction, 3rd ed, edited. (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 3.]

Cheryl Harris states that "the law has established and protected an actual property interest in whiteness" which extended to whiteness being seen as a right that could be held or possessed by Anglo Americans.[79] Harris's writing informs George Lipsitz's concepts that argues that both public policy and private prejudice have facilitated a "possessive investment in whiteness."[80] He links these two realms of public policy and private prejudice to show that the practices of both underscore the tendency of our society to regulate the interests of Anglo Americans in such a way as to maintain their status above people of color, primarily economically. This linkage also demonstrates that this articulation toward white supremacy as rule reinforces such practices. It is for this reason, I contest, that African Americans were often not shown onscreen in Early and Classical Hollywood as fully fleshed out characters. Instead, their existence seemed primarily to underscore fears of white society, especially when it came to topics of sexuality. In any capacity they are shown, sexually or otherwise, they are usually represented as the problem of society—where they are shown to be the antithesis of whiteness by nature, and a barrier to the safety and hegemonic order of white society. Conversely, those characters who worked joyfully, and protected the interests of their white employers (or during slavery, their slaveholders) were favored onscreen, because ultimately their devotion protected the interests of white America. The Classical Era of Hollywood under the PCA did more to uphold these ideas than Early Cinema, and this is no surprise, as Joseph Breen was notorious for his urging of studios to lay out the cause and effect of good and bad actions. In this case, good and bad are both informed largely by the Production Code as well as the PCA under the oversight of Breen. So, again, while there may

[79] Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review*, Vol.106, No. 8. (Cambridge, MA: The Harvard Law Review Association), 1725.
[80]George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 5

not have been a hard and fast rule against a sexual act kissing between Black characters onscreen, the main focus of these depictions was to adhere to the rules and guidelines of the PCA who was largely invested in filmic entertainment that could maintain order through instructing. What we see as a result of this, was the type of order white society wanted to see when it came to the role that African Americans would serve in real life. And it gets tortuous as these characterizations are built upon the initial foundation—because Black sexuality, as dangerous as it was deemed, was still present because it was fetishized. It was simply presented in a way that was more palpable based on the mythology that had already been cultivated around it—mainly through punishment and reward. While we may not have seen kissing between Black characters as often as white characters, there are depictions that connote what is supposed to be sexual feelings, attractions, and actions of Black characters who are meant to represent African Americans as a whole. In actuality, these depictions represented the roles that the white hegemonic order wanted Black people and Black sexuality to play in American society—and otherwise characterized it as damnable.

Conclusion

It is difficult to accurately measure the negative impact the harmful stereotypes of African Americans in film have had. After over one hundred years of film and Black people being shown onscreen, we can say that we know there has been some negative impact. But how do we pinpoint these effects as differentiated between what was seen in film, what was seen in minstrelsy and vaudeville, what was heard on records where non-Black characters acted out harmful stereotypes, and what was enacted in the day to day over the years where stereotypes were discussed by everyday people? Yet, when we think about film itself, especially around

1915 when some of the most detrimental filmic images of African Americans were seen in *The Birth of a Nation,* we can see just how much thought and intent can go into working to prove something to society and the way it is expected to be run. As mentioned above, melodrama is used to help plead the case of a film because it uses the emotions invoked within us to influence our likelihood to agree with the content being put forth, the message, if you will. The PCA under Breen had strong influence on studios to encourage them to not just teach morality, but to instruct audiences of what morality should look like. This instruction relied heavily on the cognitive biases of audiences that were already there and were steadily built upon through the use of character and narrative tropes that incorporated many of these harmful stereotypes. This dissertation's purpose is not only to look at the way that the sexuality of Black Americans was avoided in film by its most common allusion to it—by means of the onscreen kiss—but to cite how Black sexuality did make its way through narrative, both its constructed mythological uses, and how Black actors and actresses subverted these myths to define and contain their own usage of sexuality—the sexual feelings, attractions and actions of Black people. These depictions, as authored by Black actors, still do not engage the plethora of sentiments offered by Black people of the time. For one, even in case of Black sexual onscreen authorship, there is still an overwhelming resonance with heterosexual relationships. Even when Black people are allowed to tell their own stories, patriarchal practices reign supreme in these depictions. It was not uncommon for Black people to use the same stereotypical ideas about African Americans found in white productions where only the only Black character was usually a maid or butler. Harmful depictions of Black characters were not only in many ways internalized, but even these were incentivized because Black independent filmmakers often, too, followed formulas that seemed to be most profitable in Hollywood, including racist stereotypes. Still, there is a difference in the

ways that these stories were used and usually their motivations behind themes presented in the portrayals were quite different. As such, when I present these differences it is apparent that both are constructs existing to impose a paradigm, one usually used to ultimately uplift whiteness, the other mostly used to abhor Blackness in the interest of uplifting whiteness.

Chapter One: *Sing you Sinners* aka Safe(r) in Hell 1896-1931

You're Wicked, And you're depraved
Why you all misbehave?
If you want to be saved, Sing you Sinners

Honey (Ruggles, 1930)

The idea that sex sells is not an idea based solely on the popularity of the subject. Sex sells precisely because there is a price to pay for the freedom to explore it outside of the social constraints of gender, class, and race. For the film spectator the price was a ticket, but for the protagonist of the film the spectator is watching, this exploration could cost them everything. The way that sex has been represented in Early and Classical Hollywood is emblematic of a distinction between proper sex and improper sex–and Foucault discusses this distinction in *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. According to Foucault, it is the bourgeois in Western society who take on the task of representing a "deployment of sexuality," a model of sexual representation in society where desires are explained and contained by the sciences (psychology, Freudian psychoanalytic teachings, studies on vice, etc.). This containment poses further limitations through the social assignment of class, gender, and race and works to set the parameters of social order. The "deployment of sexuality" did not extend to the lower classes, however. A model of repression was used to address sexual concepts only in ways determined by the higher classes as suitable, which led to sexuality only being addressed in ways that edified

whiteness as the symbol of white bourgeois society.[81] Foucault states that the deployment of sexuality was developed with the longevity, progeniture, and descent of the classes that ruled "in mind." In other words, this structure was implemented to maintain the ruling class as the ruling class.[82] While Foucault's ideas are nuanced, at the core of his explanations, he suggests the notion of a higher sexuality which was seen as moral. This moral sexuality was upheld by those in higher classes and taken as model for the type of mentionable sexuality (yet even this sexuality was mandated to secrecy) versus a lower sexuality that was taboo, immoral, and associated with lower classes. This "lower" form of sexuality would prevent ascension to the higher classes. These models of higher and lower sexuality were constantly being addressed in Hollywood Cinema during the Silent Era and into the first few years of sound film precisely to make sense of America's increasing curiosity about sexual matters. This chapter will investigate cinematic tendencies to portray higher esteemed sexualities of white, middle-class, bourgeois society as it adopted lower esteemed sexualities, namely Black sexuality, in a process of mimesis that was focused on addressing social anxieties and reinscribing social order along the lines of class, race, and gender. This process of mimesis, however, was first popularized through Blackface minstrelsy.

Blackface Minstrelsy and Early Film

Film has been closely linked to the construction of race for as long as it has been in existence. Alice Maurice has stated that the cinema and "its shadow" were bound up with

[81]Michele Foucault, *History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction,* Vintage Book Ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 106 (Kindle).
[82]Foucault, 124 (Kindle).

representations of ethnic and racialized others so that race became intertwined with what seemed to be purely formal and cinematic concerns.[83] Speaking on the early racialized content of films, like Thomas Edison's productions, she attributes the early fascination with these racialized subjects in film exhibition to the idea that they show what the subject, representative of a particular group, can do. She also emphasizes the work of the apparatus who has the ability to capture it.[84] The popularity of these racializing tropes demonstrate another benefit that early American cinema reaped from reusing stereotypes that its audiences would internalize. Eric Lott documents instances where audience members of the live minstrel shows that preceded cinema, despite generally being aware of the tradition of Blackface performance and what it entailed, often believed not only in the accuracy of the depictions but at times thought they were actually watching Black people perform.[85] In many ways, especially when there is no counter-narrative available—seeing is believing. Yet, this seeing and believing are set up in ways that work to uphold social order and allow for people curious about race to come to an understanding about race through fiction, rather than intermingling with real people of another race. This understanding of race works as an agreement of how it will be used by the ruling class and does not imply an understanding of the personhood of the object being considered, in this case, Blackness.

Minstrelsy is one of the largest influences on Black character tropes of early film. Lott has described minstrelsy as a practice that arose from "a white obsession with Black (male)

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[83]Alice Maurice, *The Cinema and Its Shadow* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), Introduction (Kindle).
[84]Maurice, Introduction (Kindle).
[85]Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Race and American Culture,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), Chapter 1, (Kindle).

bodies which underlies white racial dread to our own day, it ruthlessly disavowed its fleshly investments through ridicule and racist lampoon."[86] There is no clear record of how Blackface minstrelsy and led to the institution of the American minstrel show, the country's first popular form of entertainment but according to Lott the practice originated in the 1830s. He hypothesizes that the trend began with white people stealing performance ideas from Black people they observed singing and dancing, or perhaps from a ritual of paying Black porters who dressed outlandishly for the clothes off their back to wear and play the character of a Black man —it's possible that it was a little of both. Still, Lott makes the claim that the desires of the minstrels as well as the audience (both overwhelmingly white) found pleasure and ease in what they considered to be reenactments of Black behaviors, because these portrayals were created to ease their anxieties about the threat of Blackness.[87] It is no wonder that minstrelsy, which began in antebellum America, was most popular at a time, between 1842-54, when the nation's rhetoric toward Blackness was shifting. Predating the Civil War, the Compromise of 1850, and with it the Fugitive Slave Act, made this period a turbulent time. The abolition of slavery had occurred in many of the northern states while discussions were being had of slave states and territories versus free ones in new territories of the U.S. Meanwhile the 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which, itself, was adapted into minstrel performances, and eventually live action and animated film, had been released and was changing the discussion about how slaves and Black people should be viewed not as a danger to society, but as obedient servants, naturally docile and caretakers of racial and social hierarchy.

[86]Lott, Chapter One (Kindle).
[87]Lott, Introduction (Kindle).

This dissertation does not address the full history of Blackface performance and how it addressed Black sexuality, but minstrelsy is a hallmark in the long practice of denying Black people the right to their own bodies and its representations, and deserves attention here. Ridicule was a main component of this performance style, but minstrel performances came about through the concept of what Lott calls the love and theft of Black culture–though I contend that these were instead *ideas* about Black culture, perspectives that gave life to myths about Blackness. Minstrelsy was just one of the many modes in which these limited perspectives, absent from the input of the objects they sought to mimic, were worked out. This "working out" had everything to do with sexuality, according to Lott, who states that the Blackface minstrel served as a metaphorical penis, one that could be controlled through its mimicry and yet able to lend liberation to those whom participated in its control.[88] Even when Black men participated in minstrelsy (Bert Williams and George Walker, The Mockingbird Minstrels, Gavitt's Original Ethiopian Serenaders, for example), they were using tropes whose origins were steeped in racist configurations created by white people. It was not uncommon, even, for slaves to participate in humor that was tailored to their master's tastes.[89] Yet, Lott states that Blackface minstrelsy didn't begin explicitly as a way to further subjugate Black people who were already slaves. Rather, he argues, that even early on (in its one hundred plus years of popularity) the practice of Blackface minstrelsy was founded on addressing concerns and fears about race that white men did not realize they had, let alone what to do with them.[90] Whether or not the intention to further subjugate was there, that was the result because those enacting subjugation were defining their

[88]Lott, Chapter One (Kindle).
[89]Jake Austen and Yuval Taylor. *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip Hop* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2012), 46-49.
[90]Austen and Taylor, 272.

subjects. The ability to define is the same as being able to name, and the ability to name something simultaneously gives the ability to give value to it—when this happens on a broad scale, it gives one group of people authority over another group of people. As Mel Watkins has stated, "both literally and figuratively, minstrelsy cast a grotesque, if strangely conflicted, shadow over the American landscape."[91]Blackface minstrelsy was just one of many other ways that Blackness was defined in the public eye. Though its peak occurred from 1840-50, its popularity continued after slavery and into Reconstruction. Michael Rogin has stated that the white minstrel performer in Blackface had the capacity to evoke emancipation through transforming into a "Black" man and then back to a white man – he argues that this capability both breaks down racial difference while at the same time reinscribing it.[92] Rogin's argument that white people could achieve a freedom through Blackface, either by performing it or being its audience, by identifying with an idea of Blackness that was fabricated doesn't quite offer a full view of its appeal to white people. The identification of white people with Blackface minstrelsy could only be achieved by someone who had a certain aspect of freedom in the first place. The freedom that Rogin suggests is not a freedom of white people to simply be something or someone else, but the freedom to take on what they are not seen as while still being allowed to return to their original appointment in society. Rogin's concept of freedom also describes the type of freedom that white characters are able to access through the presence of Blackness as it is defined onscreen. It can also describe the ways that Black sexuality was allowed to be referenced onscreen, as I will examine later in this chapter.

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[91]Mel Watkins, "Foreword" *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip Hop* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2012), 14.
[92]Michael Rogin, *Black Skin, White Masks: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), Chapter 2 (Kindle).

The character tropes of the minstrel show carried over into film as the popularity of minstrel shows began to decline. With the film industry's rise in popularity at the turn of the century, it carried those tropes along. Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen explain that the main character types seen in Blackface included the "coon": a shiftless, uneducated, slow-witted buffoon; the "dandy": a free man who thinks he's far more eloquent and better dressed than he really is; the "trickster" : a type who plays jokes on anyone, Black or white, even himself; the "Mammy" and the "Tom", who arose from the publication of Beecher-Stowe's *Cabin*: both depicted as harmless, happy and sexless; and finally, "Topsy": the dancing, carefree pickaninny. These tropes were frequently combined with one another. The buck was also a character trope that developed in the age of the minstrel show, but he was not used as much, as there was little room in these comedic performances for a "dangerous Black killer."[93] All of these character tropes can be seen, with slight variations, throughout the history of American film. Published originally in 1973, Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* (2016) focuses on these Black character tropes and how they have shown up throughout the history of Hollywood. These character tropes led to a freedom for the person behind the mask to be different, while promoting damaging, racially inscribed ideas about the race that was reflected in these performances. Freedom, then, was accomplished from the ability of white people to name or define others, and by white people' ability to define themselves in opposition to Blackness. This led to a typology of not only types of Black people but a typology of society. In its determination to create a different person— Blackface minstrelsy worked to create an antithesis of the personhood that was assumed to be under the minstrel mask by ascribing inverse values to

[93]Austen and Taylor, 26-28 and 30-31.

Blackness and whiteness. That the irony of this dynamic was a major source of Blackface's comedic payoff for white people; it set up a faux irony by not only allowing a white man posing as a "Black" man to be all of the things he as a white man said he was not, but for him to comfortably slide back into the identity that he created by contrast and embody all of the things he named himself to be. A Black man acting out stereotypes in Blackface did not enjoy the same freedom, highlighting the freedom of white men who were able to be two different things at once.

Turn of the Century Technologies and The Progressive Movement

The mainstream use of sound in Hollywood films meant a great deal for the industry. Not only could films get a bigger draw through the market aspects of this new sound technology, the technology of race would also be employed further differentiating white characters from Black characters. The new and improved cinematic technology of race was used to further convince white audiences of the importance of being socially compliant. Film has highlighted the difference between Black and white people through its structuring of white and Black "characters" since it first became a popular American attraction. The difference between onscreen portrayals of Black and white sexuality has been highlighted at the same time, casting white sexuality, which is considered, like all other things deemed white, to be the standard for actions approved by both man and God. Sexuality has become another arm in the fold that has helped prove that whiteness is the standard that should be lived up to in society. The idea of whiteness within this social order as standard also incentivizes white people to uphold the social order because they are glamorized. Even if white people are not doing right, they are not shown

as inherently bad, so they can have trysts of indiscretions here and there, and still be shown to be at the top of the social chain in America.[94] The onscreen kiss is yet another part of sexuality that has been treated differently onscreen between white characters and Black ones. Because we are all sexual beings, the way sexuality is shown from one side to the other is telling of the role that sexuality is meant to play in the social makeup of postbellum America.

Thomas Schatz chronicles the Hollywood studio system as emerging during the teens, taking a distinctive shape in the 1920s, reaching maturity during the 1930s, peaking in the war years, then going into a steady decline after the Second World War.[95] Hollywood fought to make a name for itself (and keep it) by working to build familiarity with its audiences. The films produced combined recycled narrative and character tropes with the medium specificity only afforded by the moving image. Hollywood took these inscribed personas and stitched them into the fabric of character types within the film narrative. As the Blackface minstrel performer would play to the audience's desires and expectations, the Black character tropes of early films took on many of these expectations. Whatever the actions of the characters, the white and Black, good and bad, worthy and unworthy binaries were always implied.

Popular discourse regarding the pseudoscience of eugenics in the late nineteenth century helped to imprint these ideas of a moral binary even further. Immigrants from abroad came to America due to impoverished conditions in their countries compared with the potential seen in America's expansion of industry. The U.S. population rose by fifteen million from 1880 to 1900; twelve million of these were immigrants. Cities were also growing fast: forty percent of

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[94]Note, here, that there is a stark difference between what white characters could get away with during pre-Code and after the PCA changed the nature of representation.

[95]Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 1988), Introduction (Kindle).

townships across America had decreased in size as people moved to big cities.[96] Ira Berlin positions what he calls the third Great Migration (the first two occurring in the antebellum period) between 1915 and 1970. Berlin's "third Great Migration" resulted in the depopulation of Black populations in the rural South and the rise of Black populations in the urban north, and western, cities of the country.[97] By 1970, one in five Black people had left rural living in favor of big cities. The Great Migration's restructuring caused issues in big cities for a number of reasons. Urban development had not seen such an influx of people and had to organize its cities in response. It was not just the layout of the city that was in question, there was also the question of how to deal with the people in these cities and the new problems that arose from this. From the tail end of the nineteenth century until the first few decades of the twentieth century, the proponents of the Progressive Era worked to reorganize the US as a rapidly changing society, and many of the anxieties that this era worked to improve found their way onscreen.

At the turn of the century, urban industrialized cities such as New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia were experiencing a wave of people migrating there to find work, both from rural American cities as well as overseas. Richard Hofstadter describes this time in the as being a reform movement, in which industrialization by American corporations cause social and moral decay in society.[98] This decay was seen to be the responsibility of the government whom progressives looked to enlarge and thus strengthen the administrative state in order to exert control over industry and help the unfortunate within society. Yet, those considered the most

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[96]"City Life in the Late 19th Century : Rise of Industrial America, 1876-1900 : U.S. History Primary Source Timeline : Classroom Materials at the Library of Congress : Library of Congress." The Library of Congress. Accessed November 21, 2022. https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/rise-of-industrial-america-1876-1900/city-life-in-late-19th-century/.
[97]Richar Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, Introduction (Kindle).
[98]Hofstadter, Introduction (Kindle).

unfortunate tended to be white Americans and white immigrants. For example, two of the biggest issues the Progressive Era sought to aid were poverty and the existence of prostitution. Saidiya Hartman emphasizes the harassment of Black women who either worked as prostitutes due to lack of employment opportunities in urban areas, or were assumed to be prostitutes and were often wrongfully arrested and convicted.[99] white women who became prostitutes, on the other hand, were usually seen as a victims, such that white slavery was synonymous with the prostitution of white women, and reformers looked upon these helpless participants with pity and looked to remedy the issue with a sense of urgency.[100]

While the Reform Movement was invested in subjects such as economics, political science, sociology, and social work in American colleges in order to help create an infrastructure for the changes it sought to accomplish, reformers were often limited in their scope of who they thought should be helped. Many reformers of the early twentieth century relied on the pseudoscience of eugenics determining the characteristics of those with Nordic and Teutonic lineages to be deemed most apt in intelligence and morality.[101] These findings determined those who were naturally fittest for survival and thus were most worthy to be assisted by the administrative state.[102] Discourse on racial purity found its way into the discussion of women's rights, birth control, and involuntary sterilization. These discussions took place with the

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[99]Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, (W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), Book Three (Kindle Edition).
[100]Timothy Gilfolye, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920*, 275.

Stamp, 44.
[101]Thomas C. Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016)*,* 73.
[102]Leonard,68-69.

established forethought that white people, including European immigrants, had the ability to be reformed, and should, thus, be protected above others in society. James Baldwin stated that no one was white before they came to America, "everyone who got here, and paid the price of the ticket, the price was to become `white.'"[103] whiteness was performed onscreen just as much as Blackness in order to model acceptable behavior and that which should be avoided. We can see many of the concerns of the Progressive Movement in early American films. The topic of white slavery was a popular draw in movie exhibition at the turn of the century but was later banned by the censorial list - within the "Don'ts and Be Carefuls" that preceded the Production Code. Sexuality had to be treated carefully so that the most impressionable—especially immigrants—could see the moral and correct way to behave. It was a prevailing belief that Black people did not have the ability to be sexually moral, and this divide was apparent within some of the earliest depictions of sex and sexuality. white characters were often given the chance onscreen to act outside of what was considered acceptable behavior, acting in the ways Black people were perceived in society to act, onscreen. Putting on this metaphorical Blackface gave audiences a chance to see themselves both as the mask and the one wearing the mask--o be who they are encouraged to believe they naturally are, while allowing themselves to be who they were not. In this way white society is connected to white bourgeois society: the actions they take, the respectability they embody, and demand is shown as a staple of being white. The lack of respectability of Black characters became a staple of how Black characters were shown. When a white character is shown to wear the mask of Blackness, it is meant to be received by the audience as a mask – seen through its historical role in minstrelsy – this mask is meant to help

[103]James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948–1985* (New York: St. Martin's/Marek, 1985), 107.

teach something about whiteness. Cinematically, we see that whiteness (as it has been defined by society and Hollywood) has been constructed so succinctly that it can be seen as a character itself, one that is in search of itself outside of the standards of class, race, and gender that define it.

Black Sex, white Sex and Sing You Sinners

"Sing You Sinners" (Harling and Coslow) was a popular song in Paramount's 1930 catalog and was featured in *Honey* (Ruggles, 1930). *Honey* was a pre-Code film about a family that has to rent out their Southern plantation home in order to raise money for an important surgery for their father (though the father is never actually shown in the film). They rent to a rich woman from the North for the summer who travels down with her daughter, Cora (Lillian Roth); a male house guest that the rich woman wants her daughter to marry, Burton (Stanley Smith); and a detective brought along to prevent the house staff from stealing her expensive jewelry, Harry (G. William Burnstein). The rich woman, Mrs. Falkner (Jobyna Howland), requests that the house staff of Black servants be replaced by white servants. Despite having little faith in the white servants being able to keep their hands off her wealth, Falkner seems to have zero faith in Black servants. Mrs. Falkner does not meet the owners of the house, siblings Olivia (Nancy Carroll) and Charles (Richard Gallagher), prior to renting from them. As such, Olivia and Charles decide to stay in their home posing as hired help—the cook and butler, respectively. During the houseguests' stay, Cora and Charles fall in love, while Burton falls in love with Olivia. Harry, the detective, falls in love with the maid, Mayme (Zasu Pitts), who is the only real worker of the three house "servants," and has traveled to Olivia and Charles's home with her meddlesome daughter, Doris (Mitzi Green), who seems to be about seven or eight years old.

Though there is no indication where Mrs. Falkner and her traveling party comes from, it is implied that she is from the North, as even Cora is introduced in her first scene as a flapper who enjoys partying in the big city and the more exciting things in life. In a key scene just before the climax of the film where the true identity of Olivia is revealed, Charles talks to Cora outside in the evening. They are both wearing nice clothing as if they are going out, though they seem to have no plans but to talk with each other under the night sky. While confessing their feelings for each other, Cora sees a group of Black servants walking away from the main house, lifting their hands up high and saying, "Praise the Lord, you sinners!" over and again. Charles explains that once a year the "darkies" gather for a celebration, most likely referring to a church revival or ring shout. Cora gets Charles to take her to the event and the two sit and watch as the large group of Black men and women greet each other while singing hymns in unison, "Aaaaamen! Hallelujah! Aaaaaamen! Hallelujah!" Ms. Falkner, Olivia, and Burton find their way to the enlivened scene moments later as they all watch the high energy performance of the Black service workers. As the performers sing the group oscillates from singing gospel songs to singing "Sing you Sinners," with its up-tempo jazz melody:

You sinners drop everything
Let that harmony ring
All to Heaven and sing
Sing you sinners
Just wave your arms all about
Let the Lord hear y'shout
Pour that music right out
Sing you sinners
Whenever there's music
That devil kicks
He don't like music
On that river Styx—
You're Wicked

And you're depraved
Why you all misbehave
If you want to be saved
Sing you Sinners[104]

Once this segment of "Sing" is completed, however, they go back to singing gospel, solemnly lifting their voices and hearts to God. They outstretch their arms and look to the skies as they kneel to the ground. This trope was often used in a sequence that incorporates Black people in performance at the time—where gospel and jazz music are oftentimes intertwined, and the outpouring of the performers is mixed with a show of shadows as they sing. The display of shadows mimics the movement of Black people in performance. This conflation of Black music, worship, and sexuality was common in films at this time. One of the reasons could have been the influence of gospel on popular music, including jazz. Additionally, Black religion has been seen as connected to sexuality in the American South, where *Honey* takes place. One of the most interesting things about the scene is there is an actual onscreen white audience watching the performance. The emphasis, here, with the white audience seems to be the intention of watching what Black people do, and the perceived effects of their actions. The performance leads to a slip in the character of whiteness for Cora and Doris, the film's two most rebellious characters, creating a *mise en abyme*: their participation and knowing of the songs lead to a display of a familiarity with Blackness the film is using as a warning. Doris, as trickster in the film, takes on characteristics of Blackness in that she is shown as naughty and working to upend the peace of others in the home. Cora, the flapper, defies her mother, who works to keep her dignified as a

[104]*Black and Tan Fantasy* (1927), *Hallelujah!* (1929), and *King For a Day* (1928) each feature scenes in which jazz music, Black performance of this music that included outstretched hands while dancing, and shadows on the wall were displayed —often in the same shot—to emphasize these movements.

part of the upper class. Yet, when she gets up and dances with Black characters, she takes on a display of Blackness that gives her freedom to explore her own class distinction, all the while returning to it when she becomes aware that Charles is upper-class. This narrative practice would be replicated in later films, but *Honey* is one of the first in which this occurs. It is noteworthy that Cora is never really in danger of becoming part of the lower class since Charles was upper-class, as well. But in later films, there became a pattern in narratives of changes and challenges to the gender, class and race of a white character through their connection to a sexualized Black character. And as will be examined, the Black character is always coded as sexual. *Honey*, one of the first films I have found that does this, is an early example of the narrative and cinematic device of opposing white sexuality to Black sexuality. It demonstrates a technique that, by allowing white sexuality a "deployment of sexuality" that displaces any wrongdoing onto repressed and taboo sexualities and then using this opposition to inspire introspection, re-instills the values of whiteness within a centralized character. In this way film displayed how the othering of Black sexuality could be beneficial to maintaining social status.

The aforementioned scene is emblematic of the way that Blackness has not only been used to oppose whiteness, but shown through Black sexuality as something to be othered and in many ways feared –and like all other aspects of Black life and culture in American society, a thing to be controlled. In this scene Cora is identified with the Black performers, who themselves perform a self-referential depiction of how they are seen by the white upper class. Here, the Black characters are shown enjoying their actions, though they refer to the ways that they are deemed in the eyes of outsiders. These self-referential actions can be seen in the ways that the Black audience refers to themselves as sinners, and is most underscored in Cora's break from whiteness, as she joins them as a sinner. Cora becomes the sinner that identifies with sinners, and

becomes who-she-is-not, who her mother has tasked her to be. Cora uses the assumed deviant sexuality of Black performers in the scene to transgress her class distinction–in essence she is becoming unlike herself, and like a Black person. This way, within this liminal space, she can be seen as different. Yet, this shift in how we see her depends on the control of how Black sexuality is viewed. Cora seems to lose control, and even this loss can be blamed on her alignment with Black sexuality that is assumed to be uncontrolled. But Cora gains control through this alignment only because Black sexuality, too, is controlled in this context. We know that Black sexuality is controlled in film because of the repetition of how it is referenced: as something that is only useful or appropriate when it benefits whiteness. In the following chapters I will note how this control shifted in its focus and desired outcome. Black sexuality, as it has been historically referenced, has often been linked to fear in society not because it was unwanted, but because it, at its core of construction, has come to represent freedom that must be reeled in, controlled. Black sexuality has often been utilized as a tool because the desire to control it has always overshadowed the desire for its potential—to love and let love, if you will. Black sexuality is not very different from the sexuality of all people, in this way, because most modern societies have shown interest in controlling sexuality. What is different is the *ways* that Black sexuality has been defined and constrained and how it has been constructed. It is as if all the ways that Black sexuality has been able to exist in the imaginary of American society—the freeness it exuded, the overcoming of proscription, the liminality that it represented—for all the desires that were addressed by and society placed upon it, Black sexuality was treated as a wild bull that should be tamed. In other words, the idea of Black sexuality that lived in the minds of white American society was so unruly that the control of this construct seemed imperative for maintaining control of society. African Americans were not the only citizens that were prompted by American

society to obey the rules of decency, however. Michel Foucault writes that as early as the seventeenth century, sexuality in Western society was openly discussed and pursued. It was not until the Victorian Era that discussions of sexuality were made taboo and brought under the charge of the family, with the husband and wife as representatives of the directive:

> The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law. The couple imposed itself as model, enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy. A single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents' bedroom.[105]

Foucault lays out the tenets of an acceptable sexuality in Western society. Sex was only between a husband and wife, for the purposes of reproduction, and was to the extent that it could be regulated by society.

Foucault's theory argues that reducing sex to its most basic function of reproduction was a way to minimize the problem of how to make citizens more productive for the government. Sex is so rigorously repressed, Foucault states, because it is incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative.[106] These ideas of who should be allowed to be sexual, and the ways that it was hidden points towards two distinctly different forms of sexuality. The socially acceptable sexuality is sustainable in that it acts as a model of how sex should be looked upon and reinforced by society as a way to organize society. In opposition is the deviant sexuality or the taboo – a sexuality separate from society, the illegitimate that should not be mentioned but is constantly discussed. Still, this deviant sexuality is not valued as sustainable on its own but is considered sustainable only as it can be held in opposition to legitimate sexuality. In other words,

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[105]Foucault, 6.
[106]Foucault, Part One (Kindle)

in a mimetic structure of (what was deemed) white sexuality taking on the attributes of (what was deemed) Black sexuality, both sides of the dichotomy are validated. This validation is referenced through the visibility of the two sexualities referenced, and is structured, thus, through its dependence on the other.

While the married couple held the right in society to legitimate sexuality, the idea of the illegitimate sexuality was, too, fashioned and governed to have a place in society: those "other Victorians," as Steven Marcus would say:

> …seem to have surreptitiously transferred the pleasures that are unspoken into the order of things that are counted.[107] Words and gestures, quietly authorized, could be exchanged there at the going rate. Only in those places would untrammeled sex have a right to (safely insularized) forms of reality, and only to clandestine, circumscribed, and coded types of discourse.[108]

Even illegitimate sex is sanctioned by the government, and while Foucault states its mention was not considered of proper discourse, it was not completely silenced. This illegitimate sexuality is instead displaced to the taboo.[109] The taboo is accessed through that which is not taboo. In the example of *Honey*, Cora is coded as being tasked with upholding the image of white society through her associations to higher classes referenced by her mother. When she accesses a connection to Black sexuality through her dancing and singing with the group, she transgresses racial expectations, yet she, too, is transgressing class expectations by dancing with the maid's daughter, who is connected to Blackness in her actions, as well as class in her position as the help. Cora is only made whole from her transgression when she chooses to further connect herself to the lower classes (i.e. the help) by coupling romantically with Charles, who, we knew

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[107]Foucault, Part One (Kindle).
[108]Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* 1st edition (London: Routledge 2017).
[109]Foucault, Part One (Kindle).

all this time, is actually part of the upper class. In his thesis "Mutatis Mutandis: Reverse Mimesis and Literary Modernism," Rodrigo Martini Paula writes of "ironic reversals that fuse or confuse the categories of humans, animals, and machines."[110] Referencing Nietzsche and Freud, Paula states that both share the idea that "human subjectivity was dependent on the ability to imitate others in the process of becoming." He joins, too, Lacan's ideas of the mirror stage of development in which "imitation not only helps a child learn to act in the world, but it has a key role in helping the subject realize, in front of a mirror, that it is a subject."[111] This mirror stage creates a dynamic of mimesis that Paula, citing Taussig, states enacts a doubled action of both separating the one from the "Other," and uniting them, making the one always dependent on this "Other." In *Honey*, we can see this mimesis ironically displaying what is coded as unwanted behavior to expose and work out barriers of class. Yet, working out the barriers of class, gender and race usually led not to an equal voice regarding each side discussed, but an uplifting of a favored group. In other words, Cora associating with lower classes and lower esteemed races through taking on their othered persona only worked to strengthen her position as a white upper-class woman in American society.

Not only would the emphasis on legitimate sexuality (tied to upper-class white society) reinforce the rules of society, but it organized the reinforcement in ways that made some sexuality right and others wrong. It made legitimate sexuality pure and illegitimate sexuality wicked. While legitimate sexuality had more freedom to "deploy sexuality," it did so only in so much as it could still be deemed superior to illegitimate sexuality. This poses the question of if

[110]Rodrigo Martini Paula, "Mutatis Mutandis: Reverse Mimesis and Modernist Literature," PhD diss. (Rice University, 2019).
[111]Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection* (London: Routledge, 2020).

illegitimate sexuality is dependent on legitimate sexuality, in that it is either chasing the goal of becoming more like the model of legitimate sexuality or told that it should be ashamed that it is not more like it. Furthermore, one might ask if legitimate sexuality is dependent on the presence of illegitimate sexuality in that it can take on the appearance of illegitimate sexuality and compare itself against all the things it is said not to be, and still be exalted as the model in society. A repetition of these portrayals point toward a systemic use of these ideas to help frame and reframe social order. In antebellum America Black sexuality was used for white profit. It was used to proclaim white dominance, justify white dominance, and could be used in nearly any way that white people saw fit—including as a means to access their own pleasures. African Americans were not only identified as part of the lower classes but were continuously marked as having lower sexuality. As Michel Foucault writes, sexuality became an entity that was sought to be restrained. Yet the end result of this restraint is that it was used to uplift the upper classes in society–which at this time was white society. In postbellum America, white ownership over Black sexuality may not have been allowed de jure (and even this can be contested), but, in terms of the concept of Black sexuality, it was allowed de facto at least in the public sphere (and in many ways these concepts controlled the private lives of African Americans, as well). As such, even after slavery, Black men were constantly in danger of being the targets of violence because of fear of miscegenation with white women, and Black women were more likely to be sexually assaulted because it was easy to justify the assault with claims that Black women were sexually willing. The beliefs that supported such maltreatment were created in order to serve whiteness, and these beliefs found their way through minstrelsy, vaudeville, and ultimately to the silver screen. This chapter interrogates the ways that Black sexuality was connected to ideas of social othering and fear from 1896 to 1931 in Hollywood cinema, often ironically through the mimetic

actions of white characters, and chiefly because it helped define whiteness in a time of constant change in social order while allowing white people to momentarily escape the constraints of this definition. Chapter Two speaks to how, between 1932-1935, a sort of compromise was made where Black sexuality was normalized in American film in ways it had not been prior. While it was yet tamed in white spaces, white characters acknowledge their lusts through that of a constructed Black sexuality in order to explore boundaries of not just sexuality, but race, class, and gender. In Chapter Three, I show how this normalized expression of lust is presented onscreen as not only a projection of whiteness, but one that, through a foundation of presumed familiarity, was further transmitted to project feelings, especially sadness, of white characters.

Honey displays how the use of othered Black sexuality can be used in the narrative to benefit white people. The precedent was set forth in early Hollywood establishing Black behavior as different from white behavior, especially behavior conveying sexuality. Moreover, Black sexuality was not just shown as different from white people, but as evil and something to be feared, and in later years referenced as such. When Mrs. Falkner is showing her disdain for her daughter singing and dancing with the Black servants, she is not just upset with the way her daughter is acting, she is fearful for her future as she acts out of line of what her socioeconomic status dictates. How can we know what is evil and what is good in cinema? There must be a set of signs that notates to the viewer what is good and what is evil, underscored by the consequence of each set of actions. The tropes used to identify Black people as sexual were merely signifiers, used to represent the disparity in moral capacity. So, while it was meant to show why Black people *are* so different from white people, they are really the signs that notified the viewer, especially the white viewer, that these were the reasons why Black people *were* different, justifying why they received the treatment they did. Though there were many limits to how

sexuality could be shown onscreen, this othering of Black sexuality created a visual ontology of wicked sexuality that became the premise and the foundation from which all depictions of Black sexuality proceeded, and then was assumed even when Black sexuality was not directly referenced. So, in doing this, all sexuality--not just the sexuality of Black people but also anyone linked to Blackness (doing the things that were codified as inherent in Black characters) were characterized as deviant, wayward, and necessarily in service of whiteness in order to survive, that is, not be seen as a threat. This association of Black sexuality is found in the majority of accounts of Black sexuality since at least the Transatlantic Slave Trade and continued throughout early and Classical Hollywood. Yet, because these projections existed—in as much as anything that bears a one-sided point of view is a projection—the question of what to *do* about it has come up continuously within our history. This chapter reflects how Black sexuality was framed in early American film up to the early days of sound as a reaction to the fear that tales of Black sexuality engendered. As a projection of the fears of white society about sexuality as a whole, and Black sexuality as it was constructed, Black sexuality served as a mirror. It reflected not its own nature, but the nature of the thought, desires, and actions of white people.

The song "Sing you Sinners" gives insight to the ways that Blackness and immorality is linked within film as factors that are antithetical to whiteness. The song was composed by W. Franke Harling: a British-born composer who permanently settled in the United States after spending two years at West Pointe, and written by Sam Coslow: an American-born composer who worked on Broadway before becoming a Paramount songwriter in the late 1920s. "Sing" was a departure from other songs in *Honey* because it not only featured up-tempo jazz melodies (as opposed to the ballads featured in the rest of the film), but is the only song in the film that is sung by Black characters. There is much to be said of this scene, so let's start with the obvious.

Mrs. Falkner is biased in terms of both class and race, as seen in her insistence to have a white-only staff. When she meets her white maid (Mayme), she tells the maid to keep her hands off her silk stockings, because all maids love silk stockings. We first see Mrs. Falkner on the train headed toward the plantation getaway as she tells her daughter that she doesn't have to love the person she marries, as long as they have money. However, her daughter, Cora, wants to be a wild woman, and dislikes Henry because she considers him to be a boring person. Assuming he is simply the household butler, Cora falls for Charles almost as soon as she sees him. The two begin to sneak away and talk—and eventually kiss. Here, issues of class and race are intermingled because Mrs. Falkner hates that her daughter is running around with the help and "the help" is an always already racialized category. Mrs. Faulkner constantly makes comments to her daughter that she wished she behaved better, but it is implied that she wants her to behave as if she is from a high-class family. Yet, when Cora shows herself to be the antithesis of what her mother stands for by singing and dancing to "Sing" amongst the Black maids, butlers, and workers from neighboring plantations, Mrs. Falkner nearly blows a gasket. Cora's singing and dancing seems to rise up out of her uncontrollably after Doris, the maid's daughter, begins singing and dancing along with the group of Black servants. Doris early on is shown to be a thorn in the side of every adult in the film except for her mother, whom she never talks to in the film. She is the only person amongst the servants who does not work, she gossips with the grown-ups around the house, and, when she goes too far, is given a good whack on the bottom for her obstinance—though she is not Black she performs as the film's resident trickster, stirring up trouble for herself and others. Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen have referred to the trickster as a character originating in African folklore as the metaphorical "fly in the buttermilk, the direct descendent of Br'er Rabbit, who'll play jokes on anyone, Black or white–even himself–and

damn the consequences.[112] The fact that Doris, the child, pops up to sing a song as if she had performed it a million times before, solidifies the idea that showing a familiarity with Blackness, especially when performing with Black singers and knowing all of the words, shows a kinship to Blackness. When we see Mrs. Falkner upset with Cora's performance it is because she is acting like the help (Charles, too, participates in the dance) who are connected both by profession and the actions they take to the low social standing of Blackness; here, Blackness's chief signifier is the action it takes in opposition to whiteness. In short, Mrs. Falkner is upset because Cora is acting Black. Black people onscreen between 1896 to around 1931, and especially their sexuality, were consistently linked to the idea of being inherently evil. Jazz itself means sex, and early references to jazz are often fixed in with gospel references, in part because of gospel's influence on popular forms of music, but also because Black religion was seen as less than religious due to the idea of the inherence of evil in Black people. This is why ex-slaves singing "Sing you sinners" in an up-tempo jazz tone could go back and forth between jazz and gospel so easily. Similar references to jazz and gospel can be seen in *Black and Tan Fantasy* (Murphy, 1929), *Hallelujah!*, and *King for a Day* (Mack,1930). The onscreen shadows seemed to come to resemble a menacing yet enticing aspect of Black performance and the ways that it both allured and threatened white society. Because *Honey* is a pre-Code film, producers had an easier time getting it past self-regulators with its miscegenous dance sequence. Not even with compensating moral values (which were a signature of the later, stricter Breen years) that showed that sinful actions need to be met with an appropriate consequence so that the audience understood that if they acted like that in real life they would be punished, too. Yet, this compensating moral value

[112]Autstin and Taylor, 46-49.

was missing in most depictions of Black characters onscreen after the Production Code Administration was established. Punishments of Black characters were often shown through death, imprisonment, or sometimes avoided if they were good workers and faithful to white people even in spite of labor exploitation. In fact, the only time immorality seemed not to be a problem with a Black character (either portrayed or implied) is when they were a well-behaved servant. Creating a dynamic where Black characters were shown as moral only when they were faithful servants to white people characterizes Blackness with an indebtedness that always points back to the presumed merits of whiteness.

Why did it seem necessary to show Black people in such a formulated way? For much of the same reason that white characters were shown in a formulated way. The use of signs and signifiers worked to keep a social hierarchy that kept whiteness at the head of the hegemony. The trend in Hollywood Black sexuality, as it goes, started with the foundation being laid that Black sexuality should be feared because it is primitive, ungodly, and the opposite from what all pure white people would (and by implication, should) do, yet the gag was everybody was doing it—especially in real life. In the ring shout scene, the sin was speaking about it, auditorily referencing it in a song, acting as Black people did. Mrs. Falkner was nowhere near as livid with Cora for not acting like a pure white girl fit to be married off to a pure white man than she was when she danced with Black people, in front of her rich white guest, one she was hoping to pair her daughter with in marriage, nonetheless. Scenes like this worked to show the racial and class divide that were usually two in the same—at least when expressed cinematically. This was a

reflection of the time, as well, because there was an emphasis to instruct immigrants on the importance of being restrained in society.[113]

Swing You Sinners (1930)

While the visual focal point of the performance was Doris, Charles, and Cora, "Sing you Sinners" was a song directed specifically at Black people as can be seen by the Black people singing the song toward each other at the beginning of the scene, as well as the other forms the song has taken. Nicholas Sammond has noted that the song and animated short, *Swing You Sinners* (1930), was a parody of the original "Sing" in which a cartoon character took on stereotypes of Blackness in order to make the point that he must "swing" for his sinful actions.[114] *Swing*, created by the same Fleischer Studios that made Betty Boop shorts, was made the same year as *Honey*. *Swing*, too, was released by Paramount Studios and was an obvious play on the song that spoke toward the rise in popularity of swing music in America as mcuch as it also hearkened to the prevalence of lynching of Black people in the country at the time. The song is intent on making a connection between the sinful actions associated with Black people and the punishment that they were to receive as a result.

[113]Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth Century America* (Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 2004), Chapter Two (Kindle).
[114]Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American* Animation, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), Chapter Two (Kindle).

Fig 5. Bimbo tries to sneak up on the chicken to steal it, but it alludes him. *Swing you Sinners*, Fleischer Studios, 1930.

Fig. 6. Bimbo is offered a noose to pay for his sins. *Swing you Sinners*, Fleischer Studios, 1930.

The film starts with one of Fleischer's signature characters, Bimbo, a Black dog who stands on two legs and wears only shoes, white gloves, and a hat. He stands near a fence, whistling as if he is minding his business but waiting for something. Shortly, a chicken walks across the screen and he begins to follow it. He tries to catch the chicken, but it gets away with

each attempt, until a police officer finds him and he tries to elude the officer. Bimbo finds his way to a cemetery that is possessed—previously inanimate objects become sentient starting with the gate to the cemetery that locks him in as soon as he enters. A horn signals in a song for the new turn of events and the gravestones begin to sway side to side in unison to the beat. The gravestones are then accompanied by singing grass, trees, and spirits who let Bimbo know that he must atone for his thievery as he will "Never rob another hen house"—Bimbo is, of course, terrified. "Chickens you used to steal!" they cry. "I don't steal no mo!" Bimbo laments. "Craps you used to shoot!" cemetery counters. "I don't shoot know mo!" Bimbo pleads. "Tails you used to chase!"—not nearly a legal crime as much as it was a social one, for which Bimbo must now, "Get ready brotha, your time has come!" In an interesting but not surprising detail– the singers, themselves, seem to either be Black or want you to believe they are. Though the singers were not mentioned in the credits, Bimbo is played by Billie Murray, a veteran performer of minstrel songs. The song begins in slower jazz tempo, similar to "Sing," as if they are building up to something, while the background singers, again, add a gospel element to the song. Bimbo escapes from the cemetery and gets swallowed by a nearby barn—his nightmare follows him wherever he treks. There, a chicken, a pile of hay, farm tools, and of course e, spirits, try to take him while dancing. The music changes to swing as the whole barn sways and the spirits (all white) tell him "Brotha you sure gonna get your face lifted… And a permanent shave!" One spirit carries a noose while the other carries a razor. All sing to the same melody of "Sing You Sinners:"

You can't make any excuse,
So you'll quail in your boots
'Till we've picked up the noose,
Swing you sinners!

For making chickens elope,
You're at the end of your rope,
So just give up all hope,
Swing you sinners!
We'll stretch you like a giraffe,
Maybe cut you in half,
Just to give us a laugh,
Swing you sinners![115]

The short ends with a montage of ghoulish figures that have been chasing Bimbo while dancing and singing the tune. They all smile as they prepare to usher Bimbo into the netherworld for his sins. Finally, Bimbo is ingested by a floating skull – he disappears right before the music ends and the credits run. Bimbo never awakens from the nightmare that has infiltrated his consciousness. Instead, he is given no release from the horrors he has encountered for his sins, as if his punishments are meant to be cemented in the minds of the viewer.

[115] *Swing you Sinners* (1930), 07:42-08:10

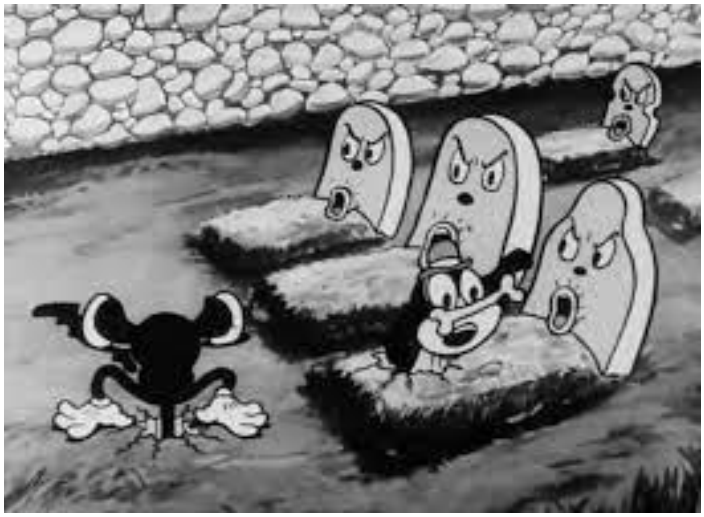

Fig. 7. Everywhere Bimbo turns, death is looking to take him. *Swing you Sinners*, Fleischer Studios, 1930.

The music in *Swing* is undoubtedly swing music from the Jazz Era. The title and plot of the film act as a double entendre: swing can mean swinging from a tree or swing to the hottest music of the time. As seen in *Honey*, this dynamic occurs with a shift in the song where the genre of gospel transitions to swing jazz. The mix of imagery and the music, as well as the condemnation the spirits speak to Bimbo about his chasing women, shooting craps, and stealing chickens points further toward the stereotypical actions that Black people were accused of enacting in real life. That swing music is mixed into the condemnation, along with the fact that it was associated with dancing, partying, drinking—the wildlife that Cora was so drawn to, leads us to understand that this is the type of lifestyle that leads to social condemnation, yet one that is supposedly comes naturally to Black people.

Sammond writes about how early animated shorts featured characters, like Disney's Mickey Mouse and Fleischer's Bimbo and Koko the Clown, were created to be Blackface

minstrel characters in cartoons.[116] Noting the similarities between animation and minstrelsy in their use of white gloves, exaggerated large eyes and mouths, and fundamental tropes regarding the regulation of unruly labor, he states that both Blackface minstrel characters and early cartoon characters were based on a fantasy of the rebellious or recalcitrant African American slave.[117] This further emphasizes the practice of creating characterizations that ultimately served to reflect not only the anxieties that led to these creations, but the need to *do* something about the characterizations white people created. In *Swing*, Bimbo is positioned as the problem so that a solution could be made for the problem he represents, a projection that simulates a way to solve the actual problem: the fear that he symbolizes. The solution is seen through the physical death of Bimbo in the animated short, symbolic of the social death African Americans encountered due to the construction of their image. We see many replications of this dynamic highlighting an inherent evilness of Black people in society, and, for the purposes of this dissertation specifically, highlighting the supposed extension of this through the depiction of Black sexuality. In this way, Black sexuality has been simulated through its construction and the utilization of its construction, to work through anxieties of white American society's ability and worthiness to maintain hegemonic rule. The question of what to do with Black sexuality has had a number of answers and has been communicated through diverse mediums. In the medium of American film between 1896 to 1931, the question of what to do with Black sexuality was met primarily with one answer: fear it and do not do what they do, or meet the same demise meant for those who act out. But at the root of these depictions, we can see a need to control both Black and white

[116]Sammond, Chapter 2 (Kindle).
[117]Sammond, Introduction (Kindle).

Americans, as well as display their proclaimed differences so that their value in society could be foregrounded. The desire to control the filmic depiction of white sexuality can be seen as early as 1896 with the first recorded onscreen kiss.

Othered Sexuality in *Hallelujah!* (1929)

Sexuality has always been a point of contention between filmmakers and the public. Where newspapers could not fully contain overt displays of sexuality in its attempts to discourage them in film reviews, censorship boards and organizations rallied support toward dialing down the explicit. Even self-regulating film organizations, like the Studio Relations Committee (SRC), arose in 1926 to quell the uproar over indecencies acted out in films deeming them too sexual, too violent, and too immoral. Racial difference meant that, for African Americans, the same departures from morality would still need to be coded as different from white transgressions. While the SRC did not have the power to directly censor films, it had influence to steer studios toward certain content by either suggesting or implementing the threat of lower box office returns. I call to attention the power of suggestion the SRC yielded toward a syntactical narrative that subsisted throughout the life of the organization at least since 1929, and continued throughout the lifetime of the Production Code Administration (PCA): African Americans kissing. By syntactical narrative, I am referring to the repetitive nature in which Black sexuality was either avoided or referenced as something negative, even in the rare cases that an onscreen kiss between Black characters were shown. Though there was no written rule against Black characters kissing as there was against miscegenation, it rarely appears in Classical

Hollywood films after 1929, and in cases where it does, it is coded to appear under specific conditions.

The earliest (and only known) industry self-regulatory document that addresses questions about Black film characters kissing is found in 1928. Several interoffice documents between SRC staff discussing *Hallelujah!* bring up concerns about this Black-cast film. In a letter from Lamar Trotti to M. MacKenzie, Trotti states, "I don't think it matters whether the negroes like the picture or not, but I do wonder whether white people are amenable to such realism." Trotti's letter expresses that he believes the characterizations of Black people in *Hallelujah!* are accurate, yet he takes issue with the film because of his concern whether white audiences would receive the film well. Trotti implies that white audiences have a preference in the ways that they want to see sexuality in African Americans. It is not enough that the depictions are accurate, but only that they fit the ideas white audiences have of what is acceptable behavior in their presence, even when onscreen.

Hallelujah! is not uncomplicated in its portrayal of Black sexuality, as the main character, Zeke (Daniel Haynes), is almost completely devoid of self-control whenever he is alone with a young woman, especially Chick (Nina Mae McKinney). Zeke becomes a preacher after his brother is accidentally killed while Zeke fights over his losses in a game of craps. Throughout the film his sexual afflictions often push the plot forward, as his lack of control is not only a focal point of the story but perpetuates the stereotype of the uncontrollable Black buck who cannot deter his animal-like sexual desires well enough to avoid exacting sexual assault—only in this Black-cast film, Zeke's sexual desire is aimed at Black women. Furthermore, though there are a number of Black couples within the film, sexuality is only shown immorally. Harkening back to depictions in *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915), *Hallelujah!* makes the

distinction that the Black man, once he is freed from slavery, will act violently, even to the extent of preying on women to rape them. This codification of Black sexuality as violent and with ill-intent when coming from men, and as always accessible and available when coming from women, set the tone for later depictions of Black sexuality. What's more, this perpetuated Black sexuality as always immoral, as it is referenced (infrequently as it is) in subsequent filmic depictions.

Fig. 8. Nina Mae McKinney plays Chick, a vamp who seduces men into mischief. Zeke, stands just to the right of her, gazing as if he can barely believe his eyes. King Vidor, Hallelujah!, 1929.

Fig. 9. Zeke about to force a kiss upon Missy Rose. King Vidor, Hallelujah!, 1929.

Fig. 10. Advertisements for *Hallelujah!* emphasize the themes of religion, music, and sex. King Vidor, Hallelujah!, 1929.

The Hollywood practice of suppressing Black sexuality continued when the Production Code Administration, with Joseph Breen as its head, succeeded the SRC and became even more stringent in its practices of restricting film content. Still, the number of Classical Hollywood films that offer an onscreen kiss between two white actors is exponentially higher than that of Black actors. Furthermore, in the relatively rare instances when the kiss is shown between Black characters, it usually involves infidelity or adulterous behavior, and is edited as a shorter camera shot or even blocked from view. There are examples of this in *Emperor Jones* (Murphy 1933), and also the film shorts *Music Hath Harms* (Graham 1929), *Oft in the Silly Night* (Gillstrom 1929), and *St. Louis Blues* (Murphy 1929). Even when Missy Rose kisses Zeke after These displays of sexuality— depictions of the kiss—are intentionally offered and coded as the opposite of whiteness, in order for white audiences to identify with the aforementioned cinematic experience of consuming and rejecting desire. The kisses between Black characters rarely happened after the Production Code Administration was established. Much like the cinematic trope of mulatto women who must suffer tragically, a tradition was carried out in restricting the ways that Black sexuality and kissing were portrayed. Because there was already an established preoccupation with how white audiences would receive the depiction of Black sexuality, racial encoding of such sexuality was primarily developed to prompt a specific type of decoding from white audiences, with seemingly little thought to how Black audiences might decode a Black sexuality.

I use the terms of encode and decode here as inspired by Stuart Hall's formulation, in which specific meaning is usually encoded by content creators and decoded by the audience. Hall distinguishes these implied references from the inferences made by audiences noting they may be different depending on a number of factors including the cultural makeup of a particular

sector of an audience.[118] I am asserting that by anticipating the reactions of white audience members, the SRC, and later the PCA, encouraged an encoding of certain tropes and rhetoric that would meet the expectations of white audiences. It is not clear how an absence of a rule led to such an indexical delimiting of sexuality, but there are, again, correlative facts that may attend to such restrictive practices. In the case of *Hallelujah!,* embedded in the concern for white audiences' reaction to the film, Jason Joy references a scene he believes is censorable and suggests to Irving Thalberg, then the head of production at MGM, to change:

> The scene in the shack in which Zeke passionately kisses Missy Rose[sic]. I suggest that, in order to retain the same thought, a less animalistic and a more simple love scene should be shown; and further, that it would be less offensive if Zeke were to ask the girl to marry him on the basis that white people will object to a strong negro exhibiting passion. However, the passion shown by Chick, a small negress, will not be deleted because of its treatment.[119]

Here, Joy seems to be concerned with the same thing Trotti expressed in his letter when it comes to white audience's perception of the sexual gestures of Black men. This scene is important not because it acts as the inciting incident of the film. Zeke has been shown as loved and well-admired by his family prior to this key moment. Yet, in this scene, Zeke sees Missy Rose is alone in the house and goes to force himself on her in a kiss. Missy Rose is startled by Zeke's change in demeanor, commenting that his eyes "look strange," and Zeke, seeming to snap back into himself after kissing Missy Rose, says the Devil seemed to have gotten into him. The scene, which suggests the inclinations of Black men to sexually assault women, was a concern of Joy's

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[118]Stuart Hall, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," *The Cultural Reader 2nd ed.* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 508-509.
[119]Memo from Jason Joy, "Hallelujah" (February 22, 1929), Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

who stated in a memo that MGM should make Zeke look less animalistic by exchanging his desire for a kiss with a desire for marriage. It is not clear what manner of gesture Joy thinks Zeke should take on when Zeke proposes to Missy Rose, but he does not say this will stop Zeke from being seen as animalistic, only less. In a later scene, after Zeke has already been shown as sexually aggressive, he makes plans with Missy Rose to marry her, yet the die of his sexual deviance has already been cast earlier in the film. *Hallelujah!* was released fifteen years after *The Birth of a Nation*, but Joy seems to reflect the same misplaced fears *Birth* incited years ago regarding the sexuality of African American men—that it can only be seen as threatening. This threat may be shown at varying degrees, but it is still there. While Chick is of less concern, she is certainly seen as sexually enticing in the film. As a result of the "passion" she displays and her unfaithfulness to Zeke (and to God), she is killed. In a scene just before she is killed, Hotshot is forcing her to leave with him and trying to convince her to be bad, because it is "in [her] blood." Less concern may have been placed on Chick's performance, however, because she already fulfills a construction of Black sexuality that paints the women as loose, which is projected as a threat, especially to white men. This construction as Chick, and Black characters overall, as irredeemable is one of the reasons I note that Black characters could not fall under the consideration of compensating moral value, as will be further discussed in later chapters. Whether the portrayal of Black sexuality is there or not, it is still a construction created by and maintained for white fulfillment—a perpetual catch-22 in which, when Black sexuality is there, it leans toward the vulgar and offensive, or else it is barely referenced at all so as not to offend white people. This sets up a dynamic in which Black people will either suffer or attach their likeness to the attributes associated with whiteness to evade condemnation–and even still they may not.

In addition to the letter from Joy, I consider Lamar Trotti as Joy's right-hand man, a Southerner and segregationist.[120] In the aforementioned letter between him and McKenzie, Trotti makes reference to the perception white Southerners have to African Americans, stating that he believes the stereotypical depictions of African Americans are accurate because it is common knowledge amongst white people in the South that Black people are the same way in everyday life as they are in *Hallelujah!*. Trotti also notes at the end of the letter he did not think anyone would want to see the film because it featured an all-Black cast. In a concomitant era of Jim Crow laws and tradition in the South, social equality of African Americans was virulently opposed below the Mason-Dixon line. Mirroring the attitudes around kissing on the silver screen, African Americans were oftentimes restricted from kissing each other in public.[121] While it may be unexpected to consider kissing as a sign of Black social equality to white people, it may not seem so if it is taken into consideration that social equality had everything to do with the ability for African American to not only have the same legal rights, but the empowerment to determine their destinies, a moot point if you do not even have control of your own body. Darlene Gray White, Cheryl Hicks, and Stephanie Jones-Rogers have written about how control of Black bodies has been a signifier of oppression since American chattel slavery – where not only were they used for manual labor, but white slave masters made the decision which slave would sleep with whom. Deborah Clark Hine writes about the related topic of the rape of Black slave women by white slave masters. Furthermore, a show of intimacy or even a public display of affection might humanize African Americans in ways that Anglo-Americans may not have been ready to

[120]Ellen Scott, *Cinema Civil Rights: Regulation, Repression, and Race in the Classical Hollywood Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 13.
[121]Stetson Kennedy, *Jim Crow Guide: The Way it Was* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1990), 210.

recognize. With a history of determining the sexual destinies of Black people in America in the not-too-distant past for white Southerners, it is not hard to see how cinema would have equipped white people, including Trotti, with a potent tool to recreate a similar power dynamic—approving some forms of expressed sexuality, while denying others according to their preferences. I offer up an exploration of the cinematic depiction of Black sexuality through the kiss—a representation signified most often by its absence in Classical Hollywood, to further underscore how cinematic Black sexuality is often displaced and reconstructed in artistic performance.

Still, just because there are glaring omissions of the onscreen kiss does not mean that Black sexuality was not present in Early and Classical Hollywood. *Hoodoo Ann* (Griffith, 1916), is a film by D.W. Griffith about a young girl who lives in an orphanage and is constantly mistreated by staff and her peers. Her only friend is Black Cindy (Madam Sul-Te-Wan), the cook, who tells Ann that she will be unlucky—"hoodooed"—until the day she marries. The film references hoodoo, a spiritual practice derived from African religions, as an evil that has come upon Ann as if she was damned, but it effectively acts as metonym for Black people as cursed in society because of their implied degeneracy. The other girls of the orphanage do not play with her, symbolizing that she is ostracized by society; she steals a doll from one of the girls in the orphanage, a symbol of her inherent sinfulness; and she is only able to break the curse with the help of the white family who takes her in and shows her how to behave correctly. Additionally, her marriage becomes a symbol of her acceptance back into society, she is no longer on the fringes as she was when she was connected to a symbol of Blackness. The film does not speak of Black sexuality specifically, but it does condemn and make reference to Black persons as a condemned race that can only be saved by its proximity to whiteness. Even the reference to a

Black religious practice was meant to connote immorality based on a common belief of white people at the time that Black people treated religion as a joke. Trotti made mention of this in an inter-office memo after viewing *Hallelujah!* in 1928, but the filmic references to Black religion and worship as an object to spark fear or ridicule had long been in practice in Hollywood.[122] Many believe this condescension derived from the fear of Black spiritual practices of Voodoo that were used by Haitians to overthrow French colonizers and gain independence. Because of hoodoo's close relation to the voodoo, and its connection to Black Christian practices, many white people saw Black religion—from the way they worshiped to its capacity to change Black participants—as frivolous at best, and dangerous at worst.[123] Black people were often linked to primitivism both onscreen and in society, and this belief was not just in the South. Ellen Scott notes that the NAACP protested a *March of Time* newsreel that proclaimed one out of every three people who lived in Harlem practiced voodoo. As previously noted, there was a consistent practice of connecting Black religion, Black sex, and Black music. In the following chapter, I will speak more to this connection and how it was embodied through themes of primitivism that were popularized in film more in the 1930s – a period when sound was standard and Black music could be heard in Hollywood film. Notably, before Black music could be heard on film, Black religion and Black sexuality were shown together as deviant as can be seen in *Hoodoo Ann*: where a religious curse impeded Ann from being accepted by white society until she committed an act aligned with white religious and sexual morality, becoming a wife. In this sense, Ann has taken on a portrayal of Blackness that has led to the fear of being seen as othered just as

[122]Memo from L. Trotti, "Hallelujah" (October 19, 1928), Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.
[123]Scott, 171.

Blackness has been othered in the narrative. Ann's sexuality is in danger until she is married yet it is because she becomes a wife, taking on gendered roles of purity, that she is safe.

In *Tarzan of the Apes* (Sidney, 1918), fear of Black sexuality, specifically Black men, is referenced when a Black man takes a white woman into the jungle against her will. This is a trope that is seen across many other films afterward—sometimes with the Black man being represented as ape. Audiences are prompted in these instances to be fearful of the supposed barbaric nature of Black people, especially Black men. The fear of a Black man stealing white women has implications of sexual and religious deviance, too, because the stealing of women was regarded as a religious practice carried out by African men and apes in early Hollywood films. In Chapter Two there is more explanation of the history of this myth, but as it relates to discussions in this chapter, this image of Black men taking physical advantage of women worked in tandem to produce fear as well as justify othering Black people, including their sexuality. Robyn Wiegman identifies the "the mythology of the Black phallicized rapist" as being created in the United States during the late nineteenth century, following emancipation.[124] It is not a surprise, then, that, remnants of this fear-induced rhetoric about Black male sexuality carried over into film narratives and cemented within the depictions, as cinema was invented in the late nineteenth century and had spread as the most popular form of entertainment with the help of the popularity of *The Birth of a Nation.*

While it is said that the infamy of *Birth* and its troubled depictions led a number of Black filmmakers to produce films in order to counter stereotypes, the first known Black-cast film

[124]Robyn Wiegman, "Feminism, The Boyz, and Other Matters Regarding the Male," *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood,* ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Mae Hark (NY: Routledge, 1993), 181.

created by a Black filmmaker was made in 1912, called *The Railroad Porter* (Foster, 1912). The increase of Black film production coincided, too, with the ending of WWI, when many African American soldiers were sent to fight, then returned home to face the same injustices they endured when they left. These events –a new century, a rapidly changing world, and the rise in popularity in film- – greatly influenced the desire of African Americans to both control their own onscreen image, as well as meet the needs of Black audiences who enjoyed seeing a picture of themselves on the silver screen. While there were Black people being shown onscreen in early film, the directors were not always Black. Alice Guy, the first known woman director, made the Black-cast *A Fool and His Money* (Guy, 1912); American Mutoscope and Biograph Company produced *Lime Kiln Field Day* (Hunter & Middleton, 1913) ; and the white-owned Ebony Film Corporation produced *Aladdin Jones* (1915). What can be seen in the ones that are extant is there is rarely a kiss between characters.[125] One exception exists in *Something Good, Negro Kiss*, but such exceptions became even more rare following the film's release. By 1929, when sound had become the rule rather than the exception in film, studios began to make more films using Black actors — this may have been to capitalize off of *Hallelujah!*. At the turn of the century there was much discourse around what was needed to secure equal rights in the US, and advance African Americans to make their access to opportunities equal to that of Anglo Americans—there were differences in opinions regarding what goal should take priority as well as how particular goals might be achieved. This disagreement led to what some have considered fractured efforts in the fight for equality. While it is not my desire to evaluate the efforts put forth by differing organizations at the time, I will address the concerns of African American advocacy groups and

[125]Bowser, Gaines, and Musser, *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2001), 245.

individuals and public forums via Black newspapers to determine how these discourses influenced protests that may have strategically prioritized certain types of depictions over others. I suspect that concerns about uplifting the Black community prompted African Americans to demand for Hollywood to stop limiting roles for Black actors to merely servants and entertainment for white people. Uplift ideology was concerned with creating more opportunities for social mobility for African Americans, and many believed this could be achieved in part by projecting an image of Blackness associated with the middle class.[126]

The PCA was against any depictions that were overtly sexual, no matter what the race of the subject. Since displays of sexuality were of chief importance to Breen under the Production Code, films could not display a shot of two people kissing for a prolonged amount of time.[127] Breen, the PCA under his control, would not easily countenance any visible display or hint of sexual behavior if it countered his Catholic sensibilities, especially if the behavior was not qualified by some sort of consequence. Still, when it came to Black couples onscreen, producers and filmmakers replaced the sexual attraction exhibited through kissing that was normally presented between two white characters with other depictions of sexuality that often surrendered to the predilections of white audiences. white audiences still heavily scrutinized such illustrations of Black sexuality, yet sexuality is clearly presented and negotiated through the viewing pleasure or displeasure of these audiences. In this sense, Black sexuality was either packaged in a format

[126]Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 3.
[127]Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 93.

that was, to borrow Trotti's term, "amenable for white audiences," or taken out if thought that it might offend white audiences too heavily.

One of the preeminent figures that worked toward repairing the iniquities offset by slavery was Booker T. Washington, who believed in an "uplift ideology" that prioritized economic advancement for impoverished Black people who he believed were in need of assistance and guidance.[128] Emphasizing a dire and immediate need for assistance, Washington worked to gain white support to his endeavors, and many times to the extent of conceding to racist ideologies in order to gain white support which lead to access to white money.[129] Furthermore, Washington was concerned with economic growth over social growth (fighting for legal rights such as the right to vote). The most vocal and popular of Washington's opponents in the 1910s was W.E.B. Dubois, who favored social equality and civil rights as the prominent goal. Even after Washington's death in 1915, debates over the best way to obtain equality in the U.S. continued. Tied to ideas of uplift, was a concern of respectability. This idea held that if African Americans showed themselves to be outstanding, God-fearing citizens, they would be granted a higher position in society they would then use to assist (uplift) others in reaching a higher position in society. This was tantamount to assimilation into Anglo American culture in order to be recognized and led to a concentration by many African Americans of more wholesome depictions of Black actors onscreen. Washington believed in vocational education that could be shared with agricultural workers in the South so that they could sustain their own living, separate from white people. Yet uplift, itself, is based on prioritizing progress where the need seemed the

[128]Allyson Field, *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 3.
[129]Field, 133.

most immediate, which often led to assimilating ideals of the Black community towards white racist attitudes to obtain the resources necessary to uplift the race. Such ideals and strategies by no means suggest a monolithic response by Black people, but I mention these practices, instead, to point out that African Americans have always had a complex and negotiated response rendered through dissemblance to racial bias in everyday life.[130] -

For those who invested in racial uplift, there was much to be discussed in the way proper depictions of Black characters. *Hallelujah!* Was one of the first Black-cast features in Hollywood, yet the portrayals of the main characters were less than favorable. The Bert Williams short, *A Fool and His Money* predates *The Birth of a Nation*, but still includes stereotypes and performance rooted in the tradition of Blackface minstrelsy. *Yamekraw* (Roth, 1930) tells the tale of a man that leaves his wife in the country in the pursuit of city life, only to be two-timed by his mistress and return home, deflated by the horrors of urban living (drinking during the time of the Prohibition, gambling, lasciviousness). This narrative not only talks about the danger that big cities imbue, it also underscores the importance of Black people staying out of the city in order to stay out of trouble. In this way these narratives work to encourage Black people to return to the country to uplift their race (a tenet of Washington's version of uplift) but discourage Black people from migrating to industrialized locales.

While Black sexuality was othered, so, too, was Black religious experience. *Hallelujah!* featured church scenes that critics called orgiastic; *Hoodoo Ann* connects Black religion to a curse, making Ann unable to sustain an implied sexual morality without marriage. In like fashion, *Safe in Hell* (Wellman, 1931) creates a connection to ideas of religious conduct and the

[130]Gaines, 5.

sexual immorality that distances from such conduct. Nonetheless, in *Safe in Hell*, the struggles involving gender lead to a lack of safety.

Safe in Hell (1931)

Safe in Hell is a Warner Bros. pre-Code film that tells the story of Gilda (Dorothy Mackaill), a prostitute living in New Orleans who, in the first scene of the film, is sent to the home of a man who wants company while his wife is out of town. Gilda recognizes her client as Piet (Ralf Harolde), a man whom she worked for as a housekeeper until he sexually assaults her. Piet's wife believes Gilda is having an affair with Piet, so she tells others in the neighborhood this and Gilda is not able to get another housekeeping job. Gilda explains in a later scene that when she could not find employment as a housekeeper, she turned to prostitution. When Gilda tries to leave, Piet will not let her. In an attempt to get him away from her, she throws a bottle and knocks him unconscious. In her haste to leave, a candle falls over and starts a fire, subsequently burning down the apartment and Piet. Gilda's boyfriend, Carl (Donald Cook) helps her flee by taking her to an undisclosed Caribbean island that does not have extradition laws in order to escape being arrested and convicted for Piet's murder. When she arrives on the island she stays in a hotel and is checked in by Leonie (Nina Mae McKinney). Her room and board is paid for by Carl, who cares for Gilda even after he finds out she has been working as a prostitute. After Gilda is taken to her room she is approached by the many white men that live in the hotel, all implied to be degenerates of societies, because why else would they be on the island? And they all have their sights set on Gilda, whom they call the only lady on the island. Carl wants to marry Gilda, but there is no priest on the island, so he goes to a chapel and the two exchange vows so as to carry out illegitimate nuptials in an illegitimate place. Gilda waits on the island for

Carl to return, working hard to suppress her urges of partying and debauchery, now that she is a married woman.

Fig. 11. Gilda works as a prostitute after getting fired from her housekeeping job. William Wellman, *Safe in Hell*, 1931.

Fig. 12. Carl, a sailor, helps Gilda flee after she is wanted by police for murder. William Wellman, *Safe in Hell*, 1931.

While Leonie and Newcastle (Clarence Muse), the hotel's porter, are arguably the least threatening people on the island, the connotations of the dangers of life on the island are all rooted in Blackness. Even Leonie has escaped life in the US to live there and is equipped with the knowledge of living a rough life to be able to handle the degenerates that live in the hotel. She sings blues music, serves alcohol, and by association of the island, is a degenerate (or else

she would not be there)—she is linked to waywardness no matter how good she is. Furthermore, not only are tropical locations considered to be dangerous because most of the citizens are Black, but these portrayals often feature the dangers of the religions practiced there. On the island Gilda has fled to, however, she has to fight her own tendency to be–less than lady-like. When she has just exchanged vows with Carl, she is back in her room and attempts to order a glass of gin but recants when Carl suggests she shouldn't. When Carl, a sailor by trade, leaves her, she stays mostly in her room, until one night where she can't take it anymore and she goes downstairs to drink and smoke in the hotel bar with the men of the hotel. When she awakens the next day, Leonie is in her room talking to her about the men in the hotel, including the island's man of law and official executioner of prisoner, Mr. Bruno (Morgan Wallace). Gilda says that she does not plan to hang out with the men anymore, but Leonie suggests that she keeps the General close to her, just in case the sailor doesn't return for her. Leonie leaves the room telling Gilda that her experience with sailors is that they are fickle, making promises they don't keep.

Piet shows up at the hotel, stating that he ran from the U.S. with the insurance money sent to his wife after he was found out by police to not be dead. Gilda writes Carl to tell her she is free to return to the U.S. Mr. Bruno, however, gives Gilda his gun stating it's for protection, so that he can get her arrested for having a weapon. Gilda shoots Piet and kills him when he tries to assault her again and is put on trial for it on the island. When the jury goes to deliberate, it is certain that she will be found not guilty. Mr. Bruno tells Gilda that he is going to charge her for having his gun and that he will set her up nicely for her six-month sentence. Gilda declines because of the promise she made to Carl to remain faithful to him; she gives a confession to the court of murdering Piet without provocation before jury deliberations are complete. She is sentenced to be executed. While she awaits being taken to the gallows, Carl arrives, oblivious to

her trial and feigned murderous confession. He leaves with his sailing crew and makes plans to meet Gilda in New Orleans. Gilda sees him off and decides not to tell him that she is set to be executed. Her meeting with Carl only solidifies her conviction that she did the right thing. The film ends with Gilda walking with Mr. Bruno and an officer so that she can be executed at the gallows. While this film centers the othering of Blackness through its implication of it being inherently deviant as a precondition to the acceptance of the seedy characters living on the island, there are updates to this trope that show a transition in the ways that Black sexuality was used in the film. The othering of Blackness and Black sexuality make the reception of Gilda and the other white islanders palpable. For example, Ellen Scott writes that Leonie is connected to Gilda in that they are both from New Orleans, both had to flee to the island to avoid trouble they got themselves in, and the "women's shared misappropriation of the category "lady" unites them through wit and wisecrack.[131]

Yet Leonie is slated as belonging there on the island–she knows the in and outs of the hotel guests and the island, she understands who has power and who doesn't, and instead of having an internal moral compass she seems to play into the desires of the guests (she tells the men to wait til Gilda gets settled before they try to harass her and tells Gilda to forget her "husband" in lieu of finding a well-to-do man on the island to support her). Gilda is continuously referenced as not belonging on the island and, until the end when she is executed for a crime she

[131]Ellen Scott, "More Than A 'Passing' Sophistication: Dress, Film Regulation, and the Color Line in 1930s American Films," *Women's Studies Quarterly* Vol.41 (1), p.60-86(NY: Feminist's Press, 2013), 65.

did not commit, looks for every opportunity to leave. Here, the white characters' connection to being othered is fashioned by the predominantly Black Caribbean island they dwell on, as well as the Black servants who assist the white residents in less than wholesome activity. Newcastle (Clarence Muse), accepts an extra tip from Piet when he arrives to the island and requests the room next to Gilda's, wryly smiling at Piet as if he understands Piet's intentions. Leonie, who is also from New Orleans, suggests she understands the men's intentions, too. She is more practical when speaking to Gilda, however, suggesting that she take up with the executioner so that he can take care of Gilda in case her sailor doesn't return.

Fig. 13. Leonie, the hotel overseer, serves drinks and keeps her eyes on all the hotel guests. William Wellman, *Safe in Hell*, 1931.

While Leonie seems to have been only giving practical advice to Gilda, Leonie's advice is in direct opposition to the promises she makes to Carl. Even though she doesn't sleep with anyone else and does not allow the men to treat her as a sexual object, Gilda leaves her room in the hotel to go drink with the men. Because the men were so infatuated with Gilda, and Gilda herself showed them that she had a wild side, this likely enticed Mr. Bruno to want to keep her–the only

white woman on the island–on the island longer with him. Still, the lapse of morals on the island seems to be intensified when compared to the U.S., and seems to offer a contrast for Gilda's social standing. While she has been linked to a life of prostitution and seen as a woman of ill repute in the states, she is seen as pure and chaste (though she is a fallen woman) compared to the other criminals living on the island. Whereas she had to take care of herself in New Orleans, she is taken care of by Carl on the island. It is not until she begins to behave as she had been in her former life that she begins to meet her demise. Not only does she break her promise to not stay in her room, she fraternizes with men for their attention while she drinks with them that night. When Mr. Bruno claims that she does not belong on the island, she exclaims that she murdered a man, is running from the police, and that she has just as much business being there as the other killers on the island. With this proclamation, Gilda's fate seems to be sealed. Life on the predominantly Black island has led her to embrace what she, at this point, was not. It is not until Piet shows up on the island, and after Gilda has made the claim that she is a murderer, that she becomes one.

Carl makes a comment early on, when Gilda tells him that she has been prostituting and killed one of her clients, that he should have taken care of her instead of letting her have to fend for herself. In fact, every time Gilda fends for herself rather than depending on a man to protect her (even Carl laments not having looked after her and suggests she would have never become a prostitute if he had), she gets herself into trouble. Gilda's struggle with fulfilling her role as obedient wife seems to be her greatest sin, one the film seeks to punish by sending her away from society. Even when she tries to do what she thinks is the best thing, and fabricates a confession to murdering Piet, she does so in part because she does not believe Carl will return and that she must again fend for herself. Yet the decision to do good or bad (bad is also not

depending on a man) is always presented as Gilda's choice–even if the decision she makes is ill-informed. Her good intentions in taking care of herself are offset by the ill intentions of many of the men around her, and without male protection, Gilda is taken advantage of. While Gilda stayed in the U.S. she was not properly protected. Yet, whenever she takes on the role of obedient wife, and does not contest this gender role, even on an island of degenerates–one that is predominantly Black–she is safe in hell. It is not until she aligns herself with the degenerates (white and Black ones) and misaligns herself with the protections that Carl has provided that she is shown to be destined for death.

Fig. 14. Gilda hits Piet with a bottle before she flees and is wanted for murder. William Wellman, *Safe in Hell*, 1931.

As mentioned previously, *Safe in Hell* represents a transition in the way that Black sexuality was becoming used by white characters onscreen. Though Black sexuality is othered in *Safe in Hell* and shown many times to be in opposition to the proper ways of how sexuality should be used–as well as shown to be an instigator of sexual immorality, it too, allows for a space in which Gilda is able to be the type of person she could not fully embody in New Orleans.

This is done, too, through the familiarity of the Black servant character to the white characters they are serving. This familiarity with the Black servant would become a more frequently used cinematic device to flag sexual immorality in a white character after 1931, when Black sexuality tended to be more normalized–yet still othered from white sexuality– in film.

Conclusion

Black sexuality in film was coded as dangerous, dark, evil, and socially deviant. This was due to the anxieties that arose during the Great Migration as African Americans moved to big cities as well as a fear of them being able to obtain social equality, mainly an anxiety expressed by southern white people. African American culture was highlighted as different and oftentimes praised, but only in so much as it could be enjoyed by white people, it had to be tamed. More often than not, Black sexuality was engaged to emphasize the reasons why white people should fear it. This led to an "othering" that built upon earlier depictions to emphasize its difference. If white sexuality was shown with caution, especially during the reign of the SRC and PCA, Black sexuality was approached with caution as it was, in contrast, an embodiment of all the things that white sexuality should not be—even if, such in the case of *Honey,* sometimes it mimicked the myths of Black sexuality. white exposure to the fearful constructions of Black sexuality acted as a minstrel mask that could be put on and taken off, never destined to the same fate as Blackness, yet, always in service to whiteness as image — the point has always been to contrast. In a time when whiteness was to be reformed above others, the myth of Black sexuality served to not only define a binary, but it was also meant to instill fear so that, even if one ventured off to the opposing side, it was not a place that one could permanently socially inhabit.

It is important to note that debauchery, drinking, and infidelity were behaviors associated with Black nightlife. white people could partake in so-called Black actions vicariously when watching performances at a cabaret or night club, while simultaneously shunning these locations and the behavior affiliated with cabarets and night clubs in films. This dynamic demonstrates the way that Black performance was referenced and used by audiences, especially when it came to Black sexuality. Just as many white people flocked to Black and tan dives and cabarets to see spectacular Black musical artists (and often miscegenate with Black populations), many of the performances onscreen implied the same type of fun. It is because the fascination with these locales had been such a draw to white people that we see these depictions of Black performance. Yet, the connection to these performances onscreen had become an answer to how to escape whiteness–and the standards its construction imposed on race, class, and gender. The promise of momentary escape from these standards was a warning to white people who were lured by the idea of reprieve, as can be seen in *Honey.* The action is inviting toward Black sexuality—but for a time, yet all the while dismissing Black sexuality–this would be a leitmotif of how Black sexuality would be read, treated, and used thematically onscreen, though with nuance, throughout the early years of American film and through well into the Classical Era of Hollywood. These concepts did not need to be overtly mentioned, they were subsumed within the text intricately, and were assumed to be true because it built off earlier depictions. As a consequence, Black people, who are thought to be naturally drawn to such things, and created Jazz music, are metaphorically destined to face death for their iniquities--if not actual death, then a social death. This social death is referenced by either actual death (such as Chick and Zeke's brother in *Hallelujah!*) or as being shunned by society until the breach in social positioning is made whole (such as when Cora or Gilda get separated from white society, likened to Blackness,

then reinstated in *Honey,* and Gilda in *Safe in Hell*). The connection to Black sexuality as deviant necessitates this social death as a result of the breach and makes for the reinscribing of order the only cure. Laying this foundation for a condition in which social order includes acknowledging sexual deviance makes the case that deviance has not only a place in society, but gives it purpose in a capitalistic society to be used to further explore–not sexuality itself, but through it, the race, class, and gender, by the ruling class. This display of deviance in Black sexuality is constant in the ways it shows up in film over time, yet it is reacted to differently within the film, depending on the timeframe it is mentioned. In the following chapter I will discuss how Black sexuality will be referenced not simply as something to be feared, but as a way to organize the overwhelm associated with lust in an increasingly sexually curious society.

Chapter Two: *Harlem is Heaven* 1932-1935

Hot voodoo, Black as mud
Hot voodoo, in my blood
That African tempo, has made a slave
Hot voodoo, dance of sin
Hot voodoo, worse than gin
I'd follow a caveman, right into his cave
That beat gives me a wicked sensation
My conscious wants to take a vacation

Blond Venus (von Sternberg,1933)

In the years to follow the nascence of sound in American film, Black sexuality in film was normalized as an expression of lust for Black *and* white audiences. The last chapter was about the precedent set-in early Hollywood establishing Black sexual behavior as different from white behavior, and therefore deserving of fear. The current chapter interrogates what happened after Black sexuality was othered in Hollywood Cinema. In essence, Black sexuality in film was normalized and backgrounded in order to foreground proper white behavior. Black sexuality was not an entity that was seen fit to survive in a plot on its own because, as the SRC expressed, there was at once a real concern that white people were not interested, or could even be afraid of Black people kissing onscreen, and simultaneously because focusing on Black romance for too long at a time would go against the original purpose of its representation. The idea of Black sexuality as it had been portrayed, needed to be controlled, in some ways maybe even more so on screen than in real life. Instead of existing on its own merit, Black sexuality was used to induce compensating moral values within the plot. This was arranged to highlight the main white characters in a film, especially their proximity to moral behavior. In films between 1932 and 1935, the normalization of inherent Black promiscuity was starting to become a tool to encode

white characters, and ultimately whiteness, with the ability to be seen as the standard for sexuality.

While 1931 brought us *Safe in Hell*, the following year points us in the direction of a more tolerant disposition toward Black sexuality, trademarked at a time in which, to quote a film title, *Harlem is Heaven* (Franklyn, 1932) MISSING QUOTE. *Harlem is Heaven* is a Black-cast film starring Bill Robinson in his first leading role onscreen. The film tells the story of a young woman named Jean (Anise Boyer) who comes to New York (most likely from the South as many did during the Great Migration) only to find that life is more difficult than anticipated in the big city (a common narrative trope of the Silent and early Sound Era films). She is almost wrongfully arrested for prostitution while standing outside and is rescued by Remus "Money" Johnson (Jimmy Baskett) who makes conversation with her and the officer and clears up the confusion about what she was doing on the street (namely, learning the story of the good luck tree she was standing under).[132] Money then gives her his business card and some money and tells her to see him the next day for a job as a dancer at the local club he runs. Jean meets Bill (Bill Robinson) and Chummy (Henri Wessel) the next day. The three end up quitting their jobs at Money's club and starting their own nightclub after Money tries to take advantage of Jean one night. The use of Harlem in the title is indicative of its setting but of its all-Black cast—but also as a metonym for Black people. Harlem came to symbolize Black entertainment and its

[132]Prostitution was a large concern in metropolitan areas. Progressive Era organizations began to lean on police presence in impoverished urban neighborhoods to keep incidents of prostitution down. Saidiya Hartman writes of the increased police presence in Black urban neighborhoods which led to many false imprisonments of young Black women, though there were some who freely admitted to doing sex work to make ends meet. In *Pick-Up* (Gerring,1933), a young white woman pretends to be a prostitute soliciting in a public park so that she can be arrested and given food and shelter during the depression, just before a group of older men vouch for her and, feeling sorry for her, provide for her accommodations, themselves.

connections to sexuality, and when it came to films, a signal that one was Black-cast. Furthermore, the film shows the different sides and experiences of residents who have taken to work in the realm of Harlem nightlife, a popular attraction at the time.

While this is a film marketed towards Black audiences, the title also indicates a change in the way that Blackness and Black sexuality was marketed in Hollywood. Due to the higher demand caused by increased leisure time and activities in the 1920s, Harlem became a playground for both African Americans and white people looking to engage in all the fun that its nightlife afforded. At times this resulted in the types of commingling that censorship boards, the Production Code, and many Americans fought to suppress. They were not only concerned with the actual act of miscegenation, they were concerned that white morals would be corrupted by spending too much time with Black people. Even in *Harlem is Heaven* (1932), the film features the oft-repeated tale of corruption that lurks around the corner for the unsuspecting country girl that moves to New York (or any big city) to become a star, or in some cases, to be free of the South. There were many of these tales circulating around this time in film and addressed in newspapers as a way to discourage too much migration to urban areas. Though not every character is "bad" in the film, the previous representation of Black people warns the viewer that danger is never too far off because Black people are dangerous. The message of the danger of Blackness is repeated in films such as the aforementioned *Hoodoo Anne* (Griffith, 1916), *Tarzan of the Apes* (Sidney, 1918)*, Hallelujah!, Yamekraw* (Roth, 1930) and *Safe in Hell* (Wellman, 1931). Even *What Happened in the Tunnel* (1903) can be said to be speaking of the dangers of Blackness - in that the migration to big cities and industrialization, along with a looser restriction on segregated public areas meant that sometimes a white mistress might use her Black maid as a stand-in to ward off unsolicited and immoral behavior from men In this vein, the maid is

considered a more appropriate stand-in to be the receptor of such behavior, because she, herself is immoral. And still, the "danger" of getting too close to the immoral was too enticing. With Jazz music gaining popularity along with access to recorded music that could be played on a record player or heard over the radio, it was a treat to get out and hear it played live, especially if one's favorite band was in town. As attractive as the visit was made to look, you didn't need to go to Harlem to feel the influence of Black music. The best indication of this were the films that included Black music, while they oftentimes merely echoed the sentiments of how Blackness was interpreted by white people. In the 1920s and into the 1930s Harlem was in vogue throughout the country, and this craze was picked up in Hollywood.

Early films until about 1931, such as *The Birth of a Nation, Hoodoo Ann*, *Hallelujah!*, and *Safe in Hell*, regularly showed Black sexuality as something different and socially contemptible - an effect that is not suitable to be mirrored by white society. The change in mainstream American reception to jazz, including nationally syndicated jazz programs over radio broadcasts, coupled with the practice of "slumming" to Black and tan establishments, aided in a lax reception of Black sexuality. What's more, the Production Code began in 1930, but the SRC didn't require studios to submit their scripts before they began production until 1931. The SRC believed that studios were adding more sexual content to films at this time in order to keep profits up and to be able to compete with each other.[133] In the interest of changing the way sexuality was referenced in films within the bounds of the Production Code reforms on sex, studios began using Black images to imply sexual deviance in white characters. This was achieved by having white characters mimic the sexuality of Black characters. Films starting at

[133]Gaylyn Studlar, "Marlene Dietrich and the Erotics of Code-Bound Hollywood," *Dietrich Icon*, (New York, NY: Duke University Press, 2020), 212.

around 1932 began to normalize the onscreen mimetic actions of white people as they "acted" Black, while they worked to show that this mimicry, though acknowledged, should be handled with care lest the same fate befall the viewer. Still, as was shown earlier in *Safe in Hell,* the message was convoluted. As referenced in the opening quote, Hollywood's strange obsession with Black religion was alive and thriving and its referencing was a way to make sense of a supposed inherent Black immorality. Yet, the opening quote comes from a song played by the main character, Helen (Marlene Dietrich), a white woman. It is because Helen has been encoded as deviant to the mores of society that she can sing such a song. In fact, the words of the song work hand in hand with this encoding, to further emphasize that she is on the wrong side of right, a locale inorganic to where she is usually normally situated by society.

Blonde Venus Encoded in Black

As stated earlier, the SRC believed that the studios were adding more sexuality in films as a way to compete with each other. Yet, when the SRC began to crack down on studios in 1931, studios became more creative in the ways they added sex to the screen. If the main character was supposed to be upstanding and intent on doing the right thing, there are specific ways in which they can be shown as embodying the opposite. It is important to consider the aspect of the "good" lead embodying the opposite characteristics. The ability of the lead to choose better comes from their implied connection to what is considered good, their positioning as the center of the story, and their positioning as compared to characters that were considered adversarial to the progress of society in that they did not conform to rules of decency. In this manner, only white characters benefited from a concept of compensating moral value because they were given the chance to change. Black characters, by contrast, were much more likely to

be shown or at least implied to be the cause of white character sinning, a symbol amongst many that the lead has fallen. I believe studios worked through the encouragement of the SRC to displace wrongdoing of main characters onto their environment, an untenable circumstance, and sexualized characters of lower class.

In the *Blonde Venus* (1932), Helen is encoded as sexually deviant early on and frequently throughout. In her first scene she is swimming naked in a lake with the co-stars of her latest show. Several censorship boards determined that the scene should either be cut out or shortened.[134] Though it is clear the women are swimming naked, onscreen their bodies are somewhat camouflaged and indiscernible because of the water. Helen is not as bothered by the men watching as they swim, though she condemns them for standing around when the women have to go to get ready for their performance. She is intentionally shown as enticing and available for pleasure of men, a sexual object. She may be vocally resistant to being viewed without clothing by men—but her physical disposition onscreen (i.e her nudity) demonstrates that she is not modest about being naked in front of a group of men. Even when covered by water, she protests because she does not want to be seen as an indecent person, but she allows herself to be seen as indecent later.

[134]In the US, the Maryland and Massachusetts censor boards both determined that the swimming scene should be cut, and other boards including Quebec and Alberta had issue with the scene, as well. Though the scene was not cut by all censorship boards in the US, the fact that it raised a red flag indicates that the nature of the display of sexuality had been questioned. Though it is impossible to tell how each board read the scene, the fact that the women are covered may not have been as alarming as other some of the dialogue that was brought into question by these boards.

Censor board documents "Blonde Venus," Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

Fig. 15 Naked women swimming with Helen, (*Blonde Venus*, von Sternberg 1932)

Fig. 16 Helen swims naked, hiding herself while she talks to Ned, *Blonde Venus,* (von Sternberg 1932).

Helen marries one of the onlookers at the lake, Ned (Herbert Marshall), and the two have a son together. When her husband becomes terminally ill and needs a life-saving surgery, she discusses going back to work in the nightclub as a dancer to help pay for his surgery. This she does against Ned's wishes, stating she was thinking about going back before she knew of his sickness—not only is she wanting to go out and support her husband, but she does so after he acquiesces, seeing she will not back down. In this way, Ned acts as the eyes of society. He does not like how the idea of Helen providing for the family makes him look, or that she is working in a club as a dancer. In the scene where she is preparing for her first night of work, Ned and Johnny help her get ready to leave and Helen gives Ned orders of how to care for their son while she is gone. She will be working for so long that she will not only miss dinner with her son and husband but she tells Ned not to wait up for her—circumstances usually characteristic of a man having to work, not a woman. While this may be within their home, it is on display for us to

view the occurrence the way that society does, the audience is prompted to judge Helen as wayward. The eyes of society are constantly watching Helen, especially when she is "bad." When Ned returns from his surgery overseas, he finds out from the neighbors, one of two women shown earlier questioning where Helen has gone, that his wife has not been home for two weeks. When Helen flees so that Ned cannot take their son away from her, Ned contacts the police who post a flier with Helen's photo asking for information on her whereabouts. Yet, the photo is Helen in costume with a blonde afro wig posing as the Blonde Venus. Later, Johnny, who is five years old, finds the same photo in a newspaper ad searching for Helen. When he asks his mom if it is her, she tears it up and says it is a "bad photo." In the photo, Helen's deviance is marked by her proximity to Blackness, as the photo not only calls back to her earlier performance, but her performance persists within the photograph, signaling that she is still enacting the performance.

When Helen returns Johnny to Ned and is later reunited with Nick when she is working as a performer in Paris, the two become engaged as shown through a newspaper announcement. Even still, the people who seem most interested in covering for her are less than honorable in society—the shady nightclub owner that silences Taxi when she tries to tell Ned who Helen is with, the woman dressed in a pant suit working at (or who perhaps owns) the club who lets Helen know her husband has been there looking for her and her son, and Hattie (Hattie McDaniel), her Black maid who has an implied past of sexual deviance of her own. Helen's display of deviance is most notable in her proximity to Blackness. When Cora (Hattie McDaniel) tries to help Helen elude capture, she goes out into the town market to find out what a mysterious white man is up to. Cora smiles at him to entice him and looks him up and down as if to offer herself as sexually available to him as a prostitute. He says that he is just browsing around which Cora relays to Helen, mocking his words, "I know when a white man's browsin' an' when he

ain't"--Cora is connected to a life of prostitution so subtly that it comes off as comical the way she looks the man up and down. There is a certain knowing of her past that can be assumed because she is Black and needs no further explanation; this knowing is part of what is supposed to make the scene of Cora attempting to entice the man so funny, for she knows men like him because she has experience knowing men like him–in the Biblical sense. Cora, here, is set up as Helen's proxy in that she investigates the man for Helen, and she, like Helen, is supposed to know what to look out for. Still, in the case of Helen, we at least know that she once lived decently though in this moment of the film she is struggling financially (and morally) in order to be able to keep her son. Immediately, after Cora returns, failing to "pick-up" the man (white men are almost never shown to be attracted to Black women, Helen goes to see if she can find out what he wants. She wears a shawl to cover her low-cut blouse, a hat to cover half her face, and dons a fan to cover a good portion of the rest of her face to appear, herself, mysterious. She stands across from a man, whom in the next scene is learned to be Detective Wilson (Sidney Toler), making eyes at him to let him know she is available. In the next scene, the detective follows Helen to a hole-in-the wall bar where they drink together for a short while, then he accepts an invitation to come home with her, thinking he is going to get lucky. When he arrives he first sees Cora, to whom he says, "Just browsin' around," indicating that he has found what he is looking for, a prostitute—not realizing, yet, that Helen has played a trick on him by inviting him to her room knowing that she is the person he has been looking for.

Helen oftentimes meanders in and out of a persona of licentiousness. This may have been because Paramount was trying to heed to the rules of the "Don'ts and Be Carefuls," but it is also likely that there was an intentional vagueness that was placed upon her character due to her whiteness. The use of Black characters is intended to inform us of Helen's waywardness, not

implicate her as a lost cause. Before we learn of her impending affair with Nick, who pays her checks in exchange for her company that she uses towards her husband's surgery, we see a scene of Nick watching her onstage performing a number that is dripping in salaciousness. Nick, a politician said to "run" the side of town that the cabarets are located in (implying he is mixed in organized crime) is immediately coded as deviant in his introductory scene where he punches a man who has approached his table at the nightclub just prior to his first time seeing Helen. She is introduced to him onscreen performing "Hot Voodoo" with an all-Black ensemble.

The scene is set at a nightclub featuring Black performers—it is made to look like the jungles of Africa, an aesthetic popularized by real life nightclubs and cabarets such as The Cotton Club–where Black artists performed in front of all-white audiences. This setting looks toward the cult of primitivism, using aesthetics associated with the culture and traditions of Africa thought to be the most primitive compared to the Western world, to invite their guests to watch the African (American) in his/her "natural" habitat, one in which the naturalness of their sexuality can be fully on display. This aesthetic of sexualized Black performers would later become the standard by which Black cinematic performance, the kind that could be easily excised from Classical Hollywood films, was included in white-cast films.[135] The first thing shown in the scene are drumsticks with mallets beating against a big drum, setting the tone for the African tom-tom drums, a staple instrument used in cinematic Black music of the time. In the foreground, a Black male conductor directs a band that is mostly hidden, while in the background a string of Black dancers appear on the left, making their way to the right of the

[135]Thomas Cripps has spoken of the use of a Tropical setting, and Black women baring their midriffs as the marker for Black performances included within classic Hollywood films.

screen. The dancers walk to the beat, swaying back and then taking a step forward, revealing a new dancer coming onstage with each step. With each step forward, too, the women create a thrust of the pelvis. They wear sparkling leotards with feather tutus, kinky-haired unkempt wigs, and chains around their arms that link each of the dancers together rather closely. In each of the dancers' hands they hold a spear in the right and a full-length shield in the other. Further apart but still shackled to the first row of dancers, a gorilla walks out following behind. Behind the gorilla is another row of dancers, identical in costume and movement to the first row of dancers. The gorilla is not shackled to the second row of dancers, nor is it burdened to have to sway to the music as the rest of the dancers do. Additionally, the dancers seem to be so closely shackled together that they must move in unison, while the gorilla, with a much longer chain, has room to roam and even decides to stop walking with the rest of the group for a few steps, the gorilla, which could break the flimsy chain that the "African" women cannot, chooses where it wants to go, more or less. These women are used in the scene and the film to demarcate the fall from grace that Helen has experienced, and become a visual display of how the freedoms associated with Black sexuality is used– not for the pleasure or even the edification of the Black characters, but for the pleasure and edification of Helen. So it is Helen, instead, that is freed and in turn takes on the liminal space afforded by the alluring display of Black promiscuity.

As the dancers-gorilla-dancers entourage make their way down the stairs and off the stage onto the floor of the onlooking dinner audience, the dancers place the shields in front of their bodies, most likely to avoid the censorable onscreen presence of Black bodies interspersed with the white audience. This gives more attention, too, to the gorilla that the dancers form a circle around in an open space on the dining floor. As they circle around the gorilla, they continue swaying back and forth, and still giving a slight thrust of the pelvis, now toward the

gorilla. With a shot of Charlie the bartender (Charles R. Moore) and another club performer, Taxi (Rita La Roy) speaking to each other, the cut back to the performers reveals the chains are gone. The dancers switch places while they circle toward the gorilla, then exit while still swaying their pelvis–an act expressing both desire and the willingness to act upon it– toward the gorilla and ultimately leaving the stage and the beast alone.

Blonde Venus, Black Gorilla

It does not seem by accident that the choreography introduces these slight but noteworthy thrusts of the women. The gorilla symbolizes Black power and strength, one that the women are shown to be unable to resist. The women, content to hide their faces from the crowd while they walk to the center of the floor, seem willing to bare all to the gorilla, and are even unencumbered when the chains between the dancers and the gorilla seem to disappear after a cut to the bartender and Taxi is made in between shots of the performance. The crowd seem to be moved by the presence of the beast, some believing that it is an actual gorilla. Once the dancers go back onstage, the chain is again visible on the gorilla though it is still not connected to the dancers, as it, too, makes its way onstage, positioned in the front while one row of all the dancers sway in the background. The crowd still does not know what to make of the beast, until the person under the gorilla suit finally disrobes, revealing herself to be Helen as the crowd claps in joy as well as relief. There was nothing to be afraid of after all, she is no longer threatening. The threatening persona Helen sheds is replaced with the persona of sexuality. She is billed the Blonde Venus, beautiful to observe, while her words hold the sentiments of an uncontrollable sexuality reserved for Blackness.

But in this performance, Helen is only "acting" Black. She is set apart from the dancers not only because she is no longer in line with them, but the angle of the shot shown when her identity is revealed and throughout her performance of "Hot Voodoo" positions her head above the Black women dancing behind her. In this way, Helen is shown to be superior to the Black dancers, but the dancers perform another important role. The dancers give us a visual cue of how we should view Helen. The dancers are eroticized and, being from Africa, are assumed to be promiscuous and sexually free —so we are to understand Helen to be at once both separate from the dancers . Once she takes off her gorilla head she is handed a blonde curly afro wig with an arrow in it, a symbol that the Black sexuality that she has associated herself with has influenced her own sexual wrongdoings. Helen is both like and different from the African dancers because she can perform her liminality as a woman who has gone astray but retains the ability to do right again. She is linked to them by proximity, singing a song about how she feels enslaved by the magical voodoo melody. Her face shows a knowing, a confidence of the persona or spirit she has stepped into—a delight in the trance she has undergone. But this trance is one she can slip in and out of as easily as she can slip in and out of a gorilla suit. Like the gorilla surrounded by the African women, her confident countenance surveys an environment that she is ultimately in command of. The crowd loves it, especially Nick, who is shown watching Helen more intently than anyone else in the crowd. "That African tempo has made a slave…I'd follow a caveman right into his cave," sings Helen.

Fig. 17 Helen sings in a nightclub as part of the primitivist aesthetic in *Blonde Venus* (1932)

Helen's manager introduces her to Nick after the performance, and Nick tells the manager to leave them alone. This was to be the beginning of the love affair between Nick and Helen that lasted long enough for Ned to leave for Germany for his surgery and return—all funded by Nick. The details of Helen's affair and her subsequent descent into prostitution, which occurs when Nick leaves for Europe and Ned leaves Helen after hearing about their affair, are a bit convoluted. This is largely because the Studio Relations Committee was regulating the content of films and forbade speaking too explicitly about taboo subjects such as marital

infidelity and prostitution.[136] Even though the SRC was not as powerful as the Production Code Administration in getting studios to abide by the rules, there are records of correspondence between Paramount and the SRC showing the studio working to make the film worthy of the SRC's standards.

In previous films I have discussed whiteness has been compromised by a white character spontaneously jumping up to dance and sing with a Black character. These Black characters were already coded as deviant by their words, dance, and costumes. In *Venus*, Helen is intentional in her move to perform with the Black entertainers ,coming onstage with them. The words of the song she sings— "That beat gives me a wicked sensation/My conscience wants to take a vacation," tells us that the music makes her want to sin, but she was already coded as sinful because of her intentionality set forth before the music even begins. The Black performers onstage act as interlocutors to the licentiousness. Many scholars have noted the difference in the actions of Helen offstage as opposed to the actions of Helen onstage.[137] In fact, the SRC's passing the film for exhibition hinged on an idea that Helen's offstage persona was Helen, while her onstage persona was to be seen as Marlene Dietrich. I argue that whatever the intentions, the onscreen persona, especially her performance of "Hot Voodoo" is what helps epitomize Helen as a wayward woman who must undergo compensating moral values in order to obtain her happy ending—a reunion with her son and husband. Though Helen can still be (and later is) redeemed by straightening up her act, the indication of her waywardness is underscored by her proximity to Blackness—seen both with Cora and the Black performers onstage—whom themselves cannot

[136]Janet Staiger, *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema*, (Minneapolis, MN: Regents of the University of Minnesota, 1995), 6.
[137]Jacobs*, 28.*

be saved in society from their sexual sins. The simple cut to the Black bartender, Charlie (Charles R. Moore) talking to Taxi has him cosigning the performance by saying that he thought the performances of the night were pretty good.

The subtle sexual actions of the Black dancers in the scene are a strong nod to myths involving African life: the belief that Africans were naturally sexual, and also to a long-held myth that women of Africa were willingly taken by gorillas into the jungle to mate with them.[138] This idea of gorillas taking women into the jungle had been a part of public discourse as early as the 1849. According to Merek Zgorniak, when French sculptor Emmanuel Frèmiet created the sculpture *Gorilla Abducting a Woman*, later called *Gorilla Abducting a Young Negress,* there was disagreement not only regarding the decency of the sculpture, but what was occurring within the sculpture. [139] The original work was destroyed but appeared in a book of Frèmiet's art from 1934. The sculpture shows a gorilla in stride, left arm outstretched as if to balance itself as it holds the body of a young woman close to his chest. The woman, who Frèmiet is quoted referring to as a "negress" (it is unclear who changed the name of his sculpture from *Gorilla Abducting a Woman* to *Gorilla Abducting a Young Negress*) is unconscious, half-dragged across the ground by the ape, while it holds her upper half off the ground.[140] Frèmiet himself thought because it was a Black girl rather than a white one that it was not only a believable scene, but one acceptable to the public.[141] Yet, though Fremiet's entry into the Salon was denied, there was

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[138]Deboray Gray White, "Jezebel and Mammy: The Mythology of Female Slavery," *Ain't I a Woman?: Female Slaves on the Plantation South,* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999), 29.

[139]Marta Kapera, Marek Zgórniak, Mark Singer, "Fremiet's Gorillas: Why Do They Carry off Women?", *Artibus et historiae* Vol.27, (Cracow, Poland: Institute for Art Historical Research, 2006), 224.

[140]*Fremiet's Gorillas,* 221.

[141]Kapera et al., 221.

buzz about its audaciousness. While some in the press speculated that the woman was dead and that the gorilla was planning to take the body with him (the consensus was the gorilla was male) to the jungle to eat it, the reigning interpretation was proposed by Theophile Gautier. He suggested that the African woman may not be dead and may actually be willing to be intimate with the ape, an interpretation that had more traction than the others.[142] Thirty years later Frѐmiet created a similar work after the first was destroyed and titled the 1887 piece, *Gorilla from Gabon*, a work for which he was awarded a *Medal of Honour* at the 1887 Salon and the Gold Medal First Class at the Third International Exhibit of the Fine Arts in Munich a year later.[143] Frѐmiet's sculptures and the subsequent buzz led to discussions of the nature of the African gorilla, rumors of African women being taken by gorillas and mating with them, and having half-ape, half-human babies, as well as sparked a fear of gorillas kidnapping white women.[144]

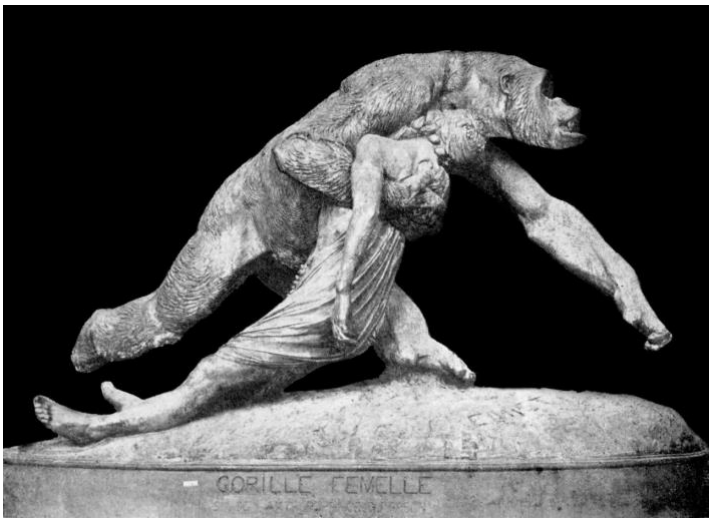

Fig. 18 *Gorilla Carrying off a Negress (Frѐmiet, 1849).*

[142]Kapera et al., 221
[143]Kapera et al., 221.
[144]Kapera et al., 226.

Fig. 19 *Gorilla Carrying off a Negress (Frèmiet, 1887).*

Up until the mid-19th Century, gorillas were largely, themselves, myths that were referenced by explorers to the African continent. It was not until 1847 that Thomas Savage, a Protestant missionary and naturalist, made his discovery to the Western world that gorillas did exist through his study of deceased primates that were taken to Britain to be studied further by scientists.[145] Many of the accounts of the savage nature of gorillas, including their lust for female humans, were disputed by scientists as early as 1869. But by this time, the legend had become a fact in popular culture. The rise in the study of gorillas, as well as their comparison with Black people is due in part to Charles Darwin's 1859 book, *The Origin of Species*.[146] While scientists

[145]*Kapera et al.,* 225.
[146]Joel Schwartz, "Illuminating Charles Darwin's Morality: Slavery, Humanity's Origin and Unity, and Darwin's Evolutionary Theory," *Evolution: Education and Outreach*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 337.

worked to understand, and in some cases, refute Darwin's claims that apes and humans have great genetic similarities, many took the stories told by explorers about violent gorillas from Africa to explain and even create their own ideas about the nature of Black people. By 1887, however, Fremiet's updated sculpture featured a gorilla carrying a white woman who was not unconscious but awake and pushing against the animal to break free.

The story of the Frѐmit gorilla sculptures speaks to the tendency of Black sexuality to be coded in sexual excess. It is not enough that Black people are considered highly sexual —they must be dangerously sexual. What's more, the art of Frѐmiet indicates a juxtaposition between Black sexuality and white sexuality. Fatimah Tobing Rony discusses the history of anthropologists looking to define race. She explains that they focused their studies on populations of Europeans, considered by scientists to be superior, and non-Europeans who were considered primitives. Rony offers that "The irony is that those seeking to explain the 'normal' needed the pathological.[147] In establishing white characters as chaste onscreen, the comparison was often made to those embodying Black sexual excess. Janel Hobson cites the exploitation of Sarah Baartman in the early 19th Century as primary evidence that Black women's bodies have long symbolized Black sexual excess.[148] This means that the mere presence of a Black woman can represent sexual excess. Because of the liminal space created by Black woman's presumed hypersexuality, their sheer presence, then, allows that sexuality to be borrowed. A trend seems to appear in these films that incorporate Black women because their sexuality was seen as less

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[147]Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), Chapter One (Kindle).
[148]Janel Hobson, "Remnants of Venus: Signifying Black Beauty and Sexuality", *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 46: 1 & 2 (NY: The Feminist Press, 2018), 105.

physically threatening than the sexuality of Black men. The consistent effort was to show how Blackness afforded white characters a liminal space, but this liminality was *performed* by white characters, usually women of the fallen woman trope. An exception to this was Mae West who was notoriously sexualized in her films and stage plays, especially in her Pre-Code films. Ramona Curry states that even West, who was coded as sexual in her dialogue and onscreen performances, maintained an undercurrent of exoticism and sexual taboo through her interracial exchanges. Even the sexualized Mae West appears more sexual when intermingling with maids.

The misleading belief in the connection between the nature of the gorilla and Africans likely reignited with the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trials in which the question arose whether a Tennessee public school teacher, John Thomas Scopes, should be able to teach evolution in class. Some fifteen years prior, Theodore Roosevelt's Smithsonian–Roosevelt African Expedition (1909-1911) explored parts of present day Kenya, Belgian Congo and Sudan to collect species for the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History which encouraged other explorations and tales of exploration in Africa.[149] By 1927, a publicity poster for First National's *The Gorilla* (Santell, 1927), a non-extant silent horror film, shows a gorilla carrying an unconscious white woman, replicating the imagery of Fremiet's sculpture. *Ingagi* (Campbell, 1930) was proclaimed to be a documentary of life in Africa which included a scene where natives sacrifice a woman by giving her to a gorilla to become a sex slave. The film, touted to have footage taken during an expedition in Belgian Congo, was charged by the Federal Trade Commission to be a fake--combining footage taken from previous films as well as a series of scenes shot in Los Angeles and was banned by the Hays office from being shown in theaters for

[149]Andrew Erish, "Illegitimate Dad of Kong," *Los Angeles Times,* 1/8/2006.

being fake.[150] Still, there was a demand to see more films about the jungle and life therein, and despite its infamy, it is widely believed that *Ingagi* led to a greenlight by RKO for Merian C. Cooper to make *King Kong* the most famous and successful film about an African gorilla of its time and since.[151] In *King Kong*, however, the sacrifice comes in the form of a white woman who is kidnapped by African tribesmen then handed over to the gorilla. Though she is rescued and both she and Kong are taken back to the U.S., Kong's obsession with the white woman has been largely argued by scholars to be a metaphor for the Black man's obsession to defile white women, which if it didn't originate with, was connected to the myth of the insatiably lustful gorilla.[152]

Scenes such as the one previously discussed in *Blonde Venus* speak to the distorted image of Black sexuality and Black religion when in fact, neither are categorically more egregious than what is considered "white" versions of it. Yet, the dichotomous positioning of the sides had become the playground for cabaret performances that centered on the cult of primitivism. These performances were popular not only because of the immense talent of the entertainers, but because they came packaged in a way that was non-threatening to white people. As much as the savages of Africa were said to be dangerous, they were not seen as dangerous onstage. They

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[150]"Ingagi." Fake American Film, Hits New Snag," *The Chicago Defender 5/16/31*
"Hays Bars Ingagi Film,"*New York Times 6/12/30*

[151]. "Illegitimate Dad of Kong"

[152]Cárcel, Juan A. Roche, "King Kong, the Black Gorilla", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, (NY:Routledge, 2022), 39 ;

- Frazier, Valerie, "King Kong's Reign Continues: 'King Kong' as a Sign of Shifting Racial Politics," *CLA Journal* Vol 51, No. 2*,* (Conway, AR: The College Language Association, 2007).
- Rony, Fatimah Tobing. *The Third Eye*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), Kindle Edition.

were contained, captivating an audience that wished to bring Blackness as foe into captivity—neither letting their captives escape a fabricated past, nor allowing them to advance beyond their fated caste. In these films, Blackness is never allowed to progress within the model of a compensating moral value. As rarely the lead or in the story, Black characters instead become part of the equation for the compensating moral value of whiteness — a value that could be variably determined in comparison to Blackness, which was assumed a repudiated moral value, one that in and of itself could have no redemption. Blackness was not good on its own merit because it could not be named as good; only when it took on forms of whiteness could it be good. In contrast, only when whiteness took off the visible forms and actions of Blackness could it be seen as good again. Even Black sexuality could be seen as, if not good, useful, as it helped reinscribe whiteness.

Harlemania and Primitivism

The lyrics of "Hot Venus" not only work to show Helen's deviance, but to acknowledge her ability to *traverse* the lines of good and evil. By explaining in the song that the song is of voodoo and it puts you in a trance, Helen is absolved from being seen as inherently evil. It instead poses her character as being good but making wrong choices, sometimes. This was the heaven in Harlem that could be found, with Harlem representing Blackness and the immoral actions that could be accessed by white people. But just as the white nightlife patron could go to clubs but did not live in Harlem, so too, could white people participate in a deviant way of life (singing the songs, doing the dances, supporting the bands), but they were not expected to live in these ways all the time. Whether we are talking about it being "Safe in Hell" or "Harlem being Heaven," the constant in these cinematic scenarios is that whiteness was constructed to be

equipped with the fortitude to withstand damnation, symbolically we speak in terms of heaven and hell but in day-to-day life this speaks toward a social damnation that renders social death.[153] *Harlem is Heaven* depicts Harlem life from the perspective of Black performers, not from the so-called normal residents. It was mostly heaven for those who were part of the nightlife, including white visitors and the Black performers they came to see. Lee "Harlemania" Posner, wrote in *New York Amsterdam*:

> The almost Universal appeal of Harlem is an interesting subject and provides ample opportunity for discussion both ways. The assertion that Harlem is heaven is generally limited to the idea that it was heaven for the white rounder, who found in' Harlem that indefinable something which drew him back, magnet-like, time after time.[154]

There are a number of things interesting about Posner's quote. For one Posner was an expert of Harlem nightlife and is credited by many newspapers in the mid-1930s for being the chief architect of the Harlem Vogue.[155] Scholar Nate Sloan writes about Posner's history as a white, struggling newspaper journalist turned press agent for Harlem nightlife during the Depression. He not only visited Harlem nightclubs before it was popular to do so, he wrote about his visits which led to the popularity of Harlem as a place for white visitors to engage in Black entertainment. If they could not physically visit, they could visit and gain pleasure from radio performances and Hollywood films. The rhetoric of these accounts suggests that white nightclub-goers were enticed by the distinction of Harlem and its nightlife to see Black people perform in their element—cue the tom-toms and pelvic thrusting. Unfortunately, this was conceived to be

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[153]Patterson, Orlando, *Slavery and Social Death,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982, Introduction (Kindle).
[154]Posner, Lee. *The New York Amsterdam News,* "Harlem More Like Heaven to the Negro Artist now," September 21, 1932.
[155]Sloan, 193.

closely linked to not just deviance, but an antithetical difference when postured next to whiteness, one of primitivism. One 1934 newspaper article comments on Posner's bravery for visiting Harlem nightclubs as early as ten years prior to reporting on them, "blazing the trail" for other white visitors to come and delight in what Sloan refers to as "the spatial inversion of New York nightlife that was underway at the end of the 1920s."[156] Posner would also start his own revue which he held in Brooklyn in the middle of the 1930s called *Harlemania*, a name that capitalized off of the craze he helped create and alluded to the types of performances that others visited Harlem to encounter. In the article from the quote above, Posner is speaking not as an expert of the cabaret scene in Harlem, but of Harlem, itself. He calls Harlem heaven for white nightclub patrons, while the subtext is that it is not heaven for most of the residents that live there. In fact, in his article Posner states that Harlem is just beginning to be heaven, finally, for Black folks—the artists that can make a living performing for the white nightclub-goers. While his point presents itself as a silver lining to Black nightclub performers, it displays a sentiment that Harlem is hell for all other residents. This idea is tied together through the cult of primitivism that seems to have its origins in the Cotton Club, where Black musicians would perform on a stage themed to the imagined image of the jungles of Africa. This jungle trope was used over and again when Black entertainers performed in Hollywood films, we see it specifically in *Blonde Venus* when Marlene Dietrich sings surrounded by a number of Black women dancers, meant to indicate how far from grace she has fallen.

Shane Vogel speaks of the cult of primitivism that invaded Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance, causing a chasm between performers who associated themselves with the Cabaret

[156] Sloan, 87.

School and that of the Negro Vogue. He wrote "the original architects of the Harlem Renaissance envisioned a movement that would counter images and representations of Black inferiority with more "truthful" representations and evidence of serious Black cultural accomplishment."[157] Yet, the performers most closely associated with the Negro vogue used white ideas of "Black sensuousness, exhibitionism, primitivism, and sensationalism" within their performances for mostly white audiences, and in doing so reproduced well-entrenched stereotypes.[158] Vogel states that the Cabaret School, a contemporary group and, in many ways, an opposing group, worked to normalize narratives of racial and sexual identity rather than play into them, or even, altogether reject such narratives as others did in the name of racial uplift so as to prove to white people that Black people were worthy of equal rights.[159] The jazz craze began in the 1920s during the time that film depictions of African Americans were working to establish them as the damned of society. Jazz had been around since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, but it was not until The Original Dixieland Jazz Band, an all-white outfit, released the first jazz record that jazz started to become part of popular culture.[160] As David Wondrich states, "One minute there's ragtime, the next—jazz. Invented in New Orleans, perfected in Chicago, metastasizing in New York, whence infecting the nation and then the whole goddamn world."[161] By the 1920s jazz was a staple of soxciety, and Black performers such as Duke Ellington were regulars at the Cotton Club, even hosting a nationally syndicated nightly show on the radio of its Cotton Club

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[157]Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret.*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3.
[158]Vogel, 3.
[159]Vogel, 5.
[160]David Wondrich, *Stomp and Swerve: American Music Gets Hot 1843-1924* (Chicago: A Capella Books, 2003),*Location 1891* (Kindle).
[161]Wondrich, loc 1911.

performances.[162] But these Black entertainers participating in nightclub performances were often popular with white people not just because of the musical talent of the entertainers, but because their performances took on harmful stereotypical language and themes of sexuality that white audiences enjoyed to watch, namely that of primitivism.

The previously analyzed scene in *Blonde Venus* includes all the elements considered to be part of a primitivist aesthetic one would find in the club: tribal women scarcely dressed and showing their mid-sections, adorned in feathers and other animal parts, and donning spears, shields, and chains. They play upon the tom-tom drum behind sexually suggestive (if not, enticing) lyrics sung by a jazz singer. All these parts worked to connect the Black singer to Africa and the presumed savagery that had been imminently residing within the Black performers hundreds of years after being taken from Africa to the Americas. It is important to note that these Black performers often represented Black people as a whole for white audiences, especially since many in the audience had not had much close and interpersonal experience with Black people on a regular basis.[163] Just as the white audiences of minstrel shows spoken of in the previous chapter, white people often believed the stories told through these performances and attributed immorality, especially a religious and sexual immorality as a natural part of Blackness.

Tracy McCabe defines primitivism as "the promotion of the 'non-civilized.'"[164] Depictions of the 'non-civilized' worked to underscore the difference between those that were deemed to be civilized and those deemed to be uncivilized and demonstrate that the source of this civilization was based on race. The allure of primitivism led to an increased popularity,

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[162]Vogel, 1.
[163]Vogel, 80.
[164]Tracy McCabe, "The Multifaceted Politics of Primitivism," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Winter 1997, Vol. 80, (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1997), 475.

leading to its artistic representation becoming stylized. The harm imposed by the cult of primitivism and its depictions was referenced by many as a point of contention. Sloan writes that the earliest use of the African jungle tropes and its connection to Black performance arose in the early 1900s with vaudeville and musical theater.[165] By 1930, Duke Ellington had made songs like "Jungle Nights in Harlem." The tendency to want to see these stories tied into the performances without being implicated as being just as immoral is poignant.

The use of a constructed view of Black sexuality is used to inform Helen's apparent fall from grace. Yet, as noted previously, Helen was coded early on as wayward when she was first introduced and then when she told her husband that she was going back to work. In fact, the most endearing quality about Helen's persona by conventional standards of proper womanhood during the time of the film's release is that she is most faithful to her role as mother, and protective of that role, even if unconventionally (Helen performs outside of her gender role by providing for her family, including her husband's life-saving treatment). Yet, it is implied that Helen is able to cross into this liminal space because she has been lured into nightlife, jazz and, and as a result, adultery. "Hot Voodoo" is the first song Helen performs as soon as she returns to work. In the very next scene, Helen meets Nick and their love affair commences.

Did you ever happen to hear of voodoo?
Hear it and you won't give a damn what you do
Tom-tom's put me under a sort of voodoo
And the whole night long I don't know the right from wrong[166]

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[165]Sloan, 24.

[166] Ralph Rainger and Sam Coslow, "Hot Voodoo," performed by Marlene Dietrich in *Blonde Venus* ;Blonde Venus, *Producer-Director, Josef von Sternberg ; Screenplay, S.K. Lauren and Jules Furthman ; Original Story, Jules Furthman.* [UCLA restored long 97 min. version (released in 80 min., 85 min., and 92-93 min. versions (?) according to AFI catalog, 1931-1940

Yet, Helen is not just possessed by the playing of the tom-toms while they are played. It is not even clear that she has had a fall from grace, much less that it was devil music that caused her to take on such a downward spiral. In a number of accounts, the story of *Blonde Venus* was originally created by either Marlene Dietrich, or between her and Josef Von Sternberg, the film's director. Lea Jacobs and Janet Staiger write of the difficulties between the studio, Von Sternberg, and the SRC. They specifically discuss the turmoil around the story's salacious account of Helen's infidelity and specific lines that were changed due to being considered indecent. Archival documents state that Von Sternberg was so fed up with the changes made to the film that he no longer wanted to make the film.[167] These SRC files also show the back and forth between the studio and the SRC regarding songs and lines from songs, many of which were cut prior to the completion of the film. While the SRC shows much concern over the film's plot, dialogue and music, the biggest underlying concern seems to be who is Helen Faraday? Lea Jacobs writes that much of the film passing had to do with the break in character garnered by Helen when she broke into song—then it was understood by the SRC, as Lea Jacobs has discussed, that she was breaking out of character to perform in the star persona of Marlene Dietrich.[168] The SRC played a considerable role in determining what type of person Helen was. Not only did they work with Paramount studios to make the story of *Blonde Venus* more acceptable to censor boards, but Jason Joy compiled a considerable list of all the reasons why the film should be deemed acceptable and circulated the list to censor boards hoping to instruct them

[167]Memo from Lamar Trotti, "Blonde Venus" (April 22, 1932), Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.
[168] Lea Jacobs, *Cinema Journal* 27, "The Censorship of Blonde Venus," University of Texas, 1988. 28

on how to view the film.[169] It caused quite a ruckus in Canada when the head of the censor board wrote to the SRC outraged at the instructions.[170] At issue for Joy was the way in which censors were reading Helen. The film had been made to fit the fallen woman narrative trope, and as such made considerable use of the compensating moral value that was supposed to redeem the film of all the evils it uncovered. Joy's insistence on instruction underscores just how important it was to the SRC to help films project their characters in the proper light. It did not matter, then, what Dietrich or Von Sternberg intended for the film, what mattered is that good morals were reinstituted into the main character, in this case Helen. The fall of Helen, then, could be said to be typified by a number of markers within the film: her insistence on working to support her household and husband rather than he supporting the family, her choice to work in a nightclub where characters of ill repute gaze upon her sexuality through her singing and performance, and the cosigning of her behavior by Black dancers who are themselves sexualized through the scope of primitivism. Charlene Regester examines how Sam McDaniel's Blackness is used as a marker to denote the corruptness of white protagonists through an "appropriation of Otherness" in the films *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944) and *Ice Palace* (Sherman, 1960).[171] She notes that though McDaniel's characters, Charlie in *Double* and Porter in *Ice*, are not immoral, "the films' equation of Blackness with evilness, immorality, and criminality" creates a linkage between the presence

[169]Letter from James Wingate to John Hammell, "Blonde Venus" (October 24, 1932), Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA

[170]Letter from John Hammell to James Wingate, "Blonde Venus" (October 14, 1932), Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA

[171]Charlene Regester, "Dark Desires and white Obsessions: Sam McDaniel As a Marker of Blackness in Double Indemnity (1944) and *Ice Palace* (1960)," *Resetting the Scene: Classical Hollywood Revisited,* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2021), 179-180.

of Black characters and the negative demeanor of white characters, influencing the "development, evolution, and construction of whiteness" and the white characters who descend into immorality. This construction of whiteness is made by juxtaposing the white character—who is assumed to be good—to the Black character---who is assumed to be bad. This does not mean that white characters could not be bad without these visible markers of Blackness, but Blackness is often used to invoke an ethos of disorder within the plot, a sort of flag that verifies that there is a disruption and potentially harmful element that threatens to upset the socially acceptable behavior of people based on gender, race, and class. In the case of *Blonde Venus*, the sexuality exuded by Marlene Dietrich was more palatable if it was the "Hot Voodoo" that made her sin. The Hot Voodoo makes us all sin, protagonist and spectator alike, it is the beat of the tom toms commanded by the knowing debaucher that causes sexual insurrection. The onscreen audience is mesmerized by the song and the hint of the taboo, much in the same way that Helen describes she is. And yet, these onscreen spectators, just like the spectators viewing the film, willingly participate in the taboo performance and derive pleasure from the liminal space that is offered through the dancers. The audience does not immediately react with awe, as they initially are frightened and not sure if the gorilla is real or a suit. Once Helen takes off her gorilla head, however, the crowd is relieved and applaud. Immediately following Helen's "Hot Voodoo" two curious occurrences follow. First the men and women of the audience are prompted to dance with each other, hinting that Helen's performance incites the crowd to act on their sexual attraction. Then, Nick goes backstage to meet Helen, a meeting in which he offers her money in exchange for being his companion—which Helen then uses to pay for her husband's treatment.

James Snead writes that Blonde Venus's "Africanized" persona is a cue that Helen has fallen from grace. But Snead speaks of Helen not just falling, but traversing between the roles of

"housewife/fallen nightclub star, Black ape/blonde woman, chaste spouse/sex symbol prostitute, good mother/wanted criminal, female gender/uncertain gender."[172] With such a variable persona, she must be anchored against something unchanging. Even Nick, with whom she reunites after she gives up her son, sacrifices his future with Helen in order to restore her to the role that she really craves—motherhood, but she has already quit her nightclub persona at this point. The most constant marker of her turn from society is the nightclub, whose value, too, is measured in contrast to the first performance in the film—Helen (Or Blonde Venus? Or Marlene Dietrich?) in a gorilla suit, followed by Helen in an afro-wig, backdropped by native sinners swaying to the African drums, acting as part teacher of this way of life and part witness to a transmogrification that they cannot participate in.

Richard Dyer articulates the construction of whiteness and how it functions in society. He argues that white male and female ideas of sexuality differ in that white males are shown to have strong sexual desires but also the willpower to not be overcome by them. white women, on the other hand, are exalted as pure and crucial to the reproduction of the white race, which creates a paradox in which she cannot be tainted with any signs of sexual intentions, yet she must be responsible for procreating whiteness in society. Dyer states "the means of reproducing whiteness are not themselves pure white," therefore, in order for the white man to show sexuality, Dyer states, he must associate himself with darkness (what he is not seen as) and yet conquer this darkness: "there need not be explicit or even implied racial reference, it is enough that there is darkness…Dark desires are part of the story of whiteness, but as what the whiteness of whiteness has to struggle against." As a result of this struggle, says, there exists a "projection

[172] James Snead, *White Screens, Black Images,* (NY: Routledge, 1994), 70.

of sexuality on to dark races" in order for white men to dissociate from their own desire. Yet, the divided nature attributed to white men is not just associated with sexuality, but with anything deemed as being low.[173] While Dyer says that it is white men who are exemplified as courageously fighting their desires, a white woman by contrast is thought to be unnatural if she shows sexual desire. [174]This serves as an explanation of why, in the early twentieth century, themes of the flapper and sexually free woman were actively trying to work out what this looked like in society through film. The theme of the fallen white woman who in turn gives into sexual desire in film was much more prevalent in films than any notion of a white man who struggled with the same. Black sexuality in early Hollywood was shown as the nadir of sexual representation, it's tendency to represent excess made it taboo and censorable. Still, this excess rarely existed on its own, it instead utilized to signify the fall of whiteness so prevalent in Hollywood films of the 1930s that it represented the paranoia of the big city and all of the sexual misfortune that could and did occur there.

The presence of Blackness as a precursor or even rationalization for the decline of an otherwise assumed moral white character is an old cinematic trope. It is most prevalent when questions arise about social order and societal obedience—will white people behave and take on their presumed birthright at the top of the American caste system? Or will they be like Black people, who disrupt the social order and are therefore estranged from any hope of material or reputable inheritance? Kaplan demonstrates Hollywood's use of psychoanalysis as a way to link women, especially white women, to Blackness as a way to show them as oppositional to white

[173]Richard Dyer, *White: 20th Year Edition,* (NY: Routledge, 2017), 27-28.
[174]Dyer, 29.

men, and by extension, patriarchy, including film noir.[175] Manthia Diawara speaks to the links between film noir and Blackness stating that the descent that (white) characters have undergone in film noir cinema has been accessed through many of the connotations associated with Blackness, including lawlessness.[176] Eric Lott writes that film noir is replete with characters of color who populate and signify the shadows of white American life in the 1940s.[177] *Blonde Venus* itself is not a film noir picture but it, like film noir, is a product of the Great Depression. In many ways it incorporates many of the same themes and visual elements explored in film noir: chiaroscuro lighting, themes of hopelessness, a femme fatale who uses her sexuality to get men to do her bidding, an evading of the law to live life on one's own terms, an inevitable encounter with hitting rock bottom in order to fulfill the compensating moral value that promises that a life of deviance means normal life cannot presume.

Orlando Patterson quotes Peter Suzuki C to comment on the form in which social death commences upon the slave (and by extension, its descendants). Patterson argues that Suzuki's interpretation of slaves amongst the Nia of Indonesia is consistent with status of most slaves: "the slaves are not mentioned in any ancestral myth, have no place in the world-tree, thus lack religion and consequently, a place in the cosmos. They have no past nor future, living as they do, on the whims and mercy of their masters. "[178] This social death is a prerequisite for life after slavery in which the former slave is still denied social equality, and who's labor and likeness is

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[175]Kaplan, E. Ann, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze,* (NY: Routledge, 1997), 100.

[176]Manthia Diawara, "Noir by Noirs: Towards a New Realism in Black Cinema," *African American Review*, Volume 50, Number 4, Winter 2017, 899.

[177]Eric Lott, *American Literary History,* 1997-10, Vol.9*,* "The Whiteness of Film Noir," (N.Y: Oxford University Press, 2022), 545.

[178]Patterson, location 1584-1590 (Kindle).

still used to enhance the economic and social status of whiteness. In film this equates to constructs of Blackness remaining the antithesis of whiteness, and where sexuality is involved, taking on the negative aspects of sexuality in order to prove the perceived positivity of whiteness. By speaking of the slave, I do not mean to confuse the idea of social death as an anachronistic occurrence that has no connection to the 1930s or much less to today. It is the conditions created during slavery and that persisted beyond the 13th Amendment that make for the case of a continued dynamic where "the marginal person, while a threat to the moral and social order, was often also essential for its survival. In cultural terms the very anomaly of the slave emphasized what was most important and stable, what was least anomalous in the local culture of the non-slave population."[179] In this case it would make sense that the incursion of deviant behavior that falls upon Helen has its access point through the liminal space that the construction of Blackness takes up, onscreen, though acting as a mirror of society's anxieties around Blackness and deviance. Furthermore, it is this access that allows Helen's personhood to reference the liminal spaces and identities of "housewife/fallen nightclub star, Black ape/blonde woman, chaste spouse/sex symbol prostitute, good mother/wanted criminal, female gender/uncertain gender," until she has given in to obedience to society.

Audiences and *Blonde Venus*

Reception of Blonde *Venus* was mixed, some were dubious about the plot ending with Helen being reunited with Ned, but most enjoyed seeing Dietrich in a new onscreen role as mother which helped garner sympathy for the conditions she found herself in the film. A

[179]Patterson, loc 1763.

September 17th, 1932 *San Francisco Chronicle* article said the story carries its heroine from "scenes of domestic tranquility to the bizarre luxury of an expensive night club, with pauses en route at haunts which 'nice people' get to see, as a rule, only on slumming expeditions."[180] A September 20th,1932 *San Francisco Chronicle* article painted Marlene Dietrich's Helen as "human," "exotic and thrilling," though forced into an evil life through her overpowering desire to keep her child with her when her father discovers her in a liaison with another man (Nick) and demands his child.[181] An October 9, 1932 *San Francisco Chronicle* article paints Helen as a loyal wife who "does everything in her power to save her husband, sacrificing social position that he may receive medical care."[182] The *Sacramento Bee* called *Blonde Venus* a story of a woman fated to be loved. Describing Helen as a woman fearful of losing her boy, and hiding with him "in sordid spots, leading a secret, furtive life."[183] *The New York Age*, a Black newspaper, wrote of *Blonde Venus* being a story of a woman who, to save her husband's life, "accepts the love of another man."[184] *The Washington Tribune*, also a Black newspaper, described Helen's bill as the Blonde Venus as occurring at a Harlem night club, where she meets Nick, falls in love with him, and loses her child due to her husband becoming "enraged," and "tears her child from her and orders her into the streets.[185] In a November 5, 1932 article by the *New York Age*, Helen is described as being "cast out by her husband…escaping in wild terror lest the police tear from her the little boy for whom she has endured such suffering and

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[180]*San Francisco Chronicle,* "Dietrich Stars At Paramount," September, 17, 1932.
[181]*San Francisco Chronicle,* "Blonde Venus Adds to Stars's Fame," September, 20, 1932.
[182]*San Francisco Chronicle,* "Fox-Oakland Films Marlene: *Blonde Venus* Shows Miss Dietrich," October 9, 1932.
[183]*Sacramento Bee, "*Blonde Venus Comes to Senator To-morrow," September 28, 1932.
[184]*The New York Age, "*Lowe's 7th Avenue Theater," October 29, 1932.
[185]*The Washington Tribune, "'*Blonde Venus' is New Triumph for Dietrich," November 4, 1932.

privation…cowering in terror in ramshackle hotels as the dread grip of the police reach her, fleeing always fleeing in the dead of night down hazardous fire escapes, into deserted railway stations."[186] The *Rand Daily* Mail, a Johannesburg, South Africa newspaper, described the character of Helen as "more sinned against than sinning."[187] Each of these articles describe Helen sympathetically, giving no judgment to the life she takes on to save her family, and later her life with her child. Even when she becomes part of the cabaret nightclub scene, she is not thought to be there because there is something inherently wrong with her, even though she does so well in the setting that she becomes world-renowned. Instead, Helen is referred to as the victim of a circumstance that causes her to act like those with which she has surrounded herself.

Blond Venus was such a success that the eponymous moniker was used to describe other women, including exhibition diver Helen Howard, Mae West, and Baroness Dorothy Von Ropp who was referred by *San Francisco Chronicle* as "Europe's Blonde Venus ."[188] The *LA Times* stated that the film's plot is unrealistic, though the acting was superb and endearing regarding the theme of a mother's love.[189] *The Atlanta Constitution*, a Black newspaper, called Dietrich's *Blonde Venus* "thoroughly human and deeply emotional" who, because of her husband, was "driven to the streets and clinging to her child"[190]

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[186]*New York Age, "Loew's Victoria,"* November 5,1932.
[187]*Rand Daily Mail,* "Marlene Dietrich: Blonde Venus at Coliseum; Some Brilliant Acting" November 4, 1933.
[188]Dan Rogers *San Francisco Chronicle*, "That Man Zog: Life of a King" (San Francisco, California) April 8, 1939.
[189]Philip Scheuer, *LA Times*, "Blonde Venus Arrives: Marlene Dietrich Superbly Photographed in Romantic Screen Play at Paramount Theater," October 8, 1932.
[190]*The Atlanta Constitution* "Dietrich is at the Paramount This Week in "Blonde Venus: To be Seen on Atlanta Screens This Week," September 25, 1932.

Most newspapers (white and Black) seemed to enjoy the film. Nevertheless, the locus of morality is highly associated with Helen, whom most interpret her waywardness as being a result of her family's financial need. Chon Noriega writes that the inception of The Code marked a time of a "conspiracy of silence" with film reviews during the '30s and '40s in which morality of the main characters are emphasized within the film, and portrayals of what was then considered sexual deviance is not spoken on.[191] While Noriega is speaking specifically about homosexuality, I contend that there was a predilection of reviewers to see Helen's deviance as not hers to begin with, thus silencing Helen's own deviance. Doherty makes note that the Code states that "the sympathy of the audience" was "never [to] be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin." However, by redeeming the character of Helen, she is deemed eligible for gaining the sympathies of the audience.[192] Jason Joy instructed the SRC to take into consideration the "effect of the picture as a whole" in relation to the Code, while still being careful to not upset censors with content. This largely influenced studios to adopt plots where wrongdoing was more liberally exercised in Pre-Code films. Moreover, creating character types that were shown to choose good in the end while being influenced to do wrong invited audiences, including film reviewers, to consider the effect of the lead character as a whole. They could then deem the character as good, while those outside influences, Black characters included, were deviant. While the Production Code Administration would limit the types of sexual depictions and situations shown in film starting around 1934, when Joseph Breen became the director, the practices of linking sexual

[191]Chon Noriega, "'Something's Missing Here!': Homosexuality and Film Reviews during the Production Code Era, 1934–1962," *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies, Cinema Journal Retrospective*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), 22.
[192]Doherty, 351.

deviance to outside influences persisted in major Hollywood films, as will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Helen's sexual availability and her morality is negated in favor of Helen being seen as a victim of extreme circumstances. But for the Black characters, it is not only assumed that they are wrong, we are only shown them within their capacity of wrongdoing. This capacity reinforces the main white character's penchant for choosing wrong. Given the dire state of African Americans since before the founding of this country up until this time, a survival mechanism has always included doing what made white people happy. Still, there were many who were vocal about the use of primitivism as an African American mode of entertainment, especially because it connected Black people to ideas of inherent evil.

Shane Vogel writes of W.E.B. Du Bois's dismissal of Claude McKay's novel *Home to Harlem* in 1927, in which he accuses the novel and McKay of pandering to primitivism, Du Bois's view of both being that they "opportunistically promoted images of Black deviance and social disorganization and gave the false impression that all of Harlem was a cabaret."[193] In 1944 writer Charles Glickberg, a white man, wrote of the tendency of popular American culture toward primitivism that started in the 1920s. He condemns the practice of the Black people who give in to the popularity of the aesthetic he argues white people perceived with a "fascination" mixed with "an unconscious but unmistakable condescension." To Glickberg, the "jaded taste of the white intelligentsia craved […] excitement, and the excitement was provided in abundance by the pounding rhythm of jungle drums, the fierce tempo of jazz music, the mad glee of tap

[193]Vogel, 135.

dancers, the element of sinister magic in the ancestral religion of the Negro."[194] Yet, the cult of primitivism did not just quench white desire for entertainment from Black people (them being in service to white desires). Its specific messages of primitive sexuality, religion, and sensibilities allowed white people to access a side of themselves that society told them they were not to be. As Manthia Diawara writes, "they enter into the funk, and become emancipated." Here, Diawara is speaking on the tendency for contemporary, Black-cast films to take on the style of film noir, but present Black characters who have fell from a socially acceptable image—an image usually attributed to whiteness. The funk Diawara talks about is the Blackness that is associated with defiance from social order. Yet, Diawara, is also commenting on the ways that all the associations with Blackness made by white society are construed into a desire, too, to be these things, yet not being able to be these things, a projection upon the image of Blackness allows them to live vicariously through these traits, while still being able to condemn the traits as being subhuman. It is the access point by which white people are able become emancipated, evil yet good, sexually charged yet chaste. Neither of these dichotomies really define a person, let alone a race, but the ability to cast these illusions upon Black people in order to uphold a desired society is older than the country itself. Glickberg states "the Negro problem is basically the white man's problem. The fear of negro uprisings, if negro domination and terrorism in the South, the myth of the negro running sexually amuck—all this testifies to the paranoiac streak of the ruling class, especially in the South...the assertion that the Negro is uncivilized, a primitive at heart, is further confirmation of this paranoiac streak."[195] In the early years of sound film, this paranoiac streak

[194]Charles Glickberg, "The Negro Cult of the Primitive," *The Antioch Review*, (Yellow Springs, OH: Antioch College, 1944), 49.
[195]Glickburg, 55.

was reflected in the use of Black sexuality as a tool to incite fear. Fear and excitement cause the same reaction in the brain so it is no wonder white people began to crave the excitement through the same institutions that cemented Black sexuality as deviant.[196]

Baby Face, Bombshell, and *Temple Drake*

While there are many films that insinuate Black licentiousness, I discuss *Blonde Venus* specifically because of the particular way it posits white sexuality to take on the aspects of Black sexuality the way Black sexuality has been referenced over and again in Classical Hollywood. In these films a primitivist affect is used to denote sexuality in excess *and* films that skip over the primitivist affect and simply tie sexual excess to Black characters in a number of films between 1932 to 1935. This can be seen in *Baby Face* (Green, 1933), a film about a white woman named Lily (Barbara Stanwyck) who leaves her hometown after her abusive father dies in a at-home explosion, and she is encouraged by her (white) male mentor to move to the city and use her feminine wiles to gain favor with men and secure a wealthy lifestyle for herself. Chico (Theresa Harris), a Black woman, leaves with her and serves as Lily's right-hand woman. Chico's presence and closeness to Lily is implicated in the scene of Lily's first sexual indiscretion where she has sex with a train operator so that he doesn't turn her and Chico in to the police for freight hopping as a means to get to the big city. Not only is Chico's closeness to Lily shown through their relationship while working in Lily's father's in-home speakeasy (when her father threatens to fire Chico, Lily threatens to leave, too), but when Lily has sex with the train operator, Chico is

[196]Alex Korb, "Predictable Fear: Why the Brain Likes Haunted Houses," *Psychology Today*, October 31, 2014, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/prefrontal-nudity/201410/predictablfear#:~:text=Surprisingly%20though%2C%20when%20you%20feel,difference%20between%20fear%20and%20excitement.

there in the freight car, too. The train operator holds on to Chico's arm tightly as he threatens them, then loosens his grip, brushing the inside of his hand along the length of her arm as Lily suggests an alternative arrangement. Lily goes to a dark corner in the freight car, while Chico moves to a dark corner on the opposite end, singing *St. Louis Blues.* While close-ups of the man and Lily's face are interchanged in shot, there is no close-up of Chico's, yet it is the sexuality of Chico that is implicated in Lily's indiscretion, not Lily's, who herself is mentioned as being pimped out by her father in his speakeasy before he dies and Lily heads to the big city with Chico. Here, even though Lily has been tainted by a misuse of her sexuality, she is at this point using her experience as a prostitute to further her own goals. She, as Janet Stainer suggests, has taken her role as the film's proverbial "bad woman," traversing from victim to victimizer.[197] Yet, it is the presence and singing of Chico that offers an access point for the self-imposed depravity of Lily. Chico's presence also serves as an implication of sexual impurity where pre-Code films were not able to be explicitly sexual because of the crackdown of the SRC.

Fig. 20 Chico watching and singing "St. Louis Blues" as Lily takes the train operator to the shadows to have sex with him, *Baby Face* (Green, 1933).

[197]Janet Staiger, "The Romances of Blonde Venus," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, Fall, 1997, 8.

The Story of Temple Drake (Roberts, 1933) is a film based on William Faulkner's novel, *Sanctuary*. The lead character, Temple (Miriam Hopkins), is referenced as a temptress who leads men on. She likes Stephen Benbow (William Gargan), a lawyer who has asked her to marry him, yet she refuses saying she is no good and that there are two sides of her, one that wants to be with only him and the other side she hates because she cannot control it. This scene is one of four that occur to set up Temple's demeanor. The first of the explanatory scenes show Temple coming home at four o'clock in the morning. First her hand is shown gripping the door while she is on the other side, the rest of her and her male suitor hidden on the other side. She tries to stave off her date who is not ready for the night to end. Though he is aggressive, Temple gets away and closes the door. Her grandfather, whom she is being raised by, scolds her for being out so late, to which Temple states she was with a man that graduated from her grandfather's alma mater, to which he, satisfied that she is at least dating someone reputable, relents. In the following scene, the man that was supposed to have been Temple's date for the night (we don't see his face with Temple but it is implied) is now at a bar complaining about her being a tease. Yet, the mention of Temple's name riles up another man that is implicated in dating Temple, as well. What Temple is able to hide from her grandfather is more clearly expressed in the next scene, however. What follows is an older Black man and woman who are servants of the Drake household. The man, sitting down, talks with the woman standing and ironing clothes for the Drakes, they are the Drake's servants. The conversation turns to Temple's negligee as the woman irons it, the man stating, "My thems pretty!" The woman responds, "They needs mending. Miss Temple is sure hard on her things. And aint no wonder. Wit nobody cept her own grandfather cant see past his own specs."

Fig. 21 Servants commenting on how "rough" Temple is on her negligee, insinuating she's been getting physical with men, *The Story of Temple Drake* (Roberts, 1933).

The implication here is that Black people have plenty of experience with fornication, and can, therefore identify its patterns more effectively than white grandfathers. Prior to the servant's scene, it is a bit of a mystery while the film works to unveil the evil that has befallen Temple. She is a tease, but much more than a tease, it is her unnatural womanhood that is exemplified by the servants. In the very next scene, Stephen is shown talking to his grandmother about Temple to which his grandmother states she has known three generations of Drakes and every once and a while there is one in the family that has a wild streak—one that has eventually landed each one in the gutter." While these scene's offer a crescendo of coded imagery that show that Temple as wayward, it is the presence of the servants, their confirmation of her waywardness, and their laughing about it as they talk that marks Temple as a bad woman, that confirms Temple with the type of wild characteristics Stephen's grandmother is talking about in the subsequent scene.

In *Bombshell* (Flemming, 1933), the reputation of Lola Burns (Jean Harlow) is at stake when her publicist promotes her persona as "unladylike" both through the roles he gets for her and by reporting fake scandals to the press. Yet, before it is revealed the type of woman she is forced to play, Lola is shown in bed, awakened by her maid, Loretta (Louise Beavers) at 6pm so

that she can get ready to go to set for her movie role. Lola asks Loretta, who is standing over her, why she is wearing the robe she gave her like it is negligee and asking what happened to the negligee she gave her. Loretta explains, "I know, Miss Lola, but the negligee which you give me got all tored up night before last." Here, Loretta appears somewhat shamefully, trying to cover herself in the robe that barely fits her. Lola replies, "Your day off is sure brutal on your lingerie." Here, just as in *The Story of Temple Drake*, the mention of torn lingerie corroborates that something indecent has happened because the lingerie is referenced as a problem, and it is referenced through Black characters who are coded as indecent because of their race yet both shown to know that the idea torn lingerie is frowned upon in society.

While Loretta is somewhat ashamed, however, her actions still link to Lola's persona of being sexually loose. What's interesting about this dynamic is that Lola goes from one form of deviance to another. In the beginning she is shown as a victim that is used by her studio and publicist to create a salacious persona, by the end she is lying to the adoption agency and choosing to raise a child without a father. Numerous times when Lola is shown being torn apart by the stress of being associated with her persona and other shenanigans, Loretta comes into the frame. When Hugo, one of Lola's suitors comes to set while she is working, making her director/ex-boyfriend, Jim, jealous, Jim purposely steps on his foot to which Lola lies, knowing Jim is jealous and stepped on Hugo intentionally. Here, Loretta is aligned to the right of Lola simultaneously cuing her servitude as well as becoming an indication of Lola's duplicitousness. When her publicist hears Lola is having a baby he comes to her home and asks her about it. While he speaks with Lola, under the assumption that she is pregnant, pitying her and calling her "poor baby," Loretta is consistently shown in the background but still next to Lola in the frame. Just prior to Lola revealing that she is trying to adopt, Loretta walks out of the room. In this

context she is seen as righted from her perceived err, as she has invited Jim to marry her and help her raise babies. Later, Lola has a breakdown due to all the people in her life misusing her for her money, including her brother, father, staff and her publicist. While her rant cites her circle as being toxic and leaching off her, Loretta comes into the background as Lola talks about adopting a baby whom she plans to raise by herself—no longer wanting Jim to be the father of her potential children. By this time the press has heard of and are calling her adoption a cover-up for the illegitimate they suppose she is having. Here, Loretta serves as an indication that Lola is perceived as a wayward woman, whose stardom has led her to be, if not sexually wayward, a symbol of an unnatural woman, the implication of such a thing being just as bad as it being real.

Fig. 22 Loretta, Lola's maid and only trusted confidant, comes into frame at the end of Lola's tirade against her family that ends with frustration about bringing a child up (albeit it by herself) around them all, *Bombshell* (Flemming, 1933). Her implication of raising a child as a single mother coincides with Loretta coming into the frame, which in itself implies immorality.

Implications of Black sexual excess is a common theme even when Black characters are the lead. *The Emperor Jones* shows Brutus Jones (Paul Robeson) as a playboy after he starts

making good money as a porter. Brutus has a wife when he leaves for his porter job, one that requires him to be gone for extended periods of time. He is shown as part of the church, singing with the congregation before he leaves for his job. Yet, when he is on the road and making more money than he had before, he takes up a girlfriend while he is living in New York, Undine (Fredi Washington), whom he first sees being caught cheating by his friend, Jeff (Frank H. Wilson) that she is dating. She changes from Jeff to Brutus, until Brutus gets tired of her and cuts her off, both romantically and financially. When she is dismissed by Brutus, she returns to Jeff.

Images of Black sexual excess were prominent in shorts as well as animated films. In *Cab Calloway's Hi-De-Ho*, Cab Calloway plays himself as a traveling performer. While much of the film showcases Cab's musical talent in jazz performance, the plot of the short has Cab talking with a porter on the train about making sure he keeps his wife home while he is out on the job. One night the man comes home earlier than expected to find Cab Calloway there with his wife. Both *Hi-De-Ho* and *The Emperor Jones* feature a Black kiss, but only under the circumstance of infidelity, as was common in the few Classical Hollywood films that had a Black kiss. In the animated short, *Old Man on the Mountain*, Cab Calloway voices both the owl that warns Betty (Bonnie Poe) of the Old Man and the terror he brings upon the town she lives in, and the Old Man, himself. Betty decides to go see the Man on the Mountain, likely to see if she can turn him to good. On her way she meets a woman walking away from the old man's house, crying as she pushes a carriage. When Betty asks what is wrong, the woman stops and pulls a blanket from the carriage that reveals three babies that look exactly like Old Man on the Mountain. When Betty arrives at the Old Man's house, he begins to sing a jazz song, sweeping Betty into somewhat of a trance as she is enthralled in performing the song and dancing with the old man. Yet, the Old Man quickly switches from intoxicating crooner to menacing as he tries to

grab Betty and place her under his will. The rest of the film is showing Betty running down the hill as the old man chases her.

Lastly, in this grouping of films there is *Okay Toots* (Chase, 1935) a *Freaky Friday* (Nelson, 1976) type of film ahead of its time. The story is Charley (Charley Chase) and his wife, Emily "Toots" Chase (Jeanie Roberts) who switch bodies one day when the wife is home receiving a reading from a fortune teller. The fortune teller is present when both Charley and Toots, in a fit of exasperation with each other, wish they could live the simpler life of the opposite sex. The following morning, the couple must go on in their day in the other's body. What is interesting about this story is that, unlike in *Freaky Friday*, where the mother and daughter switch bodies but not voices, Charley and Emily switch both. In addition, Charley seems to be aware that he has switched bodies and voices, but Emily takes on the persona of her husband along with his voice as if everything is normal. Sensing that there has been some shift in the sexual identity of Toots, the maid, Hattie (Hattie McDaniel) squints her eyes at Toots (who is in the body of Charley), "You aint yourself today, honey. You better let me undress you and put you to bed." Charley (as Toots) exclaims, "Undress me?!" to which Hattie responds, "Well, it wouldn't be the first time!" Hattie, here, is shown to have explicit knowledge of the immoral happenings; not only does she see that something is wrong because of her own sexual experience, Charlie's response implies her close (and possibly sexual) relationship with Toots has extended into improper relations with Charlie.

Fig. 23 Hattie suspecting something is awry with her boss and his wife, *Okay Toots!* (Chase, 1935).

Each of these films emphasize the ways that Black characters are linked to the idea of Black sexual excess. It is not that these characters are acting upon sexual desire, however. This Black sexual excess is displayed in the way that Black characters, who already have limited speaking parts and screentime, are constantly being connected to taboo sexual subjects and shown to have more experience with sexual subjects. Even when this sexuality was not threatening like in *Old Man on the Mountain*, it was normalized as a part of the personality of the Black servants being portrayed. Yet, the lack representation of Black characters otherwise causes projections of deviant sexuality such as this and in *Okay Toots!* to be more commonly linked to Black people as a whole, not just as an anomaly of characterization as a whole.

Conclusion

Around 1935, films began to emphasize the type of close relationships referenced in *Okay Toots.* By this time, Joseph Breen was presiding over the self-regulating organization, PCA, with an iron fist and films had to circumvent Breen's move to limit sexually suggestive dialogue even more.[198] Whether shown as adulterers, or performers draped in primitivist costumes (bearing midriff and all), or as having illicit knowledge through songs or dance or everyday household conversations with white employers, ; Black actors did not have a wide range of possibilities in representation and were most often shown as sexually impure. While films like *King Kong* serve as a metaphor for Black male sexuality, *Golddiggers of 1933* shows the musical number "Pettin' in the Park" in which a Black couple is a part of an ensemble of couples shown "petting" or kissing, yet, their park bench is shown in a tracking shot to be next to two monkeys kissing. There are a number of opportunities taken to implicate Black sexual excess or waywardness. Other films use non-Black persons of color in the same way Black people are used. *Blood Money* (Brown, 1933) shows Elaine Talbart (Frances Dee), a young and wild socialite, wanting to get up and dance with Hawaiian Hula dancers, before she gets wrapped up in a romance that turns her into a criminal. In *Flying Down to Rio* (Freeland, 1933), club singer Honey Hale (Ginger Rogers) sings "In me you see a sinner and dancing is my crime. It seems to sin I've got to give in to syncopated time. It makes me lose my dignity, it makes me lose my poise. Some folks call it music, my folks call it noise. I like music, sweet and blue. But music makes me do the thing I never should do." While the words are reminiscent of *Blonde Venus,* however, the big difference in this performance is that it is *not* a difference being marked

[198]Doherty, Chapter 5 (Kindle).

in the personhood of the singer, but a difference being marked in the type of lover the band leader, Roger (Gene Raymond) has taken on, being that they are in Rio de Janeiro. As the band plays the tune that Honey was just singing, Roger notices Delores del Rio (Belinha De Rezende) to whom his best friend and bandmate, Fred Ayres (Fred Astaire) remarks, "the Latin type," and Delores's white girlfriends who sit at the table with her relent, "What do these South Americans have below the equator that we don't?" Here, there is no wayward woman in mind, but a wayward romance.

While the signifiers differ in each film, the pattern of using Blackness to mark sexual difference as wrongdoing persists throughout films 1932-1935, including a primitivist aesthetic to connote sexual excess, using imagery to confirm excess and sexual difference, and using servants' explicit knowledge of sexual matter as a motif throughout films made at this time. This by no means suggests that films around this time did not still show Black sexuality as dangerous. *King Kong* (Cooper, 1933)*, Emperor Jones* (Murphy, 1933)*, Chloe, Love is Calling You* (Neilan, 1934)*,* and *Drums O' Voodoo* (Hoerl, 1934) make use of primitivist ideas that evoke danger. The portrayal of Black sexuality had in many ways been altered to accommodate the changing views of white people that not only enjoyed Black music but liked to visit the seedy parts of town in order to party both with and like Black people. In this way, Black sexuality was still shown to be feared, yet there was an exciting thrill that accompanied the fear that overwhelmed the scales and made white people more willing to openly embrace the multifaceted components of Black sexuality, with contingencies. While Black nightclubs and cabarets had frequent white visitors in real life, the image of white people donning their sexual desires had to be protected and projected upon Black characters, the idea of Black sexuality, or the expression of Black sexuality through song and dance. Yet, Black sexuality was never completely feared. There was too much

fascination with it by white people for fear to be the sum of all emotions and reactions to Black sexuality. The fear was what it could do. Black sexuality was referenced in film in a way that equated liking it too much to an eventual loss of control of the person linked too closely to it. So, to make the potentiality of what Black sexuality could do less of a threat, the purpose of Black sexuality changed. Perceiving that the way Black sexuality was seen could be altered, Hollywood worked to create a dynamic where Black sexuality could be commodified as a tool for whiteness, to serve once more. Instead of letting it control white people, it was instead controlled and, again, abased. This had already happened in society; the moment we see it most prominent in Hollywood is in the films between 1932-1935. This evolution of the depiction of Black sexuality would see another shift after the PCA was instituted, in which Black sexuality, in service of whiteness, was used to project not sexual, but emotional arousal.

Chapter Three: The Great Lie –Black Sexuality, Emotional Labor and Mother of Sorrows in Hollywood Films (1936-41)

Miss Maggie never tell ya,
Not till Judgment Day, what you done to her
But I knows and you knows, Mista Pete
There's only one thing to do, now
And that's to go away and stay away
Mista Pete, you get right back in that airplane
And fly away

The Great Lie (Goulding, 1941)

If we go back to the definition of sexuality outlined in the introduction of this dissertation, it is indicative of the actions, thoughts, and feelings of a person regarding sex. When considering Black sexuality as defined by American society and in American cinema, the occurrence of a Black person onscreen can be seen as representative of a collective or inclusive group, in this case African Americans or any Black person from Africa, because they have been defined by the hegemony through stereotypes and myths. It is for this reason that the discussion of Black sexuality in this dissertation is concerned with the established portrayal of it in Hollywood. Hollywood has played an integral role in embodying the stereotypes and myths around Black sexuality — a story told mostly through the purported experiences and observations of white authors. In this chapter, I uncover how the idea of whiteness necessitates the emotional labor of Black people, especially due to its notions of Black licentiousness. Popular Hollywood films made between 1936 and 1941 tended to veer toward melodrama more than the previously reigning musical. These films often included some of the most popular African American actors of the time (Hattie McDaniel, Louise Beavers, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson) playing subservient roles and getting limited screen time. Dramatic films, namely *The*

Great Lie (1941)*, Jezebel* (1938)*,* and *Gone with the Wind* (1939)*,* shifted the onscreen focus of ~~use of~~ Black sexuality in the domestic space to depictions of closeness between a Black servant and their white enslaver or employer, similar to what we see in *Baby Face* (Green, 1933) but with the added element of the Black character projecting the emotions of their boss not through song, but through dialogue. These close relationships typically consisted of the Black servant's use of their sexual prowess to help their employer and a projection of white characters' deep emotions of sorrow onto Blackness. Both of these tropes were centered around the cinematic portrayal of the subservient Black characters' sexuality.

While there was a variance in how Black sexuality was portrayed across popular entertainment at the turn of the century, two things can be ascertained: First, Black sexuality, just as any other entity onscreen, was constructed to be perceived a certain way. In her book *Reel to Real* (1996)*,* bell hooks states that films give a reimagined, reinvented version of the real.[199] According to this logic, I propose we could think of Black sexuality as a representation in and of itself. In other words, its constant connection to being deviant meant that any reference to a Black character meant automatically associating that character to being inherently sexually deviant–even if this deviance was tamed when working in white spaces. The second absolute truth about the construction of Black sexuality in Hollywood film: Black sexuality's construction was meant to fulfill a role just as every other entity onscreen was meant to. A long-standing practice, hooks states, "Blackness as commodity is appropriated by mainstream media and then

[199]bell hooks, *Reel to Real* (NY: Routledge, 1996), 1.

marketed as fictive ethnography."[200] By exploring the patterns set forth in portrayals of Black sexuality we may come to understand what function it has played in Hollywood film.

In the first chapter, I discussed films that focus in one way or another on the fear of Black sexuality in action—the belief that Black people were always one step away from their desire to act out sexually. This led not only to a fear of Black men raping white women, but even worse, a fear that the seductive lure and pervasiveness of Black sexuality would malign white people, causing them to act in the same way Black people allegedly did. In the second chapter, I examined cinema's adjustments to this fear as reflected in the popularity of jazz culture. I argued that this adjustment worked to empathize with white people who were said to act out because of Black culture, fostering a more understanding reception of this "acting out" as long as there was a compensating moral value and the social hierarchy remained intact. In this chapter, I demonstrate that white people were shown to be able to overcome sexual thoughts (or at least the importance of being able to do so was emphasized through white characters), while Black characters were shown to always be susceptible to sexual desires and deviance. Importantly, the films I analyze here also illustrate that even this Black tendency toward the sexual could be of service to white people and the idea of whiteness.

This chapter focuses on the trope of the faithful Black servant as he or she (and it was usually "she") was used to project the feelings of their employer in American films made between the mid 1930s and early 1940s. However, this does not mean that there was never a sentimental Black servant character type before this period. One of the earliest onscreen depictions of a Black character was indeed a servant as seen in Tom of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

[200]hooks, 5.

(Porter, 1903). Tom was every bit as sentimental as he was impractical because he chose to ignore his trauma and forgo his agency in exchange for perceived safety. Yet, even here, Black characters usually projected feelings that protected whiteness because they were constructed in the way that white people saw Black people and envisioned ideal Black behavior in society. Lazy, dim-witted, sassy, sly, treacherous, murderous, uncontrollably sexual — the fact that these harmful fabrications were reused so pervasively belies the anxieties that white people were trying to alternately address, problematize, ease tensions around, and solve, in order to make sense of an increased social presence of Blackness in the mainstream as well as in large cities. As hooks argues, "movies teach so much because the language of both images and words that they use is accessible." This chapter will address how these images and words work in tandem to create meaning and instruct audiences. [201]

When we analyze the repeated examples of Black characterization being recycled over decades, we can decipher the codes used within. The persistent use of these Black depictions is in service of the white gaze. The previous chapter recognizes the cinematic normalization of Black sexual excess as a staple of American culture. Yet, these Black characters were usually one-dimensional, had no character arc, and at times were used merely as entertainment whether or not they helped to advance the plot of the white characters in the film. The films that I am speaking about in this chapter show Black characters who are a definite help in the advancement of the plot. They remain projections of the fears of white people of Black sexuality, but their character types are not the only projections. Their portrayed affect is the projection of main white characters' feelings. On the surface these character types and the scenarios they are used in seem

[201]hooks, 87.

to work to normalize the Black figures in white spaces giving a utopian view of how white and Black can coexist. Yet, the actions of these Black characters mostly represent a preference—the Black character being of service to the constructed view of whiteness. Therefore, the expressed view of the vulnerable negro servant, neither owning their own story nor being able to be the main characters in their own story, was instead used in service of white emotional support. This brings me to the crux of this chapter —though studios recurrently recycled stereotypes of Black characters, the *circumstances* in which they had use-value evolved. This means that while fear of Black sexuality was a constant trope in films reflecting the constant fears of white people, how this fear manifested in films had a shift.

The characterization of Uncle Tom as the chaste, good-hearted servant was just as much a reflection of a fear of Black sexuality as the brute found in films such as *The Birth of a Nation*—Tom is just the response to the fears that were expressed in the actions of the brute character. In *Blonde Venus*, Helen's proximity to Blackness informs her own perceived harmful intentions. It is because Blackness (the stories that are created by white people about what it means to be Black), here, is in service of whiteness (the stories that are created by white people about what it means to be white) and shown as difference, that it functions to offer whiteness an access point to transgress gender, class, and racial boundaries. The throughline in these stories of Blackness is how fear of becoming Black, and all the hardships it entails, can convince white viewers to obey the rules of society. In the films discussed within this chapter, I examine how Black sexual excess was styled to produce the sadness that results from white people attempting to access modes of duality through Blackness: right and wrong, sexually chaste versus sexually charged, obedience or disobedience. In many cases Black characters were used to perform the sadness or remorse of their boss or master; they seem to have an ability to be the same but

different, like a mirror image, but in effect not able to reflect their own image or the image that they desire. This paradigm leaves Black characters unable to effectively define themselves, let alone their own sexuality. Hollywood films between 1936 and 1941 became especially adept at portraying African American servants' emotional depth as stemming from inherent sexual deviance and working toward redemption that they could never truly reach. In contrast, any white character showing deviant sexual behavior is paired with a Black character and can only be redeemed once their actions are set on the right side of the binary, effectively entrapping both whiteness and Blackness to their respective, myth-laden sexual performance norms. Black sexuality served as a marker of the need for distinguishing Black behavior from white behavior. whiteness in its juxtaposition to Blackness, could then commit the acts associated with Blackness, without ceding its position in the social hierarchy.

There are few things that are known about the lives of a Black servant in a Classical Hollywood film. Did Beulah have children of her own? Did Pearl ever finish secondary school? Did Sam even like playing the piano and how did he come to learn it? What we know about the quintessential Classical Hollywood Black servant is what was important to the role they were playing within the story. The epigraph of this chapter is dialogue performed by Violet (Hattie McDaniel) in the film *The Great Lie* (Goulding, 1941) — but little is known about Violet. In fact, every scene that Violet is in, she is on the job and looking out for the interest of Maggie (Bette Davis). At times she adds more information to the story for context, and often she comes to the defense of her white mistress against any potential antagonists. Another example of this is when Violet speaks to Peter (George Brent) who has flown in his plane to the Maryland countryside to let Maggie know that the woman he thought he'd just married, Sandra (Mary Astor), was not yet divorced from her estranged husband. Though Peter is in love with Maggie,

he marries Sandra, an internationally renowned Classical pianist, after Peter and Maggie take a break. When he arrives at what looks to be a former plantation (with scores of Black servants who once served Maggie's father still working for her), he is met first by Jefferson (Sam McDaniel), one of the Black servants who speaks to Violet about being excited that "Mista Pete" is coming back to visit. Violet, from Jefferson's first mention of Pete as the plane is landing, is in defense and does not want Peter to come to the home, knowing that he is there to meet with Maggie. While Jefferson helps Peter out the plane and is friendly toward him, Violet attempts to stop Peter in his tracks from going into the home:

> Peter: (whistles to announce he is there) Hello, Violet.
> Violet: No use usin' that whistle, Mista Pete. That sound belongs in the days that is gone.
> Peter: (chuckling) Ahh, where's Ms. Maggie?
> Violet : Mista Pete, if you take my advice, you'll get right back in that airplane and fly like a bird-right back where you come from!
> Peter: (Pinching Violet's cheeks) I've only just arrived, and I want to see Maggie.
> Violet: Mista Pete, if you take my advice, you'll get right back in that airplane—
> Peter laughs a bit again and walks around Violet to go toward the outside stairs that lead to the house. Violet moves to get in front of him again and puts her hands up in front of her to signal Peter to stop.
> Violet: Now ain't nobody gonna use no force, Mr. Pete. If your conscience don't keep you from goin' up, your good manners should. Just think Mista Pete.

Maggie, who is laying on a couch in her study, sick with the sniffles, calls Violet upstairs. Violet tells Maggie that she can't see Peter and plans to tell Peter she is sick. When she returns downstairs, she tells Peter that Maggie is sick because she was out the house when she found a newspaper announcing his marriage to Sandra. Maggie was so heartbroken she didn't even notice the rain while she was walking home.

Violet: We sees the paper. It's a fine thing when you have to read about your friends in the papers.
Peter: (looks down at his glass of water) Oh, I'm sorry.
Violet: Miss Maggie never tell ya, not till Judgment Day, what you done to her. *But I knows and you knows, Mista Pete.* There's only one thing to do now. And that's to go away and stay away, Mista Pete, you get right back in that airplane, and fly away.

Just then, Maggie calls down to Pete to come upstairs. When he arrives, she is standing up and near her amply lit fireplace as if she is not sick, but she has the sniffles. The two talk, and just as Peter is about to tell Maggie that he is not married as he thought, Maggie asks him scoffingly if he is there because he feels he made a mistake. Just then, Peter decides not to tell her but to speak to Sandra, first, about the news to see if she really loves him before he decides to leave the union, he made with her to pursue Maggie again. What is interesting about the scene, however, is that Maggie doesn't tell Peter how the news hurt her, instead Violet knocks and then abruptly enters the room as if she cannot take the heartbreak that she and Maggie are feeling at the moment.

Violet: (crying and a bit hysterical) Excuse me, Ms. Maggie, I just had to come up. Mr. Pete, yous bad for us around here!
Maggie: (Grasping at Violets arm and looking down as she speaks much more quietly) Violet…
Violet: (Putting her arm around Maggie as to hug and act as a barrier between Maggie and Peter) Your lady wife must be waitin for ya now!
Peter: Violet, I am sure your intentions are the best, but this is a personal matter.
Violet: (Still crying) There ain't nothin personal with Ms. Maggie dat ain't personable with me! Why since she that big (uses other hand to indicate knee height), I've always—"
Maggie: (in a cool tone and still quieter tone) Violet, please. Pete you better go.

Peter leaves, though a bit reluctantly, as Maggie looks at him through stone-cold eyes now that he's upset Violet, and Violet holds Maggie in her bosom to care for her while Violet, herself, is the one who is visibly crying. At the end of the scene, before Peter exits, there is a shot

of Violet and Maggie with their back to the doorway that is meant to simulate Peter's eye view. Violet, still holding Maggie in a medium shot where mostly Violet's upper back is visible, the back of her head and a part of the side of her face as she is seen still crying and embracing Maggie, a portion of the top of her head is visible, but she is mostly covered by Violet. Violet continues to cry as the two hold each other and Maggie, who is sniffling from crying gently, tells Violet not to cry. Peter leaves.

The plot of the film becomes even more wound-up in chaos from there. Peter returns home to tell Sandra they are not legally married. He tells her they need to be married on Tuesday; the date she will officially become divorced. Though she has a concert, Peter states if she loves him, she will skip the concert and marry him. She is strong-willed and does not cancel, so Peter marries Maggie. Days after they marry, Peter has to go to Brazil to help the government accomplish some critical work in the rainforests, and his plane goes missing. Sandra tells Maggie she is pregnant and wants Peter back, but when they find out Peter might be dead, Maggie takes Sandra to Arizona for months so Sandra can have the baby and give it to Maggie so she can raise the child as her own. When the child is still an infant, Peter returns home to find out he is a father. When Sandra hears Peter is alive, she makes Maggie tell Pete what happened, hoping that he will choose her, but he stays with Maggie, and Sandra, reluctant but defeated, chooses to leave the baby with them.

The Great Lie has a number of scenes that show Violet emoting based on the feelings of Maggie, yet the inaugural scenes that lead up to and show Violet with Maggie are notable for a number of reasons. For one, they connote a pairing of the boss/maid duo that works to expose the waywardness of Maggie, even when Violet seems to be the most even-headed person in the room between her, Peter, and definitely Maggie. Violet speaks to Mista Pete about good manners

because she knows that others will recognize Peter as a married man, one who should not be going to the homes of other women. She was ok with Pete visiting when he wasn't married but because she is protective of Maggie, she knows that Pete visiting will not only bring more harm to Maggie emotionally, but that she will be put at risk of being gossiped about. Yet, Violet is still careful that she is not telling Peter what to do, "Mista Pete if you take my advice…," and she even puts her hands up as if she is going to physically restrain Peter, but she says "I ain't gonna use no force…" Yet, out of the three of them, Violet tries but can't help but speak her mind and show her feelings. In a way she is showing that she cannot be proper and unobtrusive, she is set up to be shown as in opposition of Maggie and Peter. She is, in fact, allowed to let her emotions spill over a bit — first because her Blackness is connected to ideas that she is uncivilized, but also, because she is projecting the angst of Maggie. She is so overcome by what Peter has done that she cannot help but talk about the elephant in the room that Maggie and Pete cannot speak about. And though Peter is sorry and wants to make things right, he does not apologize to Maggie, but he does apologize to Violet as if she is the one caught up in his scandals, once when she confronts him about his marriage that they found out about in the papers, and a second time before he leaves the home, he does not touch Maggie but squeezes Violet's arm a bit and tells her sorry. Violet, here, is acting as an emotional proxy for Maggie, even though Maggie is the one who has committed all of the "unsuitable" actions, even letting him come upstairs, alone, when it has been widely publicized that he is married. Although we know that Peter is not married, the scene places the emphasis on what should have been done had Peter actually been married. Yet, because Violet presumed that his and Maggie's behavior violated his marriage vows, Violet became the outward reflection of Maggie's internal suffering.

Fig. 24. Maggie convinces Sandra to give up her baby so that Maggie can raise Peter's heir. The Great Lie (Goulding, 1941).

Violet is a vessel, emoting all of Maggie's sorrows to Peter and the audience (and perhaps some of Peter's undercover sorrow for having hurt Maggie). Why is it necessary for Violet to be a part of the equation? Here, Violet becomes the signifier for the chaos that ensues throughout the film's plot. She is the opposite of Maggie, yet she is the same, like a mirror image. As mentioned previously, Black people were presumed to be wayward inherently, but sometimes their bodies were not presented to represent any real kind of humanity. Writing of the exhibition of Sarah Baartman in France, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting states her "symbolic presence acts as a mirror, legitimizing existing notions of the superiority of France and the inferiority of the Other."[202] Similarly, Violet acts as a mirror and access point to orient the wayward display of both Maggie, who believes that Peter is married and as such she should not speak to him, and Peter who is ostensibly married. Violet's presence creates a liminal space that

[202]T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 37.

both Peter and Maggie can exist in because Violet is allowed to join the story and take on the backlash for the choices that Maggie has made. Throughout the film, Violet is shown helping Maggie in varying degrees —though it is unclear whether or not she knows that the baby is really Maggie's or not. Violet's contribution to the thematic space of the opening scenes almost gives permission for audiences to see Maggie as wayward. With Violet being used as a marker for indecent behavior early in the film, the tone is set later for Maggie's indiscretions as she is shown to take on the space of mock husband when Sandra is having the baby in Arizona.

Fig. 25. Violet helps Maggie take care of the baby, but she gives a knowing glance that something is awry, *The Great Lie* (Goulding, 1941).

In *The Great Lie*, the most demonstrative scene that shows Maggie conducting herself in a state of waywardness is when she takes Sandra to Arizona in order for her to give birth. Maggie, who is paying for Sandra's room, board, and medical expenses, takes on the role of man or even caring husband as she takes care of Sandra. She is kind when Sandra is annoyed and critical. She goes out and picks up food and supplies to provide for Sandra. Most importantly,

when Sandra is in labor, she becomes as a worried husband pacing outside the door of the waiting room for his son to be born (not to mention, she is waiting for a woman to birth the child that is to be hers, as well). As Maggie paces back and forth outside of the room that Sandra is in, the nurse tends to Sandra while the doctor waits in the room with Maggie until the point that Sandra is ready to deliver. Maggie wears pants, hair is pulled back to make it look like her hair is shorter than it is (in previous scenes her hair is down and she wears a dress). The doctor comments that Maggie smokes a lot, a trait usually thought of belonging to a man, especially one waiting for his wife to deliver a baby. The conversation proceeds:

Doctor: So, you never had a child of your own huh?
Maggie: No.
Doctor: Mm. Pity. Just the sort of woman that should have had one. Oh well, you'll have plenty of time suppose.

Just then Maggie moves her arm so that it is no longer visible.

Doctor: Spelled as life with capital letters. A woman without a child is like a man without an arm. A right arm—

The doctor goes on to ask Maggie about her husband, whom she says has passed away. He asks her what he was like but she is short with him and changes the subject. Shadows are pronounced over Maggie's face as she speaks with the doctor. Before the doctor goes into the room to deliver the baby, he grabs Maggie by the arms and says:

Doctor: You know what I miss? I miss the father standing around and getting in everybody's way the way, waiting for me to say, 'Well old man, it's all over and they're doing nicely.

Thematically, Maggie's persona takes on the characteristics of a man. The indication that Maggie is to be seen in a way other than is supposed to is set up early, with Maggie's scenes with Violet. It is Maggie's closeness to her maid, the appearance of Violet as a Black woman, and Violet's (unrealistic) connection to Maggie's affair that lends a sort of permission for Maggie to be seen as wayward. And what is also representative of Violet's Blackness is her automatic connection to sexual excess. Violet's Blackness, especially her connection to sexuality, acts as a liminal space that affords Maggie the ability to act out of character yet still return to a normalized depiction of her character when her husband comes back. Metaphorically, Maggie's proximity to Blackness allows her to mimic it, or simply be deviant, without taking on the burden of actually being deviant or being seen as irredeemable, and thus take on social death. Deborah Gray White has written that white people have long been convinced that Black women had unlimited sexual freedom.[203] She notes many white women feared being ridiculed, abandoned, and sent out of any decent home by society for acting the way Black women are said to act. [204]

The portrayal of the sad Black servant was not a new phenomenon in 1941, however. We have already spoken about *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its many iterations that highlighted sadness of the Black servant. This portrayal of sadness is directly linked to the illicitness that Blackness is imbued with in that it reflects the suffering that Black people must go through for their sins. In *Hoodoo Ann*, Ann is coded as Black through her social death mirrored through her connection to Blackness as Hoodoo becomes a metonym for Blackness and as Ann is visually

[203]Deborah Gray White, *Ain't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999), 39-40.
[204]White, 40.

and thematically connected to Blackness through her relationship with Black Cindy. Even in *Baby Face*, the sadness of the blues that Chico sings is meant to mirror the sadness that Lily experiences for her given lot and the fight she has to endure in order to be redeemed from social death. The difference in the sadness the characters express can be reduced to our racial expectation of them. Onscreen, a Black person is implied to have evil befall him or her because of their inherent connection to evil. A white character, by contrast, will be shown in a myriad of tropes that not only frees them to weave in and out of evil behavior, but also allows the burden of the actions they conduct to be projected onto an opposite, especially when the white character is redeemed in the end. In this way a Black character does not really reflect a number of possibilities of being but is instead designed to serve the ideas of the architects of the story. And what does this accomplish? Well, for one, it allows a white character to play into certain negative tropes without being seen as a threat to society. Centering people of color within the plot to imply the deviant actions of the main character is, as previously noted, a longstanding practice.

In *The Great Lie*, Maggie's closeness to Violet is implied when we see Violet standing up to Mista Pete on Maggie's behalf, stating that she had watched over Maggie her entire life. This closeness to Blackness comes with a warning that being too close to it can make you act the way Black people are said to act. When Jacqueline Stewart says that *What Happened in the Tunnel* exposes the fear that both African Americans and white women warning of its time that the influx of rural southern Black migrants coming to big cities could mean a slip in morals for white people, the presence of a close relationship with a Black servant implies there is a slip in morals amongst white people that should be addressed. The big concern is that this adds to the stereotype that Black people are sexually immoral, but white behavior can only mimic this supposed bad behavior or be transformed so that they no longer play the role. With the presence

of Blackness, the reason for a white person acting out of character can be explained and excused as an execution of their privilege of being able to return to good. Maggie, then, is shown a number of times as acting out of alignment for what is proper for white womanhood, and then can simply be restored to the natural story of her white womanhood.

Now we can certainly go in the direction of logic that says that behaving badly is the reason why society shuns some. But the way our society has worked is that there is usually a person who wins and someone who loses. Because power is of concern, there is usually a far greater number who lose than who win. Our tenets of liberty and justice spell out a scenario that suggests that we are built upon a meritocracy, but the law and its enforcement require some to make greater sacrifices while receiving less and others smaller sacrifices to receive a far bigger slice of the pie. Furthermore, the way we speak about others works to determine how they are seen and what actions are more likely to be attributed to them. Therefore, the actions of a white person will be read differently than that of a Black person's, onscreen, even if it is the same action. This is the reason that Black characters were used to imply a white character's actions were deviant. Because negative connotations are associated with Blackness, it is easier to read an action of a Black person as deviant than that of a white person. Furthermore, it allows the white character to step out of character, so to speak. These actions are reinforced by the plot that allows for compensating moral values to address the action. As stated in the last chapter, Black people in many Classical Hollywood films did not have the benefit of being able to be included in a compensating moral value because not only were they not the focus of the narrative most times, but this also further implies that they were irredeemable. This made it easier to digest the hardships that befell Black characters, not because they weren't heavy but because believing they are naturally deviant means that their luck will naturally be ill-fated at times, as seen with

Hoodoo Ann. This also makes scenes, like the first discussed in this chapter, where Violet is crying inconsolably much more palpable. These scenes support the notion of inevitable Black suffering based on lacking merit in society. The dynamic that befalls white characters, by contrast, is usually ostracization until they obey the tenets of society and become as they are supposed to be. They can teeter on both sides but staying too long on the wrong side, eventually, leads to a fate similar to that of Black people. But if you only show Black people in a limited light, as one-dimensional characters, and as best suited to serve whiteness, there is not much room to be anything else but a problem in society. These recycled scenarios become a narrative that can be reiterated in society until it is seen as truth. The image that people believe is true is actually the image that others have created to suit their narrative, and essentially becomes a mirror image of their own fears and desires. For use in Hollywood films, specifically, it licensed depictions to be consumed by audiences that ultimately taught that while Blackness is irredeemable, whiteness is allowed to be on the other side of the binary, continuously and always with the chance to still be redeemed.

The portrayal of white people as indecent in Classical Hollywood was usually attributed to behaviors associated with Blackness: licentiousness, infidelity, adulterousness, extreme violence, jazz music, and the rejection of gender roles. white characters' adoption of any of these attributes was, in turn, implied to be caused by the presence of Blackness. Examples of this can be seen many films including *Safe in Hell* where the presence of Leonie (Nina Mae McKinney) and Newcastle (Clarence Muse) along with the setting of a predominantly Black Caribbean Island helps to restore the functionality of Gilda's (Dorothy Mackaill) whiteness by allowing for her to be shown as evil and shunned by society before she is fully restored. In *Baby Face,* before we are shown Lily (Barbara Stanwyck) about to commit her first sexual indiscretion as a means

to climb up the socioeconomic ladder, the presence of Chico is used in the scene to characterize the actions of Lily as both wayward but also outside the norm of what she should be associated with. Even with mirroring the sadness associated with the plight of Lily as she sings "St. Louis Blues", Chico does not appear to mourn for herself or the difficulties she has faced in her life. In *Bombshell* (1933), Lola's (Jean Harlow) scandals as well as her desire to raise a child though she is unmarried is typified by the presence of Loretta (Louise Beavers) often coming into the background. In *Okay Toots* (1935), Emily (Jeanie Roberts) is more of the transgressor than her husband, Charley (Charley Chase) because she goes along with the switch as if she had always been in the role of her husband. Her indiscretions are underscored by her connection to her maid, Hattie (Hattie McDaniel), who not only knows the wife enough to know that she is not in the right body but offers to undress her as she had before. The reaction by the husband who, in the story, is himself but presents to others as if he is in the body of his wife, tells us that there is something awry with the maid--being the only other one who knows that something is off from the wife--and with her level of familiarity with the Emily since she has seen her unclothed. In *The Story of Temple Drake* (1933), Temple's (Miriam Hopkins) loose behavior is foregrounded in the opening and subsequent scenes: she is shown coming home late and manipulating her grandfather so that he does not fuss at her, she is mentioned by men in a bar/saloon who claim to know her somewhat intimately (a trope used to imply a promiscuous woman), and, following this scene, the Black employees of Temple's grandfather are used to apprise her promiscuity by mentioning that her grandfather would have a better idea of what she was up to if saw that her underwear often has rips in it.

The characterizations of Blackness as wayward help set the parameters of the (evil) actions of a white character because it codes the wayward behavior of white characters as Black

behavior. In this way, the presence of Blackness exists as myth as it acts as a signifier that the actions of a white character are not suitable or sustainable to the actions, thoughts, and likeness associated with the myth of whiteness. The presence of a Black person is used as *mise en scéne* to help viewers understand the immoral path that is being taken. Blackness becomes part of the scene as a sort of shadow that is used to see the actions of a main character as unprincipled, just as shadows on a face can indicate their dark motive.

Projection takes the idea of influencing characterhood one step further. It shows both the influence of one person onto another as well as how these influences operate systemically to affix both parties to their assigned roles in society. In the case of *The Great Lie*, Maggie's waywardness is informed by Violet's early appearance onscreen with her. Violet may be a devoted servant that cares for Maggie even as she helps shield her from the troubles of this world, but it is Violet's knowledge of the world that lets her know that she needs shielding. When Pete lands, Violet knows exactly what kind of trouble he is bringing to Maggie's door, because she is in danger of becoming the other woman, or what's worse, being known as the other woman. And when Pete makes it upstairs to see Maggie, Violet intercedes with, once again, the very words that Maggie cannot speak. It seems as if Maggie is initially kept from being associated with indecency, whereas she can still be implicated through Violet acting as her proxy. As stated previously, Pete apologizes to Violet, twice, but his apologies really belong to Maggie, whom he has actually wronged. Maggie's sadness is projected onto Violet who performs Maggie's sorrow.

In previously addressed films such as *The Story of Temple Drake*, *Bombshell*, *Okay Toots*, Black maids and butlers served their masters, but they also had a line or two that implicated them as having expert knowledge in the realm of sex. In *Temple Drake,* the servants

understood why Temple was constantly coming home with torn undergarments. In *Bombshell*, Loretta expresses that she had torn undergarments, and in *Okay Toots*, it is implied that the servant Hattie has intimate relations with the wife in the family. Sexual deviance is shown to be connected to Blackness in a number of ways. Sometimes the deviance shows up in the occurrence of infidelity as seen several times within *Emperor Jones* (1933) with the characters of Brutus (Paul Robeson) and Undine (Fredi Washington. Sometimes the deviance shows up as uncontrollable urges, as seen with both Zeke and Chick in *Hallelujah!* (1929), the Blackface character of Gus (Walter Long), and as seen with the character of *King Kong* (1933). In *Showboat* (1936), the deviance shows up as a woman singing Negro songs and passing as white. Yet, the presence of Blackness also often hits at a sexual deviance in the air, transferable by means of its sheer effervescence--the deviance is noted by the fall of the characters. Its presence seems to be able to alter the very image of those nearby it, almost as if it were reflecting its likeness onto something else. Just as in *The Great Lie,* this is evident in both *Jezebel* and in *Gone with the Wind*, where the two protagonists are linked to waywardness through their relationships to their servants. These two films are potent illustrations of how attaching the persona of whiteness to the idea of Black sexuality is a cinematic device that gives white characters room (and sometimes cause) to act out of character, while retaining opportunity to return to white propriety.

From the moment the main character, Julie (Bette Davis), is first referenced by her Aunt Belle, there is sense of a hint of trouble. Julie's reputation in the film is preceded by the play that the film was adapted from. A synopsis of *Jezebel* (Davis, 1933) the Broadway play, when reviewed by the Production Code notes Julie as detestable for her indiscretions, and is content

with the ending of her following Pres to Lazarette Island.[205] *Jezebel* was believed by much of the press to be made by Warner Bros. as a way to capitalize on the hype the David O. Selznick's purchase and the preproduction of *Gone with the Wind,* which was anticipated to be made into a film by MGM.[206] For Davis, who had already won an Oscar for her role as Joyce Heath in *Dangerous* (Green, 1935), this was an opportunity to play yet another complex character in hopes of garnering favor with the Academy.

The opening scene of *Jezebel* is 1852 in New Orleans; Buck (George Brent) enters a salon with Ted Dillard (Richard Cromwell) at the St. Louis Hotel with where De Lautrec (Georges Renavent) is drinking and talking about Buck's lost love, Julie, who is engaged to marry Preston Dillard (Henry Fonda). After an exchange of words, Buck decides to have a duel with De Lautrec because he mentions Julie's name in a saloon, which he considered is indecent at the time because it implies the woman is fit to be treated like a whore. Buck, a friend of Pres, and Ted, Pres's brother, leave the saloon on the way to Julie's party. Buck purchases a flower from a Black flower girl while being approached by Julie's uncle who is her guardian and who states he doesn't like Julie's name being mentioned in talks of a duel, to which Buck responds that he did not hear her name mentioned and that he only plans to give De Lautrec a flesh wound. The next scene shows guests at Julie's part, yet much to the embarrassment of her Aunt Belle (Fay Bainter), who lives there too, Julie has not yet arrived. Mrs. Kendrick (Spring Byington) arrives with her teenage daughter, Stephanie (Margaret Early) and they discuss the importance of

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[205]Letter from James Wingate to Jason Joy, "Jezebel" (December 22, 1933), Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.
[206]*Motion Picture Herald, "*Reviews: *Jezebel*," (Mar 12, 1938), Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

her daughter still performing a curtsy when she greets other (though it may not still be practiced in the north)—providing and important thematic highlight of proper white Southern behavior so as to fit into society. When Julie finally arrives, she is in her horse-riding dress and tells her maid that she has no time to change, to which her butler, Uncle Cato (Lew Payton) lightly questions but does not press her. As Julie walks through the corridor where the party is held, a Black maid is standing to her right, and her back is to the camera as if she is walking away from it as she of enters the room. In a medium shot, she greets her guests, and many look at her with disdain because she did not freshen up and wear proper attire to her party. Young Stephanie tells Julie that she thinks her outfit is lovely, a sign of her impressionability. As Julie speaks to other guests, she takes a drink that her Aunt Belle chides Julie about--that it is for the men because it contains hard liquor. Later, when Julie's second-time fiancé, Pres, is still in an important meeting at the bank he works at and cannot come to Julie's party nor accompany her to a fitting for her gown to the Olympus Ball, Julie not only goes inside the bank Pres is working at (which is not proper for women at the time) but confronts him and embarrassed him. When he does not go with Julie to the dress shop, Julie decides not to wear the white dress that she had paid for to be made for the party (it is customary for unmarried girls to wear white at the ball), but instead buys and wears a red dress (considered to be attire for loose women and prostitutes). Aunt Belle calls the dress vulgar, to which Julie, with a smile on her face, agrees, knowing that she will insult the ball-goers with her choice. When Preston sees the dress and orders her not to wear it, Julie can see she has succeeded in getting under his skin by causing him embarrassment.

Fig. 26. Julie enters her party in her horse-riding attire, leaving a number of her guests aghast, *Jezebel* (Wyler, 1938).

The only one that is shown to like the dress, one that even Julie states makes her look like a prostitute, is her Black maid, Zette (Theresa Harris), whom Michael Bibler states is offered as a sign that society deems the dress fit for Black women to wear, not white people.[207] Julie wears the dress when Preston arrives to take her to the ball. Instead of refusing to go, Preston takes Julie and allows her to make a fool of them both by upsetting the other guests so much they do not dance with them on the floor. Preston takes Julie home and breaks up with her. Julie believes he will come back to her because he loves her, but he leaves for the North and returns a year later with a wife. When Julie finds out Pres is to return, she doesn't know he is married, and she plans to apologize. She moves out of New Orleans and back to her family plantation—not to avoid yellow fever as the doctor suggests, but to throw a party and invite Pres. This is the first time Julie perks up after months, as she has stopped leaving the house and socializing. The day of the party, as Zette helps Julie get dressed in a white dress, she comments that she has no hopes of

[207]Michael Bibler, "Always the Tragic Jezebel," in *Southern Cultures* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, Summer 2008), 17.

receiving the dress Julie is wearing after she is done wearing it, to which Julie agrees. Julie seems to have turned a new leaf, until she finds that Pres is married. Julie responds visibly hurt but doesn't cry. Instead, she decides she must come up with a plan to get Pres back and even kisses him while his wife is inside—but Pres declines Julie's advances.

Fig. 27 Zette looks at the red dress from Julie in awe. Julie, wearing the red dress, appears aligned with the Black maid, *Jezebel* (Wyler, 1938).

Julie incites an argument at her party between Pres and Buck, but Press has to go back to New Orleans, so Ted and Buck begin to argue instead. When Ted accuses Buck of letting Julie use him to get back at Pres, the two decide to have a duel the next day. When Julie cannot stop it, but it is apparent to everyone that it is her shenanigans that caused the duel, instead of taking accountability, she decides to sit and sing "We're gonna raise a ruckus tonight," with the slaves that have come outside to entertain her and her guests. It is Julie who interrupts the slaves' singing of "Susie Girl" to sing "Raise a Ruckus Tonight," a song that hints toward debauchery as well as Black freedom from slavery. Julie is the only one of her guests that sings, and when her

aunt tells her to stop she refuses, saying, “That’s why I wore my white dress tonight, I’m being baptized.[208] Well say it, what are you thinking?” Aunt Belle responds, “I’m thinking of a woman called Jezebel who did evil in the sight of God.” The next day Buck is killed by Ted in the duel.

Fig. 28 Julie sits with the slaves to sing “Raise a Ruckus” after Ted and Buck decide to duel the next day, *Jezebel* (Wyler 1938).

Yellow Fever takes over New Orleans and a fever line is drawn that keeps people from going into or leaving from the city. When Julie hears Pres is sick and being helped by the doctor at her New Orleans home, she gets Gros (Eddie Rochester) to take her by boat through the bayou to see Pres. The doctor says that Julie shouldn’t be there, but she insists on taking the Black maid’s place in caring for Pres, even fanning him as the maid had. Aunt Belle, her Uncle Theo (Henry O’Neill), Amy (Margaret Lindsay) and Ted make it to Julie’s house shortly after, getting a pass to go through the fever line from the Governor. The doctor calls the authorities to have

[208]As stated in the previous chapter, the baptism of Black characters has been said to be a comical action by many Southerners because Black people were considered to still be sinful by way of partying, gambling, and adulterous actions.

Pres sent to Lazarette Island, a place previously designated for lepers, now used for those with Yellow Fever. When Amy states that she wants to go with him, Julie convinces her that she does not know how to care for him the way Julie does, and that she will not be able to speak to the workers in creole--she is from the North and does not know the way of life in the South. Amy decides to let Julie go with Pres, and they leave toward the island, and toward their own death.

While there is a lot to unpack in this film, I mention the scenes that are not only pertinent to the plot of the film, but the thematic undertones of the story. Jezebel was known in the Old Testament as the wife of King Ahab of Israel who ruled over Israel in about the eighth century BCE. She is infamous for convincing the king to worship other false gods and for creating strife and wars within Israel for her own selfish desires. Her name reappears in the book of Revelation where she entices people into sexual immorality and eating animals sacrificed to God. From the point of view of the Bible she is abominable, yet, Black women have long been compared to or called Jezebel, too, as they are cited to be sexually aggressive, luring men in against their will and causing them to fornicate. White calls the Jezebel persona the most prevalent image of Black women in antebellum America.[209]

There are several times that *Jezebel* links Julie's behavior with that of her slaves and servants. In Julie's first scene, she speaks in a way that shows that she is more familiar and friendly with the slaves than most people. When she decides to wear the red dress to the ball, she offers it to Zette, her maid after the night is over. When Pres breaks off his engagement with Julie because of her antics and behavior that has been disruptive to the Southern dictates of properness, Julie has already been shunned by her peers at the ball, and takes to a life of

[209]White, 28-29.

loneliness, separated from the society she had once known. Just prior to Julie inciting a duel between Ted and Buck, a young boy and girl, both slaves, are seen bickering with each other (a common trope between male and female servants that symbolizes an overabundance of troubled romantic unions within the Black community). After Ted and Buck agree to duel, Julie sits and sings songs with the slaves, as if she, too, is entertaining her guests and becoming a slave herself. She even sings about the possible freedom of Southern slaves, a pertinent topic in the pre-war period during which the film is set. When Pres becomes sick she takes the place of the maid fanning Pres and works to nurse him back to health herself. What's more, when she learns Pres is sick, she goes to the back room and sits down with the slaves as they eat so she can ask Gros if he can take her through the swamp so she can reach Pres. Even the act of going to see Pres covertly in the middle of the night was not necessary because her party arrives shortly after with the permission of the Governor. Everything about Julie seems to be wayward and seems intent on stirring up strife amongst the order of things.

While Julie was described as brave in a number of film reviews, her actions and circumstances show her as sentenced to be damned for her choices, socially by her literal ostracization to the island, and physically because she is likely to contract the plague and die on the island. Of the rave reviews, *Motion Picture Herald* called Bette Davis's Julie "unsympathetic," yet a heroine.[210] *Film Daily* praised Julie in the end when she decides to nurse Pres back to health at the risk of her own life.[211] The *New York Times*, stated that though the film is "well-performed," the story would have been better if the heroine had remained

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[210]*Motion Picture Herald, "*Reviews: Jezebel," (Mar 12, 1938), "Jezebel," Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.
[211]*Film Daily, "*Reviews: *Jezebel*," (Mar 11, 1938, "Jezebel," Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

unregenerate.[212] The *New York Mirror* noted that Davis "makes the heroine as heart-warming as she is heartless.[213] In a separate article, *New York Times* called Julie willful, "whose pride and arrogance and selfishness" in the end "have done irreparable harm." Frank S. Nugent states, "Jezebel's surrender to decency breaks the melodrama down at the finish."[214] All of these reviews note that Davis's performance was superb. However, they may have had trouble reconciling what the character was faced with in the end as being the result of a penance she has to pay with her life, as noted in a *Variety* review of the film, "[the] audience's imagination is unable to cope with the likely outcome, especially since it's been more or less forcibly impressed that it's a 1000-to-one shot anybody can come back alive from the bayou island nearby, amidst all that concentrated disease."[215] While Julie was degenerate, Bette was superb and triumphant. The separation of the two allows for the audience to enjoy the main character in all her folly, while distancing themselves from the damnation that is to withstand. Julie has tried to meddle in Pres's marriage, thwarted socially acceptable behavior, and often aligned herself with her Black slaves. It is Bette who triumphs in the end, however, even when Julie chooses to atone for her sins. Bette's courage (as seen in previous films) to face death superimposes the atrocities she has committed.[216]

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[212]*Hollywood Reporter, "*New York Reviews: *Jezebel*," (Mar 22, 1938), "Jezebel," Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.
[213]*Hollywood Reporter, "*New York Reviews: *Jezebel*," (Mar 22, 1938), "Jezebel," Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.
[214]Frank S. Nugent, "Reviews" in *New York Times*, (Mar 11, 1938), "Jezebel," Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.
[215]*Variety,* "Jezebel," (Mar 16, 1938), "Jezebel," Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.
[216]Several newspaper reviews of *Jezebel* (*Film Daily, Variety,* and *Hollywood Reporter* applauded Julie's choice to do the noble thing and nurse Pres.

James Snead states that the excess number of slaves that attended to Julie in *Jezebel* are meant to paint Julie as unadmirable, as if their abundant following of rules become juxtaposed to Julie and proves that she is deviant.[217] Yet, in this matter whether acting "good" or "bad," Black servant characters are always still considered the opposite of white people. Their actions are meant to edify their rebellion against, or compliance with, social order. But, because they are not the main characters, they are instead used to relate the characterhood of a white actor, as a modifier of whiteness. "The obedience of the Black world heightens the profile of the white one by contrast," says Snead.[218] While Snead agrees with many others that the end of *Jezebel* marks the birth of her redemption, I argue that it is the mark of Julie's unrepentance. For one thing, as even Snead notes, Julie is reduced down from a rich socialite to just being another face amongst the lower classes.[219] Secondly, there is no actual repentance for what she has done—crying instead becomes an admittance of guilt. When Ted and Buck agree to have a duel, Julie cries while singing with the slaves, but she does not repent, as the words of the song states, she still insists on "raising a ruckus." Additionally, as stated earlier, there is no reason to believe that she will stop at nothing to be with Pres. She already tried to get him killed when she attempted to incite a duel between Buck (an expert marksman) and Pres. Lastly, when Julie walks alongside the cart of the sickly Pres as they head for life on Lazarette Island, they cross the screen from right to left, a cinematic device that gestures going the wrong way or going against the grain. In short, the films make the case that the unrepentant Julie is better off dead. Her compensating moral value is being stripped of social standing which leads to her social death—she has become

[217]James Snead, *White Screens, Black Images* (NY: Routledge, 1994), p77.
[218]Snead, 77.
[219]Snead*, 80.*

as a Black person in the eyes of society in that she is stripped of her importance and social standing.

The presence of Blackness in the scenes with Julie usually serves to show how connected she is to being disobedient to southern societal custom. *Jezebel* is one of many films in Classical Can we not, however, call these white female characters a rendition of this tragedy themselves? They want to live as Black women do, but are threatened with the social death that Blackness takes on if they do not straighten up. In *Show Boat* (Whale, 1936) the emotionality of a Black character, Julie (Helen Morgan), is acted out by a white woman who is playing a Black woman passing as white—a sort of transracial zigzagging. Yet, even Julie is thematically tied to Blackness, first when Queenie, a friend to Julie, is found by a man from Julie's past to be wearing jewelry he once gave to Julie. Later, in a scene just before Julie is found out by the showboat cast to be Black, Julie sings when she sings a song to Magnolia (Irene Dunne), a young white girl and daughter to the owners of the "show boat." As Julie sings, Queenie comes in and says she's only heard Black people singing the song. Julie continues to sing and all of the negro children, workers, and Queenie sing with her as Magnolia dances a song she seems to have learned from Queenie. Julie leaves the boat with her husband, and Magnolia, whose onstage act specializes is "negro songs" she has learned from Julie, gets married and has a child—both end up in Chicago. Magnolia's husband cannot provide for the family so he leaves them. Magnolia applies at the theater to perform the songs she's learned, when Julie, who is already working there hears here Julie singing the song she taught her. The sequence of scenes follows, Magnolia's husband leaves, Julie sings a song for the theater cast during rehearsal (she sings downtrodden because her husband has left her), Magnolia sings for theater owner after rehearsal, Julie leaves the theater in tears knowing that the theater owner will only hire one solo female act.

Yet, the coalescence of these scenes is notable because it ties in the heartache of both Magnolia, a white woman and Julie, a Black woman. Though their fates come about for different reasons, they are interconnected through the sequence of showing their respective sorrows and the closeness the women initially share at the start of the film. Though Delilah in *Imitation*, and Julie in *Show Boat*, have their personal reasons for feeling sorrow that is not directly associated with their charges, these films are steps on the evolutionary ladder to the films where Black servants take on the emotional labor of their charges in regards to sexual matters.

Hollywood that featured slavery set in the antebellum south, and, like many of these films, is emphatic in its warning that the Southern way of life should not include social equality. Perhaps the men that fell prey to Julie's antics died because of her actions (Buck and Pres), but Julie herself was destined to die at the end of the film, too, and just because she seemed to do the noble thing, it was very likely that she intended to have Pres, a married man, to herself in the end. Gerry Mackie notes that the disgrace brought on by the actions of Julie, particularly her wearing of the red dress to the Olympus Ball, must be right cleansed by death—an honor killing.[220] By providing a mirror where Julie became the reflection of what society said Black people were, she was, at times, the inverse image of her slaves, who themselves, at times, questioned what she did such as when Gros objected initially to illegally taking Julie across the fever line; and Uncle Cato who questioned Julie's decision to wear her riding gear to greet the guests of her party. These moments are important because they express the notion that the white character is so wrong that even the Black servant knows better, as the Black servant teaches the children of their employers the ideals of the parents on how to survive in society. In a PCA

[220]Gerry Mackie, "Social Norms of Coordination and Cooperation" in *Social Philosophy and Policy*. Summer 2023. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

memo of *Jezebel,* Thomas Schatz said "the picture can only tell the story of the triumph of bitchery." [221]In *Jezebel*, Julie takes on the mantle of burden associated with being Black, experiencing social death first and then actual death in the end. It is, in fact, she who refuses to do right time and again in the film, that is faced with the tragedy of what her antics accomplished. Her sadness is a projection of sadness of white people who suffer because they have not followed the rules. She in essence becomes Black in the film, using the Black servants as the markers for her sexual indecency of manipulation and adultery.

To be clear, there is rarely a sentiment of Black sadness in Classical Hollywood that is not somehow rooted in projections of white fear. In *Imitation of Life*, we find the saddened Black servant who is heartbroken that *her daughter* has left her, which eventually leads to her mother's sickness and death. Yet, this heartbreak is rooted in the hysteria that Peola has endured because she appears white but is still Black. Peola cannot live fully as white woman and refuses to live fully as Black woman.

"Mammy" in the Making

Black characters are simply expected to fall in line with the tenets of a racist, hierarchal society or the implication is that they suffer because they have not. The incentive to fall in line is produced mainly through the safety purported to exist through a life of servitude for African Americans. As such the many examples of the proper way in which servants were to act were included in popular literature and film narratives. The Mammy character had been sculpted by

[221]Thomas Schatz, "The Triumph of Bitchery: Warner Bros, Bette Davis and *Jezebel*" in *The Studio System,* ed. Janet Staiger, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 84.

white writers with this in mind. Miriam Petty states that through mammy, the slavery of the American South is transformed from a vicious and brutal system of human trafficking into a harmonious, familial ecosystem.[222] white describes Mammy as a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy distasteful work.[223] This is not reality. This is a construction of reality. In real life, there is no promise that following the rules of society and happily serving white people will lead to prosperity let alone safety for Black people. Even in *Imitation of Life* (Stahl, 1935), Delilah seemed to do everything right and still died in the end. Though Delilah had her own burdens, she seems to take on the emotional burden of not her boss, but of the film, itself, most likely because she is Black. Bearing this, one of the most famous films where Blackness takes on the sadness of whiteness is *Gone with the Wind.*

In the article "Sincere Fictions of the white Self in the American Cinema," authors Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon call *Gone with the Wind* an "operatic fiction of the white self."[224] In the film mirrors are used many times as a cinematic device to help convey duplicitousness in a character. Yet, when Scarlett is shown in mirrors with Mammy, it conveys not only a duplicity of character, but also shows the two women mirroring each other—or becoming an image of the other's worst and best qualities. An initial divide between the women is shown as early as the first scene. Scarlett (Vivian Leigh) is first shown in the company of two men on her front porch. The brothers, Brent (George Reeves) and Stuart (Fred Crane), first talk

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[222]Miriam J. Petty, *Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood,* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), chap. 1, Kindle.
[223]White, 27.
[224]Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon, "Fictions of the White Self in the American Cinema," in *Classic Hollywood, Classic*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 271.

about the upcoming Civil War to which Scarlett tells them to stop or she is going to go in the house. Immediately, Scarlett is shown to be commanding of men, uninterested in political affairs as she threatens to leave if the two keep talking about war. The boys almost blow it but they convince her to stay and both ask her if they can dance with her all night at the Ashley Wilkes's barbecue. Scarlett says that she already has her dance partners but agrees to dance with the two in exchange for them telling her Ashley Wilkes is planning to get married to his cousin Melanie.

Already, there are many similarities to *Jezebel.* Both films are set in the antebellum South, both protagonists live on their family's plantations, both protagonists are single young women who are highly sought after by the men in their town. Both women are in love with men who get married to someone else, and both women scheme to get the men they love for themselves. The big difference in the films is that *Gone* takes place at the onset of Civil War and after, and *Jezebel* takes place about ten years prior to the Civil War when Yellow Fever had reached the South in the 1850s. Additionally, both Buck and (it is implied) Preston die in *Jezebel*, while the main men of Scarlett's life, Ashley (Leslie Howard) and Brett (Clark Gable), do not die in *Gone* but both reject Scarlett in the end (the two men Scarlett does marry die shortly after they are married but she does not care for either of them). Of similarity, too, both Julie and Scarlett are shown early on to be encoded with the presumption of Black sexual deviance, both through their relationship to their Black servants. When Scarlett learns that Ashley is to marry someone else, she hurries away from the brothers and looks pensive as she is already in the works of devising a plan. As she runs from the house, Mammy (Hattie McDaniel) is shown in a medium shot yelling out the side window at Scarlet, who is then shown still running from the house, yet toward the camera, in a long shot. Scarlett is centered yet skewed a bit to the left while Mammy, still yelling out the window, centered yet to the right of Scarlett. It

is important to note two things about this long shot. For one, Mammy is so far away from the camera that as we see Scarlett running towards the camera, yet away from the house in the background, the only way to distinguish Mammy is by the moving towel she slaps up and down as she yells angrily at Scarlett both in her medium shot, and in the long shot while Scarlett is running, so that we know that is her still in the shot. Second, Mammy yells that Scarlett should not be leaving without her shawl and that it is bad manners to not invite the brothers to stay for supper. In this shot, though moving away from Mammy and the house, Scarlett is implied to be reflecting the bad behavior of Black people, as Mammy states that Scarlett "ain't got no mo' manners than a field hand"—aka a slave. Mammy is there to juxtapose this behavior and, just as an inverse image of a mirror, takes on the moral authority whiteness is supposed to convey—even while yelling out the window. Vera and Gordan are right when they note Black people in *Gone* are treated as "conveniences, psychic extensions of the white people, intended to prop them up."[225] Yet, the Black characters were also positioned as important functions of character and narrative development of the protagonists—especially the servants closest to their charge.

Even yelling out the window, Mammy is participating in an often-used trope in which the Black servant is shown to be more moral than the protagonist, so as to show how far gone the protagonist has strayed. This is a marker used to indicate that the character's goodness is tarnished, and should be seen as a fall from grace. A big difference between Julie and Scarlett, too, is that Julie did not have her parents to look after her, only her aunt and uncle, who could not get her to obey what they said—the voice of reason in *Jezebel* is mostly her aunt, who tells her

[225]Vera and Gordon, "Sincere Fictions," 273.

the truth about how she is acting. Yet, we do not have the same instances of indecency brought forward by Aunt Belle as we see in Mammy.

In *Gone,* Scarlett's parents are painted as moral beings, yet oblivious to most of what she has schemed together to get Ashley for herself. It is Scarlett's father, Gerald O'Hara (Thomas Mitchell), who, in the beginning of the film, sets the tone for one of the most important themes of the film, land. He tells Scarlett that she should not be chasing Ashley because he doesn't love her, and that land is the only thing worth fighting and dying for. In a following scene, Scarlett's mother, Ellen (Barbara O'Neill), whom John Devanny says is used to highlight Scarlett's estrangement from goodness, comes home at night after helping to deliver a child born out of wedlock that belongs to the overseer of their plantation, and whom she tells her husband he must fire because of it.[226]Yet, Mammy can see through all of Scarlett's ploys, she is, as Devanny puts it, the "prod" to Scarlett's conscience.[227] When Mammy helps Scarlett get dressed for the Wilkes's barbecue and ball, the scene opens with her tying a corset behind Scarlet. When Prissy (Butterfly McQueen), the house servant, brings in food, Scarlett declines, saying she wants to keep thin for the party, while Mammy stresses that if she waits until the party to eat, she will eat too much and embarrass the family. The two also contend about the dress Scarlett is to wear, Scarlett puts on an off-the-shoulder dress that Mammy says she isn't supposed to wear until after 3p. Mammy, here, is shown not only as a voice for white society and their customs, but in opposition to Scarlet that shows where Scarlett's actions ought to be aligned.

[226]John Devanny, "Catholicism, "Irony and Gone with the Wind," ed. *The Southern Quarterly* (Lafayette County, Mississippi, 2018), 98.
[227]John Devanny, "Catholicism, "Irony and Gone with the Wind," 104.

Time and again, we see the act of characters working to live decent lives but cannot overcome their nature that is opposed to society's dictates of decency. We see this in the white characters, but we also see this mirrored in many of the Black characters that are close to the protagonists, in Mammy, especially. As James Baldwin has defined the Black female servant of the Classical Era, "she is Mammy, in *Gone with the Wind*, and in *Imitation of Life*, and *The Member of the Wedding*—mother of sorrows, whore and saint, reaching a kind of apotheosis in *Requiem for a Nun*."[228]A notable shot occurs with Mammy and Scarlett contesting the custom of wearing Black after she marries Charles Hamilton, Melanie's brother, and he dies shortly after in the War from pneumonia. As she tries on a hat, Mammy comes in and tells her she cannot wear it. Scarlett cries at her predicament and her mother suggests she goes to stay with Melanie while Ashley is at war. Contrary to Ellen, Mammy sees through Scarlett's ploys and tells Scarlett that she should go to Savannah instead and not meddle in the affairs of Ashley and his wife. Instead of entertaining the truth that Mammy is speaking, Scarlett orders Mammy to go pack her bags. This scene marks a new low for Scarlett's character. She does not care that her husband died, but is only sad that she isn't with Ashley, who is still married. Additionally, it is one thing to interfere with an engagement, but it is far worse to try to entice a married man. Yet, it is not Scarlett's mother who sees this, but Mammy. Mammy was clear on what was happening as soon as she opened the door, if not before. Mammy tells Scarlett not to wear the hat, but she understands why she wants to wear it. It is as if Mammy's ability to see Scarlett's actions is a reflection of her relationship with Mammy. The two are even reflected side by side as the shot reveals the real Scarlett, followed by a mirror reflection of Mammy, then Scarlett's reflection. As

[228]James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, (New York: Vintage International), 74.

Mammy moves into the room, she appears first in sequence, then Scarlett, then the mirror image of Mammy, and the mirror image of Scarlett, each image horizontally aligned across the screen. The two women are aligned within the mise-en-scene because their characters are aligned to reflect the other reflecting the other. Mammy is good but (instinctually) bad. Scarlett is bad but (instinctually) good. The duplicity of both women reflects upon the other, notating the influence each has on the other. In this way, the appearance of a Black maid can be used to encode sexual immorality in a white character.

Fig. 29 Mammy and Scarlett mirror each other's best and worst purported qualities, Gone with the Wind (Fleming, 1939).

Mammy is not just aware of worldly lusts, she takes part in them, herself. When the war is over, they take some soldiers in at Tara and Mammy cleans the clothes of the soldiers while they have created cloth curtains outside so that the soldiers can bathe. Mammy not only tells the men to take off their pants but that if they don't scrub themselves thoroughly, she will do it for the men. Shortly after, Mammy is standing with Scarlett and Melly on the front porch when

Ashley walks up the road. Melly runs to greet him and Scarlett starts to run to see Ashley too, but Mammy stops her stating that Ashley is Melly's husband, implying that Scarlett should cease to start to meddle. Later, after Scarlett and Rhett marry, Rhett waits in the study with Mammy when Scarlett is in labor with Bonnie. Rhett and Mammy have a drink together, something unsuitable for the time because she is a slave, as well as ladies aren't supposed to drink hard liquor. Not only is Mammy committing these social faux pas, but Rhett realizes that Mammy is wearing the red petticoat he bought her in New Orleans (where he and Scarlett honeymooned) and he tells her to pull up her skirt to show him, to which Mammy says laughingly, "Mr. Rhett, you is bad. You're naughty." The red petticoat has the same connotation as the red dress, a color that prostitutes wear. Deborah Gray White says that petticoats were usually worn in multiple layers as a means to cover any leg exposure, "respectable" women never showed their legs in public.[229] While Mammy does not show her legs to Rhett, her familiarity with right and wrong lends to her understanding of what is implied when he asks her about what is underneath her skirt. It also seems that Rhett, a man known to visit Belle Watkins at her brothel, is flirting with Mammy in a way that decent white women would be expected to discourage. This shows that Mammy, though she may seem asexual and solely concerned with working for the good of her boss, is always assumed to have a strongly defined sexuality that is simply hidden in plain sight.

[229]White, 31.

Fig. 30 Mammy's red petticoat, bought by Rhett Butler, Gone with the Wind (Fleming, 1939).

Coded as deviant, Mammy instructs Scarlett on what is proper, even as Scarlett is intent on doing the opposite. In the scene where Scarlett decides to go to Atlanta to visit Rhett in jail to ask him for $300 for property taxes on Tara, John C. Clum states Scarlett's sexual motivations as similar to that of Belle Watling, a prostitute and brothel madame.[230] Scarlett tells Mammy to make her a dress so she can look nice while asking Rhett for his help. Mammy tells Scarlett that it isn't right to use the curtains to make a dress, but she agrees to do it. Still, she insists on accompanying Scarlett to Atlanta, knowing that she should not be out in town without a chaperone. Like a prototype of a femme fatale, Scarlett knows how to entice men through her use

[230]John C. Clum, "Kisses and Commerce," ed. *The Southern Quarterly* (Lafayette County, Mississippi, 2018), 99.

of femininity.[231] And as hooks argues: femininity was invented to satisfy male fantasy.[232] Yet, it is Rhett that gets the best of Scarlett when he gets her to admit she would do anything for the money, then tells her he doesn't have any. When Scarlett runs into Frank Kennedy (Carroll Nye), a man who was raising money to be able to marry Scarlett's sister, Suellen (Evelyn Keyes), she sees that he is doing well and decides to work on him to get him to marry her instead of her sister. As she invites him to leave with her and Mammy, Mammy sits in the back of the horse cart looking at Scarlett, once again, disapprovingly. Again, in the following scene when Suellen cries over the loss of her love, a man she waited to get married to throughout the Civil War, Melly tells Suellen that she did it to save Tara, but Mammy is in the background watching it all, upset at the scene that Scarlett has created, that will lead to heartache of her and those around her. Yet, it is the knowing Mammy who takes on these sorrows even more poignantly than Scarlett for Scarlett's own indiscretions.

Erin Sheley notes how Mitchell's theme of land is connected to white feminine virtue and the loss of this virtue, both in the book and film, is associated with the notion of Black freedom.[233] Scarlett went through a number of hard lessons and seemed to succeed in redeeming herself at the end of the film when she decides to go back to the Tara plantation, tend to the land that her father taught her was so important, and work on a plan to get her husband, Rhett, back.

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[231]The femme fatale is an attractive, often self-determined, seductress who causes anguish to a man who becomes involved with her. Sexual fatalism is often attached. She may appear glamorous or monstrous. The gender identity seems dissonant.

- Yuko Minowa, Pauline Maclaran, and Lorna Stevens, "The Femme Fatale in Vogue: Femininity Ideologies in Fin-de-siècle America," *Journal of Macromarketing*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2019), 270.

[232]hooks, *Reel to Real,* 18.

[233]Erin Sheley, *"Gone with the Wind" and the Trauma of Lost Sovereignty,"* in *The Southern Literary Journal* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina, 2013).

When Scarlett returns to Tara she is returning to her roots and departing from deviance—a deviance that is both thematically and cinematically linked to Blackness, as well as the Black characters in the film, namely Mammy. The same characteristics that her father chastises sits in opposition to the important things is life, namely land.

This is one of the most important differences between the plots of *Jezebel* and *Gone.* When Scarlett heeds her elders' words, unlike Julie, we are led to believe there is hope for Scarlett in the end. Yet, where we see Julie has visibly taken on the sadness of her lot, and still remained defiant to the order of Southern society, we see Scarlett reach a turning point after an intensely emotional scene in which Mammy, not Scarlett, is crying hysterically because of the sadness in the home. This comes after numerous attempts of Scarlett to win Ashley over, even after she has married Rhett. Rhett, in fact, makes Scarlett wear a red dress as punishment to a party Melly has for Ashley after rumors spread that Ashley and Scarlett were found embracing earlier. In a turn of unfortunate events, Rhett assaults Scarlett, Scarlett gets pregnant, Rhett leaves with their child Bonnie for months, then returns and loses both the child Scarlett is carrying when she falls down the stairs, and Bonnie, in a horse-riding accident. When Melly comes to the couple's home after Bonnie dies, Mammy meets her at the door and tells her about the heartache the home has endured. She states that Scarlett is broken-hearted, though Mammy knows that Scarlett is tough enough to get through. Yet, though Rhett is having a harder time accepting Bonnie's death, Mammy relays the sorrow of the household with the couple fighting and threatening each other, as well as the sorrow of not being able to give Bonnie a proper burial because Rhett won't let them take her body. In the very next scene, Melly is on her death bed after collapsing at the Butler household. Scarlett finds that she doesn't want Ashley, who still

does not want her, and really loves Rhett, who is tired of her antics and leaves Scarlett. Scarlett, who has now lost everything in the span of a short time, except her land.

It seems strange that Mammy should have to intercede, only the events that she accounts within the home are especially grim, including the arguments and Rhett not wanting to let go of Bonnie's deceased body. Yet, Mammy plays an important role here because she can be the bearer of such dreary accounts, and the sadness associated with her is a marker for the demise of something sacred that has happened in the world of her master. Mammy said herself that Scarlett is strong enough to get through the troubled times. Still, Mammy's sorrow represents a turning point for Scarlett, just as Violet embodied sorrow at the turning point of Maggie and Peter's relationship, yet opposed to Julie, whom, coded as Black, embodied sorrow, herself, before choosing to die on the island with Pres. As can be seen in these key films, when Blackness takes on sorrow it is because it has been associated with the inverse of what is right in society. When it involves sexual matters, it depends on the moral indecency associated with Black sexuality to emphasize the systemic way that morality was taught to audiences. Though the Black maid is coded as deviant through her Black skin, she is able to enforce rules that she has learned in proximity to whiteness. There are times when she acts in accordance with her presumed true nature, and others when she is acting according to the "good manners" she has learned working for white people. In *The Great Lie*, Violet works to protect Maggie, and the presumption of her waywardness is hinted at her knowledge of what is the proper and improper way for married people to behave, even still, she helps Maggie keep the secret of the baby, even if she does not know exactly what has happened, and she states that she would "feed the Devil, himself, if he'd polish up the smile on Miss Maggie's face like that," referring to Pete after he and Maggie reunite. The message seems to be over and again that the Black servant should be there for their

charges, whether to help them sin or to help keep their name from being muddied up by the dirt of rumors. Yet, cinematically, because the Black servant is encoded as deviant, it implies that they are the influence that makes for indecent behavior. These films, in effect, become examples of how society should be run, and the way that each character type is to play their role.

Yet, the Production Code Administration's idea of compensating moral value, the consequence of immoral behavior of the (white) protagonist, may not hold as its primary objective for narratives to reinscribe whiteness to its place in society, but this was definitely a result seen in many of films based on these practices. Scarlett's reception of compensating moral values was seen to be met when she tries to get Ashley to run away from the Tara plantation and when she visits Rhett in jail to convince him to give her $300—both the men declining her offer.[234] Still, the PCA was careful not only to not outright suggest that Belle Watling was a prostitute, but also not to suggest that Scarlett offered her body to Rhett for sale in order to save her family's plantation, and instead offers him her hand in marriage.[235] They also suggest a change be made where Rhett is fondling Scarlett's s "bare shoulders." In Scene 421 they want them to be careful of a display of Rhett lacing Scarlett's corset.

In addition to the scene of Scarlett attempting to prostitute herself, the PCA asked the studio to amend their first draft to be careful in the way they address Scarlett's rape by Rhett in their home, and Rhett's extramarital relationship with Belle, and any reference of Belle as a

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[234]Letter from Joseph Breen to David O. Selznick, "Gone with the Wind" (January 14, 1937) Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

[235]Letter from Joseph Breen to David O. Selznick, "Gone with the Wind" (January 14, 1937) Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

prostitute or owning a brothel. They never say take them out of the script, but they are careful to any blatant display of sexual deviance. Many times, we see the PCA approving a section of a film, stating that it is impossible to give approval of the whole film without receiving—well the whole film: "you understand, of course, that our final judgment will be based upon our review of the finished picture.". This does much to encourage studios to let them know that their submissions are "so far—so good." Yet, besides impeding a studio or director from being able to change a part of the film after receiving an okay from the PCA, another reason that this caveat is included in script submissions is that the story must have a compensating moral value for the main character.

Scarlett had plenty of emotional moments in the film. Yet, while many reviewers lauded *Gone* as the best movie to date, and praised Vivian Leigh's performance of strength and courage, they praised Hattie McDaniel for her performance in the "most moving scene in the film."[236] Howard Barnes of the *New York Herald-Tribune* states that *Gone* is "wanting in both emotional intensity and cumulative dramatic impact" and that "the burden of feeling becomes dissipated rather than being made the heart-shaking core of profound artistic adventure." While he praises Leigh for embodying Scarlett as outlined in the novel, he praises Mammy and Pork (Oscar Polk) for their performances as "faithful retainers of the O'Hara's at Tara, even when the Confederacy is crushed…"[237]

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[236]*Variety* review, *"*Gone with the Wind" (January 14, 1937) Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA*., "*Gone with the Wind" Dec 20,1939.

[237]Howard Barnes, "On the Screen" in *New York Herald-Tribune* (No date). Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

William Weaver calls Leigh's Scarlett "unpredictably tempestuous, cool, cowardly, heroic, generous, avaricious, tender, venomous, shrewd, stupid, a natively mercurial personality forced this way and that by need circumstance, ambition, envy hate, selfishness, and a distorted devotion, but mostly by emotions she never fully understands. Of Rhett, Weaver say is a "man of unbridled emotions, including lust, and unfettered tongue." Yet, of Mammy, Weaver writes that she set a new high in the department of "colored mammy," one who received spontaneous audience applause mid-picture during the Hollywood preview screening for the press. *Variety*, too, explains Leigh's Scarlett as girl-woman of complex emotions, and McDaniel's Mammy as an "outspoken old retainer whose wild grief at the tragic break between Rhett and Scarlett…is a masterpiece of provocative emotion." And Reginald Whitley of the *Daily Mirror* calls Leigh's Scarlett, "very, very wicked, BUT—you'll find her irresistible."[238]

When *Gone with the Wind* was released there were a number of African American writers who opposed the film, some even while still praising Hattie McDaniel for her performance. In *Returning the Gaze*, Anna Everett references Melvin B. Tolson's take on the film that seemed to sum up the responses and much of the rhetoric behind those who tended to find some parts of the film admirable. Tolson notes that even those African Americans who liked it, had a different perception of *Gone* than did white people. Yet, Tolson likened those Black people who praised the film to victims still being abused but just more lightly than before, "If you beat a man long enough with your fists, you can slap him and he'll appreciate the slap."[239] Moreover, Tolson, a

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[238]Reginald Whitley, "Reviews" in *Daily Mirror* (April 19, 1940). Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

[239]Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy off Black Film Criticism 1909-1949,* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 292.

noted writer and professor in the 1930s, made the observation that the number of plantation films coming out during that time were ironic against the backdrop of our nation denouncing Nazi fascism. He also pointed out that the image of the Big House was being uplifted in a cultural revisioning of history that these films promoted, all the while suppressing the truth of the exploitation, violence, and other abuses that the Big House has actually embodied throughout the history of our nation.[240] In short, Tolson warned his African American audience not to be fooled by iconography.[241] Writers such as Tolson understood the message ultimately being taught in *Gone,* and that it was not one to help African Americans but to reinscribe an order that had already been in place.

Miriam Petty speaks of Hattie McDaniel's key scene that won her praise and the Academy Award in *Gone with the Wind* as being a powerful watershed moment of the film's narrative, a formal and performative tour de force from McDaniel, and a central American symbol of race, class, and gender—Mammy—through which Black women's bodies and lives had been consistently objectified and obfuscated. These three elements, Petty argues, not only lends to the potency of McDaniel's portrayal, but is "an essential part of McDaniel's filmic mammy monument."[242] Petty states that, in the staircase scene when Mammy is telling Melly about the household surrounding the death of Bonnie, Mammy herself becomes a physical and performative symbol of grief.

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[240]Melvin B. Tolson, taught at Wiley College and advised an award-winning debate team whose story is told in the film *The Great Debaters* (Washington, 2007).
[241]Everett, 298.
[242]Petty, 30.

It is clear that these characters represent Black "help" and their association with being hypersexual. These associations are made time and again with the Black maid character. I have more evidence than I have time to cite. When maids were not gatekeeping against potential sexual predators (because it was assumed that they knew what to look for), they were shown to have close connections with their bosses or masters. Just as in the relationship between Chico and Lily in *Babyface* who both flee Lily's hometown for a new start, with Loretta and Lola in *Bombshell* when Loretta inherits Lola's intimate clothing and Loretta "knows where the bodies are buried," in *Mad Miss Manton* (Jason, 1938), Melsa (Barbara Stanwyck) is hunted after by underworld crime bosses and her maid, Hilda (Hattie McDaniel) is there to help protect if not worry over her in each scene she appears, and give the occasional comment on the opposite sex. These films show case by case the tendency to wrap a sexual charge around every Black servant character.[243] This was encoded in these characters so much that, but you could simply add a line or two about a character's experience and the experience could eventually be implied for future characters. It in essence becomes part of the character trope and stereotype typically associated with these characters. When we get to films closer to films like *Jezebel* and *Gone with the Wind,* these associations are still active, so when we see the presence of the Black maid, we can see how her presence is an influence, or is reflected upon the protagonist as an indication of the future wayward actions they are going to take.

As can be seen in *The Great Lie, Jezebel*, and *Gone with the Wind,* Blackness is a code that signifies deviance and separation from an esteemed social standing. Schatz calls Julie the

[243]While the servants in the films I reference are all women, men were implicated in some of the films, as well. In *Temple Drake*, a Black male servant speaks with the maid about Temple's undergarments, and in Five *of a Kind* (Leeds, 1938), Eddie "Rochester" Anderson makes a joke in which the punchline is that he has five kids.

perfect balance of bitchery and captivating charm of euphoria and barely subdued hysteria, evoking both sympathy and grating irritation.[244] Yet, in Julie we see a coding of Blackness on the white character that fails in being redeemed the way that whiteness is shown to be redeemable, linking her errant behavior to a choice that she can make to turn away from. In this way we can see that it is not the people that have merit, but the stories that are told about them that give them merit or strips them of it. In this we can see that whiteness is just as much a construction of society and a means to promote social hierarchy as Blackness is.

Conclusion: Two Ways About Love

There's no two ways about love
It's true what they say about love
Come what may
It's just that way

[244]Schatz, "The Triumph of Bitchery," 85.

There's no two ways about love
When fate appears on the scene
There's no betwixt and between
There's no doubt
You're in or out
There's no two ways about love

It comes right out of the blue like a cyclone
Sweeps you right of your feet
Don't try to cut any corners
You're heaven bound on a one-way street
The schemes that your dreaming of
Fit into your world like a glove
Once you're hooked
Your goose is cooked
There's no two ways about love

Within the first ten minutes of *Stormy Weather* (Stone, 1943), we are hit with the inciting incident of Bill Williamson's (Bill "Bojangles" Robinson) love-at-first-sight meeting of Selina Rogers (Lena Horne) at a ball in which Bill and other soldiers are honored for their service in the military for World War I. Fresh from France, Bill's mind is intent on making something of himself, yet he cannot shake his feelings for Selina. Nevertheless, the two are rarely able to communicate their feeling for each other outside of song and performance. This may seem like a normal occurrence for a romantic musical, but even Emotions such as these are complicated because of the overuse of common tropes of Black characterization, as Bill and Selina are ever and always beholden to obligations to entertain, which gets in the way of a true romance and any explicit references to sexual attraction toward each other. It is only when a dance routine by Katherine Dunham and her Troupe is introduced toward the end of the film that audiences are given a visual cue for any sexual desirability between Bill and Selina. Still, this dance sequence is never meant to actualize sexuality between our main characters, but is instead presented as a dream sequence, posited to be non threatening, as it represents a liminal space of

the unnatural because it does not truly exist outside of a concept (dream), to be understood simultaneously as natural because it focuses on a longing that is always and never in full existence. Stormy Weather asks for but is continuously denied a romantic story of the main characters Bill and Selina toward each other. Instead, because both actors' priority is given to first entertain (white, and afterward Black) audiences, their romantic connection is trivialized as Stormy Weather becomes a romantic musical continuously in denial of itself. The dream sequence, then, acts as a placeholder for reality, while the reality of the story is given to represent a dream. Stormy Weather becomes, then, a continuation of a constructed sexuality that is more intent with appealing to white audiences and their expectations of using Black sexuality as a means to explore race, class, and gender.

Stormy Weather was billed as a romantic musical, one of eight Black-cast musicals made by Hollywood studios preceded by Hearts in Dixie (Sloane, 1929), Hallelujah (Vidor, 1929), Green Pastures (Connelly, Keighley, 1936), and Cabin in the Sky (Minnelli, 1943). The film tells the story of Bill Williamson and Selina Rogers's courtship of each other, beginning when Bill returns to the United States after serving in World War I in France in "Jim 15th Infantry Band" in 1918. The two meet when Bill and his army pal, Gabe (Dooley Wilson), attend a ball in honor of the returning soldiers—Bill alone, and Gabe with a date, Cynthenetta Webb (uncredited role), who comically gets Gabe to spend all of the little money he has on her. Bill is instantly struck by Selina's beauty when he first sees her across the floor of the ballroom hall. He is introduced to Selina by Jim Europe and the two learn that both are performers, Selina traveling with Chick Bailey and His Band, a troupe of Black performers that travel around the country. After their initial meeting, the two part, though they are enamored with each other. Selina, a

rising star, goes on to continue touring, and Bill to Memphis where he has taken his old job as a performer in a small nightclub. The two are later reunited when Chick Bailey's Band visits the Memphis nightclub and Selina convinces Chick to add Bill to the band. Chick and Bill are at odds with each other when Bill and Selena get closer, and Chick decisively places Bill in the background instead of showcasing his talent. When Bill outshines Chick during one of Chick's performances, he fires Bill. Yet. Selina leaves with Bill. The two become even more successful when they have their own traveling troupe, but Bill, after years of being together, wants to settle down and marry, while Selina wants to continue performing. The two depart only to be reunited sometime later when Bill attends a big send-off performance and sees Selina onstage with Cab Calloway and his band. Here Selina sings the eponymous ballad "Stormy Weather" about her longing for her lost love, and reveals to Bill she is singing about her regret of letting him go. The two reunite and, as Bill becomes part of the show which he was initially an audience member, the two perform an onstage wedding as the film comes to an end. The two never kiss, as couples were accustomed to do in romantic musicals. Instead, any semblance of romantic connection is subverted by the need to perform, both within a diegetic framework, and thematically within the topics of sex, gender and class.

Stormy Weather premiered in 1943 both at the Roxy Theater on 7th Ave in New York and the Alhambra Theater in Harlem. For a Black-Cast film, 20th Century-Fox put a considerable amount of money in it, yet because of the performative nature of the Black-cast musical, studios spent significant amounts of money on them. This is most likely to not only to retain high production value, but to be able to fit a large number of well-known Black performers in the film. The film's budget was $1.6 million. In contrast, previous films that turned out to be big hits by Fox were budgeted at only a fraction of the cost. The hit Miracle on 34th Street

(Seaton, 1947), starring Maureen O'Hara and John Payne, had only a budget of $600,000. Famed director John Ford made his adaptation of The Grapes of Wrath (Ford, 1940) starring Henry Fonda and Jane Darwell with a budget of $800,000. As a large production, Fox would have wanted to see big returns from Stormy Weather. The split in premier locations notes the studio wanted the film to appeal to both Black and white audiences. The film premiered in what was mostly satisfactory reviews by white and Black audiences, alike. New York Times called Stormy Weather a "first rate show" in favor of Fox's decision to have "wisely decided to bury a very thin and trite story line with an abundance of the show world's leading colored talent." Here, New York Times mostly focuses on how Horne's performance "digs deep into the depths of romantic despair to put across the classic blues number." Horne's performance is not separated from the romantic storyline, but is instead shown as inseparable and preferred to any other actions of love between Bill and Selina, few as they may be within the film.

Black newspapers mostly lauded Stormy Weather as a great film, yet it was not without its controversies. Most Black newspapers were not very concerned with the love story between the main characters, however. In a caption of picture of Robinson and Horne in costume titled "Movie Romance," the *Philadelphia Tribune* states that the two share "a bit of romance" onscreen, while seeming to be more concerned with the couple's attire in the film. The Pittsburgh Courier reports on the film shortly after it opened, stating that the film is "perhaps the most progressive, significant, all-out gesture yet made to portray the Negro sans his usual clowning, buffooning characterization heretofore." The review by the Pittsburgh Courier is representative of what many in the Black audience had been concerned with in regards to films that starred African Americans, namely that prior depictions were usually 'tom' and 'mammy'

character types shown to be either be servants to white characters, lazy, uneducated, unsophisticated, threatening, or all of the above. There was particular interest, too, in images of Black people that were not in shabby attire and speaking in malapropisms. This was a point some film reviews still seemed to be uneasy about with the placement of Robinson in the film in that he had often played what many regarded as a tom character. Many African Americans were quite dismissive of Robinson's placing in the film. E.S. Franklin wrote in the Chicago Defender that though the film was supposed to be based on Robinson's life, he was inept at playing the role. Instead, he states that Robinson, who in his prior roles is most noted for his "wide grin and shuffling feet," was outshone by other more distinguished performers, including Horne. Controversy, too, arose after the film was completed when it was rumored that Robinson was to be replaced by another actor because he was ineffective as a romantic lead opposite Horne. The rumor was publicly denounced by both Robinson and 20th-Century Fox, with Robinson even looking to sue a number of newspapers who reported the story. This contention with Robinson and the press seems to further emphasize both Robinson's fight to be accepted by audiences in an era in which roles for Black characters were changing. Previous roles for Robinson had made him an international star, yet he was often a slave or servant dancing for his masters. In The Little Colonel (Butler, 1935), Robinson stars opposite Shirley Temple, and teaches her to dance in a scene noted to be the first in which a Black and white actor hold hands onscreen. Yet, Robinson was cast in the film as Walker, servant to Temple's character, Lloyd Sherman in the postbellum South in a role easily identified as former slave who continues to serve his white family after slavery has ended.

By contrast, Horne's position in Stormy Weather seemed to be more palatable. The film

was only the second big studio feature she appeared in, and she represented for many in the African American community a more sophisticated representation of Blackness. Arthur Knight states that Horne was placed in her first feature, Cabin in the Sky, as well as in Stormy Weather, in an attempt by Hollywood to be the first African American actress made into a star. In Cabin in the Sky, Horne plays a jezebel-like seductress, Georgia Brown, who is sent by the Devil to tempt Lil Joe Jackson (Eddie "Rochester" Anderson) away from his wife Petunia (Ethel Waters). Yet Horne's contract in subsequent films she earned after Stormy Weather stipulated that she would only play romantic leads, no longer playing the "other woman." As such, Horne's image was much more aligned with the promise of new roles for African Americans by a few big Hollywood studios after receiving flak from the African American community and the NAACP to improve the depiction of the Negro in Hollywood, stemming in great part from the controversies enacted by the Gone With the Wind (Fleming, 1939). Hattie McDaniel was the first Black performer to win an Academy Award for her role in the film, nevertheless, she and other African American actors found it hard to get roles in Hollywood because studios didn't want more protests from Black viewers about their use of Black actors who had been known for their roles as servants and slaves. While Horne was being made a star in Hollywood, Robinson's star was fading, as many could not separate his new role from years of roles of negative depictions. Stormy Weather would be Robinson's last film role before he died of heart failure in 1949 at the age of 71.

Though Stormy Weather was said to evoke a new era and order of typical Hollywood depictions it seemed to be in keeping with a long tradition in Hollywood to keep depictions of Black romance to a minimal. Instead, sexuality is implied often with the characters, and this sexuality is shown to work against gender and class roles in society. The character of

Cynthenetta is shown as gold-digging and willing to sin with any man with deep pockets. Selina refuses to take on wifely duties, and instead favors working. And Gabe is hinted as hypersexual when he is revealed at the end of the film for the first time with his love interests and several children.

The quotations referenced above have to do with the contradictions of a phrase like "there's no two ways about love." The song proclaims that love is shown yet romance is displaced by either a contestation of gender roles (Selina refusing Bill's love and the opportunity to be his wife), or a misuse of the sexuality (Gabe being hypersexual be display of his many children. Cynthenetta being hypersexual for financial gains). There is a lack of sexual actions in the characters, yet a constant reference toward how sex should be done. In Selina's character, she is implied to be in error for refusing Bill's love and her place as a housewife and stay at home mother. She is not willing to perform her gender role and suffers "stormy weather" because of this. Cynthenetta is displayed as lacking proper morals as a woman—displacing her from proper womanhood and possibly aligning her with lower-class behavior. Gabe's gender performance is hyperbolic, as he is connected to ideas of Black sexual excess.

All of these performances discussed from Stormy Weather overshadow the negligent romantic content, which is consistent with most of the portrayals of Black characters from 1929 to 1941. At the beginning of my exploration of what was to become a starting topic for my dissertation, I wondered why Black characters in Classical Hollywood didn't kiss. What I found after watching a number of films within my periodization was a pattern of linking African Americans to deviant sexuality, and good white characters who were influenced by deviant actions in their environment (including visiting Black-occupied cabarets) to act deviant. This

deviance, however, is connected to issues of race, class, and gender in that the control of one often implicates the control of the other. By contrast, Selina and Bill's romance, as Black characters, is missing in the midst of questions of gender and class, just as Gabe and Cynthenetta's "romance" is missing for most of the film, and further subverted by a dog whistle of Black sexual excess.

Stormy Weather looks at the "romantic" lives of African Americans and frames it within a scope of how white people wanted to see Black sexuality—still intent on solving preoccupations regarding social equality and societal control. white viewers with regard to gender, class and race roles, and denying Black characters the ability to be soft and intimate with each other on camera. This dissertation has looked at the ways that Black sexuality is utilized to be shown in oppositions to whiteness and still allow for white characters to explore a life of deviance. I believe that characters such as Julie in Jezebel (Wyler, 1938), Helen in Blonde Venus (von Sternberg, 1932), and even Anne in Hoodoo Anne (Griffith, 1916) benefited in that they triumphed over the gender (Julie, Helen), race (Anne), and class (Helen). Yet, the glaring omission of romance in a Black cast romantic film produced for mainstream audiences, while the film simultaneously asks and answers questions of gender, class and race, further shows the films preoccupation with pleasing and appeasing white audiences first.

As early as 1929, the self-regulating organization called the Studio Relations Committee questioned whether white audiences would want to see Black couples kissing onscreen when discussing several kissing scenes within Hallelujah. From there, various depictions of Black characters are shown to embody sexual deviance. As films increasingly became a means of

entertainment to mass audiences, many began to question the medium's power to influence its viewers. Many organizations including the Legion of Decency organized protests at the premiere of movies that were considered to display improper morals. As such, censor boards were set up at the city, county, and state level around the country, effectively giving government the right to restrict films, in part or whole, from being played in their jurisdiction. As a result, in 1924, the president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, William Hays, worked with a number of organizations to create a list of rules referred to as "Don'ts" and "Be Carefuls" that laid out the content big studios should avoid in order to ensure their films would not be denied by censors. This list, which included, but was not limited to restrictions regarding foul language, depictions interpreted to be sacrilegious, overtly criminal behavior, suggestively sexual behavior, and any hint of miscegenation. The SRC was to oversee Big Studios who, fearing they would lose money if their films were denied release, agreed to follow the rules. Yet, little oversight by the SRC led to the list being revamped in the early '30s into the Motion Picture Production Code, as the Production Code Administration, led by Hays, though enforced heavily by Joseph Breen, who would take over the duties of the SRC. From 1934 to 1966 when he retired, Breen more or less had the most say in Hollywood over what would pass as acceptable, as Big Studios agreed not to release films without a Production Code seal, and Breen, a devout Catholic, had a strict interpretation of Production Code rules.

In alignment with changes in the way that the Code was enforced with Hollywood studios, there are shifts in the ways the Black sexuality is referenced and utilized. Up until 1931, the year the Studio Relations Committee began to require Hollywood studios send copies of their scripts for approval before productions, Black sexuality was othered and displayed as deviant and in opposition to white sexuality. The dictate from the SRC lead to studios using the

reputation of Black sexuality as wrong and deviant to signal deviant behavior in a white lead characters and ultimately allow them the opportunity to explore their own lustful desires without the danger of being irrevocably coded as deviant. Films released between 1932 and 1935, I discussed a pattern in Hollywood films to frame some of the most widely recognized Black actresses such as Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beaver as deviant as well as depicted as providing a liminal space in which their white employers were allowed to explore outside standard gender, class, and racial roles. In Hollywood films from 1936 to 1941, I discuss films in which the white character is connected to their Black servant to the extent that their servant's implied sexual deviance leads to projecting and emoting the desires of their white employers. In these relationships, the characterization of sexuality is set up in a dynamic that makes the depictions of white sexuality and Black sexuality dependent on each other in that they both cause change in the other. white sexuality is changed by Black sexuality in that Black sexuality creates space for characters to stray and return to proper behavior that is approved of society. In the films discussed in this dissertation, Black sexuality is shown as deviant by nature. Here Black sexuality is shown to have value from its ability to favor whiteness as the standard every time it was thematically linked to deviance of a white main character. This practice of acknowledging Black sexuality for its manufactured lack led to the type of erasure of humanized romantic depictions that Stormy Weather grapples with in 1943, following a 1941 takeover of Hollywood film production monitoring by the Office of War Information. And yet, still, depictions of Blackness in the '50s, 60s, and '80s often hint to previous depictions of Black sexuality, either in their complete lack of mention of sexuality in "good" (and obedient) characters or by way of a deviant Black character being hypersexualized.

Filmography

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Mayo, Archie. *Night After Night*. Paramount Pictures, 1932. 1 hr., 13 min.

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Micheaux, Oscar. *Within Our Gates.* Micheaux Book and Film Company, 1920. 1 hr., 19 min.

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Schertzinger, Victor. *Safety in Numbers.* Paramount Pictures, 1930, 1 hr. 20 min.

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Selig, William. *Something Good, Negro Kiss.* Selig Polyscope Company, 1896. 1 min.

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Vidor, King. *Hallelujah!* MGM Studios, 1929. 1 hr., 49 min.

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