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Deviant Representations: Female Relationships, Film Censorship, and Hollywood Cinema, 1932-1945

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Deviant Representations:

Female Relationships, Film Censorship, and Hollywood Cinema, 1932-1945

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in English

by

Kirsten Michelle Lew

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Deviant Representations:

Female Relationships, Film Censorship, and Hollywood Cinema,

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Kirsten Michelle Lew

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Richard Yarbrough, Co-Chair

Professor Kathleen McHugh, Co-Chair

This dissertation examines how the American film industry's Production Code (its institution of self-imposed regulation) affected representations of female relationships between the 1930s and the 1940s. Focusing on relationships between black, white, and queer women, it argues that female relationships were important sites of resistance to the Code's enforced racist and patriarchal ideology. Such relationships provide critical commentary on the era's anxieties about female sexuality, miscegenation, women's labor, and class precarity that often bypassed censorship's awareness. "Deviance" in this project refers to women who in various forms do not fit within a socially acceptable definition of womanhood, whether it be along vectors of race, class, sexual orientation, or sexuality. It evokes the logic used by film censors to maintain a

"moral" framework around right and wrong types of women. Engaging with the archives of film censorship and production, this dissertation asserts that while cross-racial and cross-sexual female relationships were on the one hand intended to distinguish "deviant" forms of femininity from images of heterosexual white women, on the other they could also produce their own resistance by providing incipient possibilities of female affinities across social boundaries. Looking at a variety of woman's films within different genre conventions, including gold digger films, melodrama, horror, and film noir, it claims that in the face of censorship that attempted to regulate narratives about women, female relationships could be turned into conduits for a visual language of insurgence that bypassed the Code's imperatives. It intervenes in traditional feminist film criticism's accounts of the place of women in Classical Hollywood cinema, which argue that such films were ensconced in fundamentally patriarchal ideology that undermined bonding between women. It revises this consensus by considering productive moments of female relationships and demonstrate how they function in opposition to the Code's language surrounding female representations.

The dissertation of Kirsten Michelle Lew is approved.

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2020

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Introduction

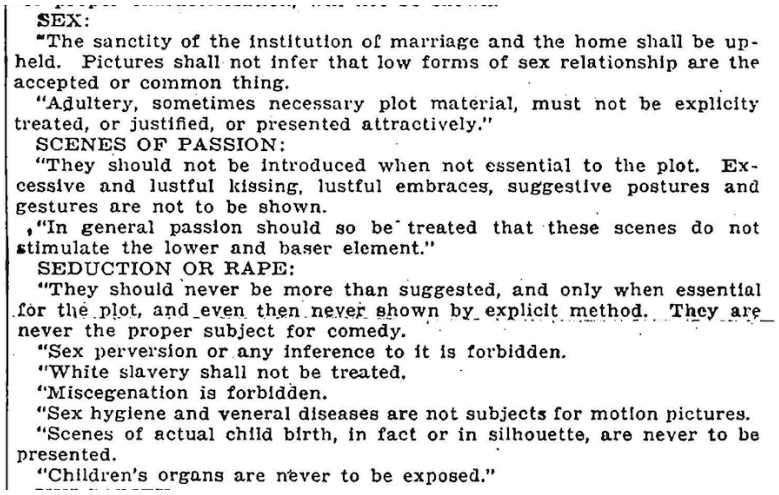
The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationships are the accepted or common thing.

Motion Picture Production Code, 1930

In the 1933 MGM film *Hold Your Man*, Ruby (Jean Harlow), a woman who knows how to fleece a man for rent money using her feminine charms, falls in love with petty criminal Eddie (Clark Gable). When he accidentally kills a man, she refuses to rat him out to the police and ends up in a women's reformatory. There she lives with a diverse array of figures. One of her roommates is Romanian (Dorothy Burgess), another is African American (Theresa Harris), another a socialist (Barbara Barondess), and the film shows us that there are also Asian and Jewish women there as well. Each of them has been locked up for various petty crimes that register their status as socially deviant: prostitution, drug and alcohol use, political subversion. This motley crew of women form a supportive community who, in the film's climax, work together to sneak Eddie into the facility and get the couple married so that Ruby will not have her baby out of wedlock. Thus, while the women individually represent various social transgressions and marginal identities, the opportunity for their collective action across lines of race, ethnicity, religion, and other forms of difference is ultimately in service to the film's reinforcement of the sanctity of marriage.

The Code, also known as the Hays Code, was the form of self-regulation that the American film industry adopted in 1930 under pressure from religious groups who feared

the social impact of cinema on the masses. Films, asserted the writers of the Code, had a responsibility to promulgate morally sound narratives that did not encourage or glamorize vice. "Moral" in this case was presumed to mean in keeping with Christian and patriarchal values, particularly as they pertained to issues of sexuality. Representations of women are not specifically singled out anywhere in the text of the Code, but the section headed "Sex" was clearly the place where they, and issues that concerned them, were policed. The Code elaborated a series of forbidden acts and identities that, while not solely concerning women, were primarily aimed at them through women's symbolic burden of representing sex: "adultery," "scenes of passion," "seduction or rape," "sex perversion," "white-slavery," "miscegenation," "sex hygiene," "scenes of childbirth," and "children's sex organs." How might this conglomeration of issues contribute to our understanding of how film censorship impacted representations of women—specifically, women relating to each other—during Hollywood's Classical era? The central claim of this dissertation is that the "Sex" section of the Code functioned like the reformatory in *Hold Your Man*: it brought together different kinds of subversive women under the banner of deviance, and in the process produced unintended affinities that actually work against the Code's disciplinary logic.



SEX:

"The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing.

"Adultery, sometimes necessary plot material, must not be explicity treated, or justified, or presented attractively."

SCENES OF PASSION:

"They should not be introduced when not essential to the plot. Excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces, suggestive postures and gestures are not to be shown.

"In general passion should so be treated that these scenes do not stimulate the lower and baser element."

SEDUCTION OR RAPE:

"They should never be more than suggested, and only when essential for the plot, and even then never shown by explicit method. They are never the proper subject for comedy.

"Sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden.

"White slavery shall not be treated.

"Miscegenation is forbidden.

"Sex hygiene and veneral diseases are not subjects for motion pictures.

"Scenes of actual child birth, in fact or in silhouette, are never to be presented.

"Children's organs are never to be exposed."

Figure 1. The "Sex" section of the Production Code as it was printed in *Variety* on Feb. 19, 1930.

The idea of affiliation, or *bringing together*, is a key concept for this project. Foundational feminist film criticism and studies of racial representations in Classical Hollywood have largely focused on how films distinguished among women along racial, sexual, and class lines, foreclosing opportunities for female bonding because, so it has been argued, such bonding threatens patriarchy.[1] It is certainly true that filmmakers and film censors were extremely attuned to the potential social messaging of films regarding issues of race, sexuality, and gender—issues that are deeply imbricated with one another. Thus, for instance, Classical Hollywood cinema's relentless proclivity to present African American women as maids to white women, maintaining racialized class difference within these relationships. This also accounts for Hollywood's persistent privileging of heteronormative romance plots, especially in woman's films (arguably the most defining film genre of the 1930s and 1940s). And yet it was rare for censors to view

[1] See for instance E. Ann Kaplan's arguments about female bonding in *Stella Dallas* and *Blonde Venus*: "The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's *Stella Dallas*" in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1990), 133; *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983), 57.

representations of female relationships themselves as particularly problematic sites worthy of scrutiny. *Hold Your Man* is not singular for the 1930s in its representation of female friendships that cross racial and ethnic lines, even as the film maintains an image of white female stardom and white reproductive futurity.

Nor is it singular in portraying these friendships alongside other behaviors considered to be socially deviant—the kind that could land you in a correctional institution. The very fact of this diverse female community existing within a women's prison illustrates how its vision of both female bonding *and* unruly female behavior can only exist behind bars, literally contained. It suggests that such indifference to social boundaries is anomalous, limited to the world of penitentiaries and institutions, an idea mirrored in some contemporaneous prison chain-gang films that feature Black and white men. What draws these subjects together are the very acts that mark them as deviants. Here, and in the entirety of this project, I am using the term "deviant" as it has been theorized by Cathy J. Cohen. Writing from a position of queering African American Studies and undoing some of the nefarious underpinnings of respectability politics, Cohen argues for an analysis that centers "the experiences of those who stand on the (out)side of state sanctioned, normalized White, middle- and upper-class, male heterosexuality."[2] Her application of the term is deliberately broad, encompassing not only different kinds of queer folk but also single mothers, people on welfare, and those who have been incarcerated. Though she is speaking specifically about Black politics and communities, Cohen eschews defining deviance along purely racial, sexual, or gendered lines. For Cohen, the everyday agency of such figures to live deviant lives "challenge[s],

[2] Cathy J. Cohen, "Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics," *Du Bois Review Social Science Research on Race* (March 2004): 29.

or at least counter[s], the basic normative assumptions of a society intent on protecting structural and social inequalities under the guise of some normal and natural order to life."[3] Though this concept anticipates the use of the term "queer" to delineate myriad positions outside of normativity, I prefer Cohen's articulation of deviance because it more closely adheres to the ways that social scientists, reformers, and censors of the 1920s and 1930s discursively constructed their arguments for film regulation (which I will discuss more in depth below). Cohen is concerned with the real lived experiences of people, but I consider how her theory might apply to representations, particularly ones that were policed in ways that speak to the surveillance of deviant subjects that Cohen describes.

"Deviance" has been most commonly deployed in film studies to reference forms of queerness, reclaiming the term from its discursive usage in the early twentieth century to suture nonnormative sexual identities with antisocial and violent behavior (think Leopold and Loeb, or Norman Bates). Chris Straayer's work *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies* uses the term to resituate viewership outside of a heteronormative matrix, challenging the feminist film theory mainstay that cinema caters to straight male spectators by centering how gay and lesbian audiences subversively read and repurpose film meanings.[4] But as Patricia White acknowledges, film theory's genealogy of "strategies of oppositional viewing" that emphasize race, gender, or sexuality exercise a mutual influence over one another.[5] While this dissertation draws on Straayer's and

[3] Ibid., 33.
[4] Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-Orientations in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
[5] Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press 1999), xvii.

White's methodologies, it is less interested in spectatorship than it is in the ways that deviance as a logic arises from the Code itself, one that is not organized around a primary category of difference but rather comes to embody the affiliations among many marginal identities and behaviors. Indeed, Christian Metz refers to censorship as a "deviation" for the ways it inherently permits passage of meanings it claims to totally repress.[6]

One difficulty of writing about deviant subjects in Classical Hollywood cinema is that they are not always legible as such; and when they are, they are usually not centralized within the narrative. Most of the female stars of the 1930s and 1940s were emphatically straight and emphatically white, at least on screen. But this is precisely why relationships between ostensibly normative women and women more overtly marked as deviant become crucial sites for recognizing how deviance is conveyed within a representational structure that mandates normativity. The reasons for this mandate, of course, do not have to do entirely with censorship but are also the product of social beliefs and power relations. However, censorship as an optic through which to view these relationships helps contextualize them with regard to how deviance was being regulated in other areas. Female relationships that crossed social lines could serve the ideological purpose of distinguishing deviant forms of womanhood from images of heterosexual white women. They could also engage in what we would today call a white liberal feminism that pays lip service to difference without fundamentally questioning structures of inequality. But I am interested in how these relationships resist the mandates of the Code by providing incipient possibilities of female affinities across social boundaries. In this study I will look at four different kinds of woman's films—gold digger films,

[6] Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1982), 253.

melodrama, horror, and film noir—that portray relationships among women of different races, sexualities, and classes. I assert that in the face of censorship that attempted to regulate narratives about women for racist and patriarchal ends, female relationships could be turned into conduits for a visual language of insurgence that bypassed the Code's imperatives.

The history of the Code is well known in film studies. From the 1930s to the 1950s, censorship set the parameters of possibility for American film. Though the early decades of the twentieth century were punctuated by celebrated censorship cases in literature and theater, film held the unique position of not qualifying for First Amendment protections, thanks to a 1915 Supreme Court decision (*Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio*) which ruled that films were a business rather than a vehicle of public opinion. The decision would not be reversed until 1952. Film censorship existed before the Code, under the stewardship of former Postmaster General William H. Hays, head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of Association of America (MPPDA) from 1922 to 1945. Attempting to navigate the diverse requirements of state censorship boards, Hays implemented a list of "Don'ts and Be Carefuls" for the industry in 1927, from which the 1930 Code would eventually derive many of its prohibitions. But there was no mechanism for enforcing this list, and until 1934 Hollywood was in its notorious "Pre-Code" era, where sexual explicitness and graphic violence flourished, tempered by only the slightest nod to vice's punishment. Though Pre-Code films were subject to regulation, it was minor compared to what they would experience after the formation of the Production Code Administration (PCA) in 1934. With the failure of the MPPDA to meet the public outcry for cleaned up movies,

the Legion of Decency, a Catholic organization, called for major reform and threatened massive boycotts. Preferring internal reform to potential federal regulations from Franklin Roosevelt's administration, Hollywood agreed; and thus the PCA was created. That institution became practically synonymous with the looming figure of Joseph Breen, a Catholic journalist who headed the PCA for most of its existence and oversaw the censorship of almost all Hollywood films made between 1934 and 1954. Under the PCA, films that did not meet the Code's standards of approval (and theaters that exhibited them) would be fined $25,000, and appeals could only be made to the New York-based MPPDA and the financial institutions that funded the film industry. This financial stranglehold meant that Hollywood had to abide by the censors' demands.

Breen and the censors of the PCA were meticulous in their scrutiny of scripts, which studios had to submit in advance for approval. As the PCA files readily indicate, oftentimes scripts were submitted in parts, and then revised and resubmitted. Usually filming started before an entire script had been approved. It was the final cut of a film that received a Code seal of approval, preventing filmmakers from drastically changing what had been approved in a script. In practice, however, filmmakers did not always concede to the PCA's every demand, and censorship was subjective and uneven. When comparing the production material in the extensive archive of the PCA with the released films, one finds that minor infractions frequently make it into the final product. Narrative and visual context played major parts in how a point of contention was resolved. As Lea Jacobs has pointed out in her study of censorship and adultery, the "rule of compensating values," or the narrative logic that sinful characters be punished and virtuous ones be rewarded, predominated in ways that actually permitted the presence of adultery in

films.[7] The PCA was also deeply concerned with certain topics that only received a brief mention in the wording of the Code itself. The representation of African American characters, for instance, received substantial attention in films even though the Code only mentions race once: in the clause forbidding miscegenation. However, as Ellen C. Scott has demonstrated, the PCA regulated myriad issues pertaining to African Americans, including scenes of lynching and racial violence, the use of racial slurs, representations of slavery, and attempts to address American society's persistent racial inequalities.[8] In sum, the practice of censorship must be understood beyond what the Code actually says.

But one does not have to look far to find the discursive logic of deviance embedded within the language of the Code, as well as in the series of publications in the late 1920s and early 30s that helped establish it. The Payne Fund Studies were a series of commissioned research projects on the social effects of film, with particular emphasis on what were perceived to be the most susceptible members of society. In the publications they are referred to as "children," but in point of fact most of the subjects interviewed were high school and college students. These studies proliferated a classist view that asserted only mature and sophisticated audiences could engage with morally ambiguous art without being corrupted by it. In these studies, the argument is made again and again that movies facilitate "delinquency." In *Movies, Delinquency, and Crime* (1933), for instance, the authors argue that the seemingly harmless acts of imitating dress and hairstyle of movie stars are part of a more insidious trend of young women copying immoral sexual behaviors they see on screen:

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[7] Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928-1942* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).
[8] Ellen C. Scott, *Cinema Civil Rights: Regulation, Repression, and Race in the Classical Hollywood Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

> In a scene, as many of the accounts show, the girls do not imitate merely separate, isolated items, but instead they tend to take over a framework of conduct marked by feelings of love, freedom, excitement, adventure, and wildness. In so far as such a general pattern serves as a source of information, or a guide to conduct, the copying may orient the girl in the direction of delinquency.[9]

In the study female delinquency is almost always understood in sexual terms.[10] Thus, acts like truancy and running away from home are tied to the sexualized allure of the movies and the presumption that in acting outside of authority, young women were making themselves sexually available. A similar logic would reign in the Code. Women, of course, signify sexual difference in a patriarchal society, and thus represent sex itself. Furthermore, sexuality is the realm in which much of the social policing of women occurs. Therefore, while the Code's categorization of sexual issues is not overtly gender-specific, its tenets are implicitly aimed at images of women. For this reason, the "Sex" section of the Code should be understood not just in terms of its individual prohibitions, but as a cohesive logic that sought to organize women's actions along the lines of acceptable and deviant.

According to the Payne Fund Studies and moral reformers, films had a corrupting influence. As a result, film regulation would come to be framed in terms of preventing the production of new deviants. The patronizing attitude of the Payne Fund Studies was

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[9] Herbert Blumer and Philip M. Hauser, *Movies, Delinquency, and Crime* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1933), 104.

[10] See Rachel Devlin's account of Progressive-era reformers in "Female Juvenile Delinquency and the Problem of Sexual Authority in America, 1945-1965," *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 9.1 (1997): 153.

carried over into the writing of the Code. We see this ethos in the Code's opening statement of general principles as they were elaborated in 1934:

> Most arts appeal to the mature. This art appeals at once to every class, mature, immature, developed, undeveloped, law abiding, criminal…
>
> …it is difficult to produce films intended for only certain classes of people. The exhibitor's theatres are built for the masses, for the cultivated and the rude, the mature and the immature, the self-respecting and the criminal…
>
> …Because of the larger audience of the film, and its consequential mixed character. [sic] Psychologically, the larger the audience, the lower the moral mass resistance to suggestion.[11]

It was in the name of the imagined categories of the "immature," "undeveloped," and "criminal"—a confluence that in itself reveals the mutability of terms and frameworks for those subjects whom the guardian censors deemed unsuitable—that censorship was enacted. Gender does not immediately reveal itself here as an operative category. However, given the Code's (and the subsequent archive of censorship's) clear investment in regulating representations of women and controlling the messages films presented to women audiences, we should understand the censors' articulations of "immature," "undeveloped," and "criminal" as also comprising female filmgoers. Each of these terms points to the idea of intellectual incapacity, a notion very much in keeping with the era's ideas of genetic predeterminism and eugenics that categorized certain subjects as socially unfit. I am arguing that women were categorically racialized according to a similar logic

[11] "Text of the Production Code," *Motion Picture Herald*, 11 Aug 1934, 12.

within the body of the Code and in the actual practice of censorship. By "racialized" I refer to the ways in which Classical Hollywood cinema protected whiteness as a norm by using signifiers of non-whiteness to present certain social subjects as deviants. The "Sex" section reveals how collectively, restrictions against certain acts aimed at women were understood as part of a larger, interconnected idea of deviance.

What does this history have to do with representations of female relationships? What do relationships among women reveal about how the Code regulated, or failed to regulate, images of women? Those questions are where this project intervenes in critical debates about woman's films. Nowhere in the Code is there any mention of relationships among women. With the exception of overt lesbian relationships, female relationships were rarely ever policed by the PCA—a fact that raises the question to what degree female bonding is perceived as threatening under patriarchy. But other issues that affected women were policed, and those issues in turn affected how female relationships were presented. Among woman's films of the 1930s and 1940s, we find innumerable imbrications among women in the form of friendships, employer-employee relationships, rivalries, and implicitly romantic relationships. These relationships, often marginal, are important sites of social commentary in the face of film regulation.

The Code, after all, was far more than just a series of prohibitions. It was an ideologically driven bulwark against society's rapidly changing social mores. As scholars like Jacobs and Richard Maltby have explained, the Code manifested a retributive logic that actively shaped film narratives.[12] The ramifications of this logic have been explored thoroughly in regard to issues of sexuality, crime, and class, and more recently in regard

[12] Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin*; Richard Maltby, "'Baby Face,' or How Joe Breen Made Barbara Stanwyck Atone for Causing the Wall Street Crash," *Screen* 27.2 (1986): 22-46.

to race.[13] But what has yet to be fully explored is how, in policing certain elements of films, censorship reinforced the shared, collective positions of acts on the margins of the socially acceptable. In other words, in asserting what was forbidden, the Code proliferated relationships *between* transgressive acts.

We can see this connectivity play out in the era's representations of female relationships. Specifically, this dissertation will examine this phenomenon through relationships that cross social lines of race, class, and sexuality. By focusing on Classical Hollywood's treatment of relationships among Black, white, and queer women, often under shared conditions of economic precarity, I find that censorship could undermine its own imperatives by suggesting underlying affinities among women where it meant to assert differences. I read these relationships against the Code's mandates governing representations of women in order to show how such regulations compelled unintended affiliations among women in ways that illustrate the intertwined nature of categories variously understood as deviant. In doing so, I show how the separate issues presented in the Code's section on Sex are intersectionally connected in ways that manifest both in cinematic representations and in the process of censoring. I argue that representations of female relationships fostered a cinematic language that fundamentally challenged the ideological motivations of censorship by providing images of interracial, non-heteronormative possibilities. In other words, despite the Code's attempts to differentiate straight, white, middle-class femininity from other forms of womanhood, these films inadvertently present images of female connection and even solidarity that reflect the

[13] In addition to Jacobs and Maltby, see Scott, *Cinema Civil Rights*, Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), and Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

reality of race, class, and sexuality as intersecting concerns. I refer to this overlay of crossings as "deviance" in order to evoke the era's psychological discourse for subjects who did not abide by normative social behaviors, and to recoup the term to describe the images of social deviations that recognize the linkages among these categories of difference.

This work departs from traditional feminist film criticism, which claims that woman's films are embedded within a fundamentally patriarchal ideology—what Catherine Jurca calls "a certain predisposition to make patriarchal oppression the bottom line in Classical Hollywood film."[14] In my analysis, I use the critical lenses of Black feminism and intersectionality to focalize the productive aspects of racial and sexual intersections within otherwise hegemonic frameworks. Drawing from work in African American Studies that centers marginal figures (including Miriam J. Petty's work on African American actors and actresses in the 1930s) and refigures the cultural work of problematic racial narratives (such as Jennifer C. Nash's work on Black women in pornography), I argue that attending to the importance of female relationships allows us to see disruptions to the stability of heterosexual romance narratives that enforced white reproductive futurity.[15] I find that woman's films of this period are better understood by considering the multiple and often contradictory registers through which films produce racial and gendered meanings. Under this mode white patriarchy is the starting point

[14] Catherine Jurca, "*Mildred Pierce*, Warner Bros., and the Corporate Family," *Representations* 77.1 (Winter 2002): 31.
[15] Miriam J. Petty, *Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

rather than the bottom line, and its unimpeachability is challenged by recognizing how woman's films contain the means of their own ideological unraveling.

For all the attention woman's films have garnered since the advent of feminist film criticism in the 1970s, few studies have taken female relationships as their central object of focus. Meanwhile, the male buddy film has garnered substantial critical attention (I touch on some of the differences between theorizations of male and female buddies in Chapter One). That scholarship that does treat women's relationships usually focuses on films made in the wake of second-wave feminism. This is a pointed omission, given the concerted attention to women's issues, women's experiences, women spectators, and women stars within this body of scholarship. On the one hand, it may be that the fact of women interacting with each other in woman's films is too obvious a detail to be worth concentrating on. On the other hand, when female relationships have been taken up in this work, often the analysis asserts competition and animosity as the main narrative trope. Jeanine Basinger's work on Classical Hollywood woman's films and Karen Hollinger's study of female friendships in films from the late 70s onwards, for example, come to the same conclusion about cinematic female relationships of the 1930s and 40s: they set up a dichotomy between "good" and "bad" women.[16] As Hollinger puts it,

> To a non-resisting spectator, both female double and group friendship films of the 1930s and 1940s offer patriarchally inspired views of female friendship as a conflict between "good" passive and "bad" aggressive

[16] Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993); Karen Hollinger, *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

> femininity. They also subordinate women's friendships to their attachments to men and family; stereotypically represent female friendship as involving jealousy, envy, and competition for men; and even use the portrayal of female relationships as a means to denigrate women's career ambitions.[17]

Granted, the films Hollinger and Basinger address tend to be ones that centralize a female relationship (for instance, both critics discuss the 1946 film *The Dark Mirror* about twin sisters). Yet most films that contain female relationships are not necessarily about female relationships. In fact, I am more interested in the ways that female relationships act as counterpoints within conventional Hollywood romance plots in ways that, far from denigrating women's ambitions, offer a fleeting glimpse of what they could look like. Consider, for example, the utopian potential of the interracial friendship in *Baby Face* (1933), a film I discuss in Chapter One, when the white heroine Lily briefly considers running off to Europe with her Black partner Chico (who alternatively figures as her maid and her closest friend) before deciding to stay and support her husband.

Considerations of interracial and queer female relationships have in fact paid far more attention to the disruptive possibilities of these affiliations even as they recognize the problematic ways such representations also normalize heterosexuality and white supremacy. For instance, there has been significant critical work on Mae West's onscreen relationships with Black women (a topic I analyze in Chapter One) as well as on the Black and white mother-daughter couples in the landmark 1934 film *Imitation of Life* (which I analyze in Chapter Two). In addition, Patricia White has compellingly argued

[17] Hollinger, *In the Company of Women,* 41.

for viewing strategies that make visible Classical Hollywood's forbidden lesbian representations, a phenomenon that she understands as deeply intertwined with the relegation of people of color to the visual and narrative margins. For her, queer recuperation is a major incentive for attending to peripheral female characters in their relationships to female stars. As she says, "Such 'asexual' characters are as close as Hollywood gets to indicating 'deviant' gender presentations and the sexual identities they sometimes imply…Supporting characters also encode class, body type, age, ethnic, and racial differences often minimized in classical Hollywood."[18] Building on White's claims, I use the critical lens of queerness in recognizing the significance of these relationships but beyond specifying queer sexuality as my subject. Rather, the "deviance" White names can be extended to other socially condemnable acts and identities beyond queer sexuality (though for women, they will almost always be rendered in terms of sexuality). My aim, ultimately, is to bring these two critical discussions on race and sexuality in sustained dialogue with one another.

While sequenced chronologically from the Pre-Code era to the end of World War II, the chapters of this dissertation are organized by genre in ways that map out a history of social concerns around women as they developed from the early 1930s to the mid-1940s. Though situated within different generic conventions, all of the case studies analyzed are woman's films, meaning films that were aimed at a primarily female audience and that featured female protagonists. I frame each chapter with regard to a particular issue—either an injunction from the Code or a statement from within the PCA archive—that speaks to an issue central to that genre: "white-slavery" for gold digger

[18] White, *Uninvited,* xxii.

films, miscegenation for race melodrama, queer sexuality and adultery for horror, and maternity and women's labor for film noir. I selected these films based on their exceptional foregrounding of socially transgressive female relationships. Each of my chapters offers an idiosyncratic methodology based on the censorship history for the respective films, engaging either multiple films or a novel-film adaptation pairing. The first chapter looks at relationships between Black and white women in gold digger films both within and beyond the conventional maid-mistress dynamic. Reading *Blonde Venus* (1932), *Baby Face*, and *Belle of the Nineties* (1934) against the context of the economic precarity of the Depression, I argue that these films portray interracial female alliances against the sexual and economic exploitation of men. My second chapter examines the first cinematic adaptation of *Imitation of Life* from Fannie Hurst's novel. I compare the text's analogies between sexual passing (passing as non-queer) and racial passing with the film's reconfiguration of the narrative's Black-white relations so that the Black female characters bear the brunt of the film's perceived dysfunction. The third chapter demonstrates how the impulse to normalize a white Anglo-Saxon subject position in the horror film *Cat People* (1942) produces ideological contradictions when it intersects with a competing imperative to normalize heterosexuality. I also turn to how these issues manifest in two related films also produced by Val Lewton at RKO: *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) and *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944). Finally, the fourth chapter demonstrates how women of different races, classes, and sexualities are affiliated on the basis of their labor in James M. Cain's novel *Mildred Pierce* (1941) and its 1945 film adaptation, which famously stages the return of women from the workforce back to the home as World War II ended.

In concurrence with Basinger's account of woman's films, the genre has an uncanny ability to be a duck-rabbit of politicized meanings. As she states,

> If it is true, as many suggest, that Hollywood films repressed women and sought to teach them what they ought to do, then it is equally clear that, in order to achieve this, the movies first had to bring to life the opposite of their own morality…
>
> Everything the woman's film is, it also isn't. Everything it endorses, it undermines. Everything it destroys, it reaffirms.[19]

A challenge in parsing cross-social female relationships as they were presented in Hollywood films is that subversive "resistance" is ensconced within narratives that by and large reaffirmed gendered and especially racial norms. However, that does not mean moments of resistance are not there. These relationships complicate accounts of woman's films as capitulating to the status quo, and complicate too our sense of how resistance can manifest within them. The repressive force of the Code catalyzed female relationships as sites for cinematic commentary on social anxieties like class rise, miscegenation, same-sex relationships, and women's labor. Not only should we attend to the importance of women's relationships within woman's films because they are a crucial aspect of them, but also for what relationships between women reveal about how the Code regulated, or failed to regulate, images of women. Female relationships embody the ways that regulation worked against its own purposes in drawing women together through the very deviance that was meant to keep different kinds of women apart.

[19] Basinger, *A Woman's View,* 6-7.

CHAPTER ONE

Spectacles of Deviance: Race and Performance in Gold Digger Films

White-slavery shall not be treated.

Motion Picture Production Code, 1930

White slavery, the term for prostitution coined by anti-vice crusaders in the nineteenth-century, was also the word that the writers of the Code opted for in 1930. This language was taken from the MPPDA's 1927 "Don'ts and Be Carefuls" list of prohibitions that preceded the Code. While in 1927 white slavery fell under the list of "Don'ts"—things expressly prohibited from representation in films—under the "Be Carefuls" one finds "The sale of women, or of a woman selling her virtue." There are two things I want to draw from this distinction. First, it emphasizes that the kind of prostitution represented by white slavery was understood as pertaining specifically to white women. This is certainly what reformers into the early twentieth century meant by the term: the concept was used to distance white women from sexual immorality by casting them as unwilling participants in sex work.[1] The image of white women forced into sexual enslavement by predatory, usually non-white pimps was perpetuated by xenophobic and racist anxieties around the increasing numbers of immigrants into the United States, and also was very

[1] Shelley Stamp Lindsey and Janet Staiger have examined the different, and sometimes paradoxical, meanings and messages that white slavery films presented to audiences during the silent era. See Lindsey, "Is any girl safe? Female spectators at the white slave films," *Screen* 37.1 (Spring 1996): 1-15; and Staiger, "The White Slave," in *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 116-146. Also see Nell Irvin Painter's contextualization of whiteness in relation to slavery in *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010).

much tied up with fears of miscegenation.[2] Suturing together notions of whiteness and victimization, the prostitution of white women could be presented as unnatural, something no white woman did willingly, or enjoyed, or benefited from—while shunting the burdensome image of the "willing" prostitute onto non-white women. In invoking the language of white slavery, the writers of the Code reveal that their concern about sex work is about race as much as it is about gender. Second, the distinction between "white-slavery" and "woman selling her virtue" suggests that there were multiple ways for women to sell themselves, some of which could be negotiated on film. One of these ways, as became apparent during the first years of the Great Depression, was gold digging.

As Richard Maltby has argued, the cultural rebellion one witnesses in some Hollywood films of the 1930's should be understood in direct relation to the era's crisis of patriarchal capitalism.[3] Within the many ways this crisis manifests in the period's representations, there is a clear cultural concern around the desperation for class rise. What was once an empowering narrative of Americanness, typified by the nineteenth-century novels of Horatio Alger (which construe poverty as a failure), becomes a weapon. As white men started experiencing unemployment in larger than normal numbers, narratives that showed women (and immigrants, ethnic minorities, and criminals in the contemporaneous gangster cycle of films) successfully exploiting capitalism both showcased the threat to patriarchal privilege and negated it by presenting such exploits as immoral and criminal. became a threat to their privilege. In this milieu,

[2] Brian Donovan, *White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender, and Anti-vice Activism, 1887-1917* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).
[3] Richard Maltby, "'Baby Face,' or How Joe Breen Made Barbara Stanwyck Atone for Causing the Wall Street Crash," *Screen* 27.2 (1986): 22-46.

the image of the woman who uses her sexuality to secure economic prosperity becomes a similar kind of threat to American ideology, bearing the blame for the Crash through her actions while also revealing patriarchal capitalism's consistency with ruthless amorality. Ironically, while women who worked outside of the home were frequently typified as mannish (as I will examine on the following chapter), a different form of female labor tied to spectacle, performance, and sexual allure rested on an opposite stereotype: woman as dangerously seductive. In both cases, female economic independence was connected to female sexuality as a way of containing those threats: the fact of women's class rise and its means could be labeled problematic and condemned—while also bringing spectators into the theater.

The form of female deviance examined in this chapter is exchanges of sex for money, as articulated in the Code's prohibition against prostitution and vaguer allowance of less overt sexual transactions like gold digging and becoming a "kept" women. It will consider the racialization of white female sexual commodification through relationships that frequently appear in pre-Code gold-digger films: that between white female gold-diggers and African American women who are their maids. These relationships often exist within a gray area, on the one hand marked by rigid racial segregation that does not permit Black women to rise above the station of servant or approximate the glamor of their white mistresses, and on the other hand evincing close affective bonds and mutual understandings that are suggestive of friendships. Scholarship on these relationships have questioned the extent to which they function merely as bolsters to white femininity by portraying maids as assets that gold-diggers accrue alongside of diamonds and furs. At the same time, the criticism has pointed out how these same women, denied the

sexualized glamor of their white counterparts, simultaneously act as ciphers for the stereotypical sexual promiscuity that African American women have historically been laden with, implicating white women in sexual deviance through their affective proximity to them. The films of Mae West are often taken as exemplary of this phenomenon of paradoxical distinction and closeness, where the complex intertwining of class, race, and sexuality make these relationships difficult to parse. Issues of class are always inflected by issues of race—who is allowed to rise, and how much, and under what circumstances. Donald Bogle asserts that class at once separates and unites West with Black women: "black women could not possibly be rivals to Mae West's femininity and…only black women were fit to wait on whores. Because both blacks and whores were at the bottom of the social scale, Mae West could rely on her colored maids and enjoy a livelier camaraderie with them than she might with whites."[4] Ramona Curry, meanwhile, emphasizes that Black maids mark West's "acquisition of wealth and social status, as her maids increase in number with her success"; at the same time, "The interracial exchanges in which the star engages onscreen also charge her image with an undercurrent of exoticism and sexual taboo."[5] Maids, then, can be described as accentuating the multi-faceted transgressions that attend female gold-digging: as the white gold-digger rises financially, her companionship with her maid, in part enabled by her newfound wealth, ironically serves as a reminder of her questionable origins.

While this context is crucial for understanding the role Black women play in the class rise narratives of gold-digger films, I want to instead focus on how interracial

[4] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film* (Toronto; New York; London: Bantam Books, 1974), 61.
[5] Ramona Curry, *Too Much of a Good Thing: Mae West as Cultural Icon* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 15.

companionships between Black and white women are also frequently positively positioned against the forms of patriarchal oppression that drive women to gold-digging in the first place. In the three case study films I examine in this chapter—*Blonde Venus* (dir. Josef Von Sternberg, 1932), *Baby Face* (dir. Alfred E. Green, 1933), and *Belle of the Nineties* (dir. Leo McCarey, 1934)—relationships between Black and white women position female networks as a means of fighting back against male exploitation. When viewed under this optic, gender emerges in a way that reconfigures our understanding of these films' classed commentaries: if class rise is circumscribed by race for Black women, it is limited too for poor white women, for whom, these films suggest, sex work is the only way up. Through this alignment, we see affinities emerge between Black and white women that complicate arguments of Black maids as mere accessories to white female sexual deviance. Rather, they suggest more empowering political possibilities. Because these relationships involve women who are deviant by dint of their participation in or their abetting of gold digging and sex work, their positive portrayal levels a critique at the moral logic that condemns such women to society's margins. By contrast, the heterosexual romantic relationships in these films are represented as decidedly perfunctory: in the case of all three films, the endings that show the reunification of the female lead with her male love interest were hastily added at the end of the production process at the behest of film censors. In this sense, the films each embody Barbara Smith's definition of "lesbian literature" as works in which women "are the central figures, are positively portrayed and have pivotal relationships with one another," while evincing a "critical stance towards the heterosexual institutions of male/female

relationships, marriage, and the family."[6] In this way they distinctly differ from the interracial male buddy film genre that emerged later in the century, which abets patriarchal logic by rejecting the presence of women and strongly disavows homoerotic possibilities.[7] Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that in these films the white female protagonists are both the narrative and visual focus of male oppression and the primary beneficiaries of interracial female friendships. Black women remain marginalized both in their relegation to service positions and in the narratives that sideline them. Thus, while this chapter looks at how racialization is placed in the service of the white femininity at the narrative center of these films, it argues that the presence of Black women in relation to white gold diggers serves as a crucial cornerstone for how these films represent the manifold social subversions latent in their protagonists' actions.

The plots of gold digger films, which run the gamut from tragic melodramas to musical comedies, usually involve a white woman climbing her way up the economic ladder through one or more relationships with wealthy men. Because of industry self-regulation's "rule of compensating moral values," in which virtuous behaviors were rewarded by the narrative and vice punished, more often than not this method of class rise was negated by the end of the film through the protagonist's fall back to her original class station. Sometimes, as is the case with *Blonde Venus* and *Baby Face*, this punishment only occurs within the last minutes of the film, in the form of revised endings mandated by film censors. Lea Jacobs has identified this logic as a major force shaping fallen

[6] Barbara Smith, "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," *The Radical Teacher* 7 (March 1978): 23.
[7] See Robin Wood, "From Buddies to Lovers," in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 222-244; and Cynthia J. Fuchs, "The Buddy Politic," in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 194-210.

women films (where women engage in extramarital sexual relationships).[8] Yet while it is more straightforward to see how the rule of compensating moral values was applied to women who exchanged sexual favors for financial gains, the recognition of race's role in these narratives complicates this history of censorship. The three films examined in this chapter, which straddle the Pre- and post-Code eras (the early 1930s to the pivotal year of 1934, when the Code was enforced), were all subject to censorship for their sexual content. And yet, in each case, issues of race were almost virtually ignored, even though the films deploy the white protagonists' visual and affective relationships to African American characters in ways that flout ideas of racial separation. I want to suggest that the interracial female relationships we see in these films, which take the forms of friendships, accomplices, maids and employers, rivals, and backup dancers on stage, do more than uphold the whiteness of the female leads. They also do more than imply the transgressiveness of the main white star by associating her with "blackness." If we read the internal contradictions of these films, other functions and interpretations emerge.

I will parse some of these contradictions by examining the tensions in these films between their narratives and their spectacles. The distinction between narrative and spectacle is a mainstay of early feminist psychoanalytic film criticism. *Blonde Venus* in particular has frequently been interpreted along these lines. Laura Mulvey has famously articulated the tension between male-driven action and female-arresting spectacle in Hollywood films.[9] Gold digger films frequently involve some sort of stage or spectacular element (usually the women are performers of some kind, which puts them in the

[8] Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928-1942* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).
[9] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6-18.

sightlines of wealthy men), which lend them to this hermeneutic. Yet I believe that the films in this chapter tell a very different story if we shift our focus from looking exclusively at gender to also looking at race, especially considering that the performances in these films are often racially charged. Here I draw from Jennifer C. Nash's intervention in how we understand Black women in racialized pornography. Nash critiques Black feminism's theory of representation that views images of Black women made by non-Black-women filmmakers as inherently violent and exploitative. Instead, she shifts the critical focus from injury to ecstasy to illustrate how race in pornography reveals itself as a performance, that is, "how race AIDS [sic] pornographic protagonists in staging, enacting, and naming pleasures, even as it always already constrains protagonists' lexicons of desire" (emphasis Nash's).[10] Using this framework, I argue that the contrast between staged spectacle and narrative action that we witness in certain gold digger films abets an understanding of certain racial representations as performative. Just as there exists a gendered tension in these films between what white gold diggers ostensibly perform and what they do outside of a staged context, there is an equally significant tension between race as it is treated "on stage" and race as it is treated in the narrative action. If the narrative is the space where Mulvey has read a scarcity of female agency, I observe that it is in the narrative that female relationships are their most robust and transgressive. Performances, on the other hand, have a tendency to appropriate racial stereotypes for the pleasure of a presumed white audience. They also are presented as a source of male visual pleasure, and tend to forward heteronormative romance narratives/plots, whereas interracial female friendships are pushed to the film's narrative

[10] Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 3.

margins. However, when we contrast the staged and narrative treatments of race and gender within the same film, we see how the performances of the stage for the sake of male characters are at odds with representations of affectively authentic female relationships of the narrative, in ways that question the validity of the former. I thus use the distinction between narrative and spectacle/performance put forward by Mulvey, but I come to a different conclusion about what work it does; I claim instead, as per Nash's reading, that the distinction reveals the performed nature of race and gender.

My readings, in addition to looking at these films through the lens of performance/narrative, focus on the kinds of positive affinities these works present between women, especially women who share a marginalized status. They present "womanhood" as a space less constrained by racial boundaries, where mutual female understanding offers the possibility of unifying against oppressive patriarchal structures. While these relationships are still far from utopian or equal, they nonetheless present subversive challenges to white, male-dominated power. These relationships allow us to read against the dominant narrative grain that wants deviant women punished.

I. *Blonde Venus*

Figure 1. Helen (Marlene Dietrich) performs the song "Hot Voodoo" framed by "tribal" Black backup dancers in *Blonde Venus*.

Two scenes of on-stage performances anchor the film *Blonde Venus*: one about racial primitivism, one about gender inversion. Each provides a space to revel in the glamorized spectacle of the protagonist Helen's (Marlene Dietrich) racial and sexual transgressions. In the first performance, Helen makes her dramatic return to the nightclub world after having retired to get married and become a mother. She transforms from the devoted sacrificial housewife willing to do anything to save her ailing husband into a threatening gorilla, prowling around a glittering nightclub that appears to be in Harlem. But the transformation is truly complete when Helen emerges from the gorilla costume and reinforces her status as a white woman suggestively inhabiting a sexualized Black space. The blonde Afro wig she dramatically dons registers this tension, as do the African American female backup dancers that frame her and wear black versions of the same wig (along with signifiers of jungle primitivism: spears, shields, and face paint). The tension registers too in the lyrics of Helen's song:

> Hot voodoo, black as mud
>
> Hot voodoo, in my blood
>
> That African tempo has made me a slave
>
> Hot voodoo, dance of sin
>
> Hot voodoo, worse than gin
>
> I'd follow a cave man right into his cave

The racial play between internal and external—the white woman in the gorilla, the African tempo in the white woman's blood—point to the idea of miscegenation without

placing Helen in proximity to African American men. Despite these musical allusions to interracial sex, it was the positioning of Helen in the space of a Harlem nightclub that upset the film censors about this scene. Song lyrics were routinely scrutinized under the era's censorship, and Jason Joy, head of the Studio Relations Committee (SRC) tasked with implementing the Code, deemed "Hot Voodoo's" lyrics "satisfactory under the Code" though he noted they necessitated "careful handling."[11] But his assistant, Lamar Trotti, objected to "a white woman shown singing in a negro café operated by negroes" on the basis that such a scene would be "questionable especially in Southern states where such equality is frowned upon." [12] In the actual film, potential "equality" is mitigated by the fact that the club where Helen performs is operated and patronized exclusively by white people, though original casting invoices called for equal numbers of Black and white extras for this scene. Black people appear in subordinate service to Helen's act and the club, as backup dancers, musicians, and bartenders, but they never interact with her. The point I want to make here is that suggestions of interracial contact within the context of Helen's act seemed to be more acceptable to film censors than outside of it in the non-stage diegesis of the film. Why is it that the "Hot Voodoo" performance, which overtly plays with the taboo of miscegenation (which was expressly forbidden under the Code), made it into the film, while African American people as potential viewers and enablers of Helen's performance was changed? What about the performance made this idea safe or acceptable where it was otherwise threatening?

[11] Jason S. Joy to B. P. Schulberg, 18 May 1932, *Blonde Venus* (1932) file, Production Code Administration Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA (hereafter cited as *Blonde Venus* PCA file).
[12] Lamar Trotti, "Resume," 16 May 1932, *Blonde Venus* PCA file.

One way this disparity has been articulated in the case of *Blonde Venus* is that the staged space of spectacle, as opposed to the non-staged space of the narrative, can contain subversive meanings because they exist in an ostensible context of performance. In keeping with director Josef Von Sternberg's oft-quoted insistence that his films should be projected upside down so that the plot will not interfere with the image, scholars have almost universally agreed that *Blonde Venus*'s spectacular, stylized performances are at odds with its narrative action.[13] The film's tale of Helen's adultery, punishment, and ultimate enouncement back in the domestic realm is betrayed by the ways that her ascent as a cabaret star, as framed in her performances, allows her far more money, power, and glamor than her life as a wife can. Performances also put Helen in the line of sight of Nick (Cary Grant), a wealthy politician whose mistress she becomes. While not a gold digger per se, Helen does use Nick for his money so that she can afford medical treatment for her husband. Yet because of what Jacobs calls "the motif of performance" that runs throughout the film, even beyond its explicitly staged spectacles, elements of the film's visual aesthetic style have been read as undercutting elements of its moralizing plot, allowing the film to "suggest a whole range of motivations for Helen's actions that lie outside the scenario of wifely sacrifice and devotion."[14] Under this view, the implicit content of the film's performances exist separately from the story that justifies their existence (and that they help forward). The incongruity between the aestheticized

[13] See Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981); E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983); Lea Jacobs, "The Censorship of 'Blonde Venus': Textual Analysis and Historical Method," *Cinema Journal* 27.3 (Spring 1988): 21-31; Gaylyn Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); and Sianne Ngai, "Black Venus, *Blonde Venus,*" in *Bad Modernisms*, ed. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
[14] Lea Jacobs, "The Censorship of 'Blonde Venus,'" 25, 27.

performances and the punishing morality of the fallen woman plot signal to the latter's subversion by the former.

While the binary between narrative and spectacle is an important framework for understanding *Blonde Venus*, I propose that it works differently than previous critics have outlined. That difference has to do with the juxtaposition of how the film presents Helen's relationship to marginalized women—namely Black women, queer women, and poor women—when she is onstage versus when she is offstage. Joy's and Trotti's assessments, which point to the permissiveness of performances, are in keeping with the critical argument that the film's plot is the more conservative façade that the performances help undermine. The stage offers the fantasy that the reality cannot abide. It is no accident that the issue that indexes this tension is miscegenation: Helen might be able to sing about interracial eroticism, but she cannot come anywhere near African American men who might view her sexually. But Helen's relationships with women obey an opposite formulation. In Helen's performances, other women are visually subordinated to her white, phallic power: the backup dancers in "Hot Voodoo" are literally in chains. But offstage when she is fleeing from her husband and male authorities, she relies on marginalized women for help and becomes one herself. This reading takes as its premise that *Blonde Venus*'s non-performative spaces offer images of authentic female interactions that reveal a network of women outside of the bourgeois imperatives of white, middle-class heteronormativity.[15] In the narrative action we witness the conflict

[15] As E. Ann Kaplan states, "this potentially subversive world of female bonding…offers a threat to patriarchy" because of how these women aid Helen in her flight. For Kaplan, this female world where Helen "tries to appropriate motherhood to herself" is contrasted with Helen as a "performer" where she "put[s] her sexuality at the service of men" (*Women and Film*, 57).

between socially transgressive female relationships and a patriarchal morality imposed by the Code.

Performances, meanwhile, rather than simply being sites of sexual subversion, can be understood as ministering to a specifically white gaze. In the "Hot Voodoo" sequence, interracial sexual fantasies are performed for a white audience. Though it showcases Helen's appropriation of male power—she isn't carried off by the ape like Fay Wray, but *is* the ape—it does so through notoriously racist iconography at the expense of the African American figures in the scene. Within the scene itself, there is a tense confrontation between what is presented on the stage and the world on the other side of the footlights. As the gorilla, not yet revealed as Helen, prowls around the club, a white woman asks the Black bartender Charlie if it is real. Charlie, who speaks with a stutter, replies, "Say lady, if that animal was real, I wouldn't b-b-b-be here." Charlie's stutter and his reply have been read as portraying him as cowardly, a reassuring counterpoint to the threatening gorilla (representing Black male sexuality) for white audiences. But Charlie's demeanor when he delivers these lines conveys annoyance rather than fear, as if he can't believe he's been asked such a stupid question. As Miriam J. Petty has argued, performance was sometimes the only way for Black actors in Hollywood to subvert the usually demeaning roles they were asked to play.[16] Furthermore, Charlie's answer brings to the fore the question of what is real and what is staged. The white patron believes the scene presented to her, confusing it with reality; Charlie reveals that it is not, refusing to be a part of the spectacle. In calling out the fantasy, Charlie also insists upon himself as the reality, in which he is relegated to working behind the bar in a white-owned Harlem

[16] Miriam J. Petty, *Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

club frequented by white customers. As John Baxter points out, this scenario was "more or less the prevailing situation in real Harlem establishments such as the Cotton Club."[17]

The dynamic witnessed here is not the only time it appears in *Blonde Venus*. There is a discernible pattern of the film's performances being undermined by moments in the plot in ways that suggest the latter space as open to subversive political meanings. Sianne Ngai has suggested that, in keeping with the film's theme of inversion and the critical discourse that has emphasized its "manifest" visual style, we attend to the film's plot as its "latent" layer where racial meanings play out.[18] In a similar vein, if the "Hot Voodoo" sequence is understood as on the one hand undermining the film's valorization of the white patriarchal family, on the other it also asserts racial difference. While the fact of Helen performing in a Harlem club with African American dancers might suggest some degree of parity (as it did for Trotti), that reading ignores the power dynamics inherent in Helen's appropriation of Black signifiers. It also ignores the fact that even when Helen is at her lowest social point in the film, there still exists the possibility of class rise for her in ways that do not exist for the film's African American characters.[19] Thus the stage was not free to overthrow society's mores, even if it sometimes presented that appearance. Rather, the narrative action contains the film's most pointed social critiques, as evinced when Helen is on the run from the authorities for refusing to give up custody of her son. The first figure she encounters in her flight is Viola, an African American hotel maid Helen calls to watch her son Johnny (Dickie Moore) while she goes

[17] John Baxter, *Von Sternberg* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2010), 155.
[18] Ngai, "Black Venus, *Blonde Venus*," 152.
[19] While Hollywood films actively limited roles for African Americans, Ngai has identified the rise of African American cabaret star Josephine Baker as a subtext of *Blonde Venus*. Thus the film chooses not to acknowledge the possibility of black female stardom that mirrors Helen's.

to work. Viola is only in the film briefly, but the unidentified actress who plays her actually appears earlier in the film as an extra: she can be seen sitting outside of the window of the club owner O'Connor's office (Fig. 2 and 3). This minor detail is one of the few hints in the film as to the club's Harlem locale. Ngai reads this scene as the film's allegorical "shutting out" of Black theater, which becomes a "background text" in Helen's transformation to the Blonde Venus.[20] But given Viola's subsequent appearance in the film, this moment takes on new significance. In the first scene with her, the African American inhabitants of Harlem are shut *out* from the white space of the nightclub, a fantasy world where ideas of Blackness are exploited for white customers. When Viola appears again (presumably not as the same character as before, but it is perhaps not accidental that she should be used twice as an extra in the same film), she is called *in* to Helen's hotel room to watch over Johnny.[21] Though Viola is not presented as socially equal to Helen, since she is a maid (for instance, Helen addresses her by her first name instead of with "Miss/Mrs."), their encounter suggests maternity as a shared venture among women. While this fact presents an opportunity for a female relationship, in the white, male-owned world of the nightclub Viola is simply shut out.

[20] Ngai, "Black Venus, *Blonde Venus*," 159.
[21] Production records suggest that the actress Evelyn Preer was originally cast as Viola, but she does not appear in the film.

Figures 2 and 3. Left: An unidentified African American actress in the background of O'Connor's Harlem club. Right: The same actress appears later in the film as Viola, a maid in a Norfolk hotel.

Immediately following this encounter, Helen meets another marginal figure in the form of a female nightclub manager (Cecil Cunningham). This character wears a man's tailcoat and is coded as a butch lesbian. In hushed tones the manager tips off Helen to the fact that the police and her husband have been there looking for her and that she should skip town. When Helen begs her not to tell anyone she's been there, the manager replies, "Don't worry, I've got a kid of my own." Again, motherhood serves as the basis for female support against male authorities. In fact, motherhood, for all that it is portrayed as household drudgery when Helen is in the domestic sphere with her husband Ned (Herbert Marshall), looks very different once Helen leaves that space. Joy attempted to justify the presence of adultery and prostitution in *Blonde Venus* by arguing that it was in service to virtuous motherhood: "This is not the act of an abandoned woman who is finding pleasure and happiness in an unconventional life. It is the action of a mother and of a good woman."[22] Joy here reflects a cultural understanding that views motherhood as

[22] Jason S. Joy to John Hammell, 16 Sept 1932, *Blonde Venus* PCA file.

incommensurate with sexuality. As E. Ann Kaplan points out, there is a "fundamental distinction between fetishism [woman as sexualized spectacle] and mothering that underlies the whole film."[23] However, the distinction that Joy attempts to make between an "abandoned" woman and a "good" one ultimately elides those categories precisely because Helen's maternal devotion is inextricable from her selling herself—first as a spectacle, then to Nick, and finally on the streets. The queer manager too challenges Joy's profile as an "unconventional" woman who reveals herself as a compassionate mother.

Later in the film, after Helen has given up Johnny to the authorities, she appropriates the iconography of the butch manager in a performance that signals her second ascent to fame and fortune in the cabaret world. Similar to the reversal of racial dynamics between the "Hot Voodoo" performance and Helen's non-staged dependence on African American women for aid, in this number Helen goes from getting furtive help from a sexually deviant woman to staging that woman's role for a male gaze. Both Helen and the manager wear tuxedos, and there is a further echo between the manager's group of lounging cabaret girls and Helen's "harem" of Orientalized backup dancers, one of whom she briefly caresses (Fig. 4 and 5). Once again the stage grants Helen explicitly white and male positions of power, presenting a spectacular play of gender inversion (rather than the racial inversion of "Hot Voodoo") that is at odds with Helen's vulnerability and female companionship while on the run. Furthermore, whereas before Helen forged connections with women through a shared understanding of motherhood, in this scene she emphatically denies emotional investment in her son. Bystanders whisper

[23] Kaplan, *Women and Film*, 53.

that she has become “as cold as the proverbial icicle,” and when her former lover Nick tries to entice her back to New York to see Johnny she insists that she is not interested. She also has a maid, a white woman with whom she speaks French, suggesting her class ascendency and her subscription to European, cosmopolitan values that suggest her sexual liberality (we also learn that her ascent began in South America, also connoted as a place of looser sexual mores). Thus, her transformation back into the Blonde Venus inflects her female relationships, which are now marked by class differentiation rather than shared struggle. Helen’s use of the manager’s iconography is therefore put towards a very different ideological purpose: differentiating Helen from other women and placing her in positions of masculine authority over them through her sexual potency.

Figures 4 and 5. Left: The butch cabaret manager who warns Helen walks past a group of lounging women. Right: A tuxedoed Helen performs with a “harem.”

Critics have disagreed over how much agency Helen actually exercises in this performance. Kaplan and Gaylyn Studlar have read Helen as the ultimate male fetish object, while Bill Nichols and James Snead see Helen as outside of male control in this

scene.[24] These two disparate readings are fundamentally over the question of how a given viewer sees Helen: as catering to male heterosexual desires (whether sadistic in the vein of Mulvey or masochistic according to Studlar) or challenging them. But if we consider the parallel that the film sets up between Helen and the manager, particular given how this paralleling of performance and narrative exists elsewhere in the film, we can instead approach it as a matter of what the performance does differently from the earlier scene. One notable difference is in the lighting. The Norfolk cabaret is shrouded in shadows and the manager speaks in a hushed tone, whereas the Parisian club is white and brightly lit. The latter scene puts Helen at center stage and in neon lights, whereas the former scene emphasizes her fugitive marginality. When we consider this incongruity, an ironic critique of Helen's social position begins to emerge. The real lesbian manager and the Helen who seeks her help must hide, but the Helen who plays with the iconography of lesbianism for a male audience gains wealth and acclaim.

This situation mirrors Helen's relationship to Black women as well. While running from the law, Helen eventually ends up in Savannah and is aided by a woman named Cora (Hattie McDaniel), who ambiguously figures as Helen's maid, nanny, or landlord. Cora embodies a stereotypical mammy figure. Donald Bogle reads her as "the prehumanized black domestic" who is "the true and trusted companion" of white people.[25] William Rothman, on the contrary, argues that Cora is not Helen's servant but her friend, "aiding a woman she accepts as a sister," though he qualifies that their racial

[24] Kaplan, *Women and Film*; Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure*; Nichols, *Ideology and the Image*; James Snead, *White Screens/Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994).
[25] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 116.

difference allows Helen to be free and powerful in ways denied to Cora.[26] These disparate readings are the result of the contradictions that mark the positioning of Cora and Helen. Cora is at once cunning, gathering information from a white male detective who is trailing Helen, and forgetful, playing into racists caricatures. Furthermore, it is unclear how Helen can afford to keep a maid when she is completely destitute, living in a dilapidated house and working as a prostitute. Also, in spite of her poverty, Helen manages to style her hair and wear a slinky kimono, while Cora wears a frumpy apron and is granted none of Helen's glamor. At the same time, in the shot where Helen and Cora peer down at the detective from a balcony, the framing of their positions on either side of a palm frond suggests a parallel (Fig. 6). In this scene, Cora and Helen present a united front against the male threat below. Cora also puts on her own racialized performance: Seeing if she can get any information from the detective, Cora cajoles him with smiles, calling him "boss" and offering to help him find whoever he's looking for. But she immediately drops the façade when she's back with Helen, saying, "That white man's up to something. I know when a white man's browsing and when he ain't." Thus, while the relationship between Cora and Helen does not suggest racial equality—which was itself often an object of censorship, as my next chapter will explore—it does position the film's female characters as explicitly at odds with its male ones in ways that draw the female characters together.

[26] William Rothman, *The "I" of the Camera: Essays in Film Criticism, History, and Aesthetics* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 101.

Figures 6 and 7. Left: Helen and Cora gaze down at a detective who is trailing Helen. Right: Helen performs "You Little So-and-So" behind palm fronds like the ones she hides behind with Cora.

The palm fronds that frame Cora and Helen, suggesting their furtiveness (they speak in whispers, as did the butch manager), are also a motif that visually link that scene to another in which Helen performs the song, "You Little So-and-So." In that number, the camera is situated behind large palms, voyeuristically following Helen like a Peeping Tom (Fig. 7). The lyrics of that song, as its title suggests, are all about innuendo: "The Greeks have words for almost everything I know/ But you little so-and-so!" The scene's visual staging thus mirrors the song's theme of meanings "hiding" behind words. Yet while Helen teases a sexualized male gaze in this performance, in the later scene with Cora the fronds emphasize Helen's hiding in a different way: from the dangerous male gaze of the authorities. In another inversion, the eroticized gaze that followed Helen during her act becomes the defensive gazes of the women as they fend off the male detective. This performance about disguises —and in fact all of the performances in *Blonde Venus*—can thus be understood as disguising the social reality of female vulnerability, which by contrast the female relationships of the film reveal.

The scenes in which Helen meaningfully interacts with other women are in fact marked more by social realism than the fantasy spectacles of the stage. Social realism is an undercurrent in Josef Von Sternberg's work, as we can see in his early films *The Salvation Hunters* (1925) and his adaptation of Theodor Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy* (1931). *Blonde Venus*, furthermore, is very loosely based on Émile Zola's novel *Nana*. We see how Helen's triumph as a performer is belied by her social precarity in a scene where Helen interacts with women in abject poverty. After finally giving up Johnny to the authorities, Helen drunkenly stumbles into a homeless shelter. This is explicitly a women-only space, as signified by the sign on the entrance, and the women in it are clearly subalterns, portrayed as shabby, aggressive, and suicidal. It represents rock bottom for Helen, and rather than stay amongst these women, Helen vows to find herself a "better bed"—that is, return to the male world of sexual exchanges. In the next scene there is a sharp contrast in Helen's situation: Helen appears onstage in Paris her tuxedo act, and we learn that she has used "man after man as a stepping stone" to her success. Because her economic survival requires male support, Helen must effectively leave sisterhood behind. Though women appear in both Helen's performance and the shelter, the former group is silent and agentless, serving Helen's star image like the Black women in "Hot Voodoo." In this way there is a clear gendering of the two kinds of spaces and modes.

To return, finally, to the issue of gold digging: as Jacobs describes, the Studio Relations Committee's primary concerns over *Blonde Venus* were to what extent Helen's sexual transgressions were justified by commitments to her husband and son.[27] The

[27] Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin*, 92-95

ending went through several revisions that sought to mitigate Helen's adultery and prostitution in different ways, including one where Helen's husband Ned is revealed to also have been having an affair (which the censors rejected). In defending *Blonde Venus*, Joy asserted that because Helen is not after money for its own sake, suffers for her crimes, and ultimately returns to her family, her actions are acceptable.[28] Thus, domesticity embeds the images of Helen's class-climbing performances, framing them in the name of maternal sacrifice. The tension between the two ideological impulses—the sanctity of the home and the glamor of the high life—inheres in the film, and has been a source of major critical focus. However, there is another way of understanding the film that emerges when we shift the focus from the film's heterosexual relationships to those between women. These relationships draw our attention to the very different racial and gender representations between the film's stage and off-stage space. If the film's performances offer potential ironic contrasts to the narrative of wifely devotion that was mandated by censorship, the female relationships add another layer of irony that underscore performance as a façade in the service of male desires, aping white patriarchy's oppressive forms. Censors saw only two possibilities for Helen—in Joy's words, either an "abandoned" woman or a "good" one—but through the female relationships we see a possible third alternative emerge for Helen outside of patriarchal control, an "unconventional life" among women that is neither thankless wifehood nor sexualized object.

II. *Baby Face*

[28] Jason S. Joy to John Hammell, 16 Sept 1932, *Blonde Venus* PCA file.

Figure. 8 Chico (Theresa Harris) and Lily (Barbara Stanwyck) think about how to climb the economic ladder in *Baby Face*.

While the Von Sternberg/Dietrich films made at Paramount have a European and cosmopolitan sheen, Warner Bros.'s *Baby Face* is a gritty social picture engaging with the precarious economy of the Depression. *Baby Face* tells the story of Lily (Barbara Stanwyck) as she relentlessly sleeps her way up the corporate ladder in order to escape the abusive and dreary working-class world she came from. One of the most notorious gold digger films of the Pre-Code era, the film was re-edited from its original version in an attempt to obfuscate the fact of sexual exchanges and to prevent Lily from being financially rewarded at the end of the film. I will be analyzing the original cut of the film, acknowledging that it was not the version circulating in 1933, because it involves key scenes that indicate how the filmmakers wanted to position the relationship between Lily and Chico (Theresa Harris), Lily's Black companion.

This pairing is notable within the body of Pre-Code films for the way it positions Lily and Chico as friends on somewhat equal terms, in a relationship that is insisted upon (though not centralized) throughout the film. Chico does end up as Lily's maid, but the film also undermines the power dynamics of that relationship. At the beginning of the

film Chico works in Lily's father's speakeasy, and there is not a clear differentiation between her class status and Lily's. As Lily climbs the class ranks Chico becomes her maid, in keeping with Hollywood's general reluctance to give Black women the same possibilities of upward mobility as whites (as I will discuss further in Chapter Two). But as Ellen Scott points out, there are various ways in which the film implies that Chico's position may be in name only, through, for instance, the elaborate furred costume that she wears on her day off that mirrors Lily's.[29] The ambiguous nature of their relationship, Scott continues, even invites us to read it as potentially romantic, a claim very much in keeping with Smith's assertion about positive female relationships that are critical of oppressive patriarchal institutions. I in turn, following my analysis of *Blonde Venus*, will look at the contrast between Lily's "performances" for the male gaze when she is gold digging, and her affective authenticity with Chico.

Even though *Baby Face* does not have explicit stage performances in the way that *Blonde Venus* does, Lily self-consciously positions herself as a visual spectacle for men (Fig. 9). The male gaze operates as the looks of all the men who see Lily as sexually available, oblivious to the performative nature of her interest. Far from being the uncritical default status of patriarchal scopic regimes, the male gaze in *Baby Face* is aligned with the sleazy and gullible men whom Lily lures in and discards once she finds something better. In other words, performance in this case is what the male gaze cannot see through; it turns the gaze's scopic power against itself. We are meant to understand Lily's performances as duplicitous and in service to purely mercenary motives. By contrast, her relationship with Chico constitutes a female space where Lily acts as her

[29] Ellen C. Scott, *Cinema Civil Rights: Regulation, Repression, and Race in Classical Hollywood* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 20.

genuine self. The antagonists of this relationship are always men, and every time (except the very last time) Lily makes clear her loyalty to Chico over them. As was the case with *Blonde Venus*, the world of women, which permits cross-racial bonding within limits, offers a refuge from the purely transactional world of men.

Figure 9. Lily puts herself in the line of sight of influential men at the office where she works, climbing her way up the corporate ranks.

That Lily's exploits occur in a bank speaks volumes about the film's attitude towards the institutions responsible for the Depression. Maltby has argued that *Baby Face* presents a subversive critique of capitalist patriarchy, which censorship sought to contain by making the bank the site of Lily's moral redemption in the revised ending of the film.[30] In that ending, Lily gives all of the wealth she has accrued to effectively bail out the bank, and she and her husband Courtland end up working class back in the steel mill town where Lily began. Whether this ending actually undoes the film's critique is another question. As Thomas Doherty describes, for the first two years of the Depression politicians and other major public figures were loath to acknowledge the extent of the

[30] Richard Maltby, "'Baby Face' or How Joe Breen Made Barbara Stanwyck Atone for Causing the Wall Street Crash," 22-46.

crisis, assuring in public statements that the worst was over and things could only get better.[31] By 1933 when *Baby Face* was released, the situation was no longer deniable. The film does little to present the male bankers as victims of anything but their own mismanagement, who are easily duped by Lily's charms. Furthermore, the crisis in patriarchy is made even clearer by the building of the bank itself, the phallic skyscraper that acts as a barometer for Lily's progress. In a reversal of the male gaze, Lily sizes up this building and resolves to make it to the top. That Lily is able to conquer this imposing edifice reveals that institution to be fundamentally weak behind its façade. Thus, *Baby Face* not only represented sexual exchanges, but also condemned what were supposed to be venerable establishments of national importance.

Importantly, Chico is Lily's persistent companion in these ventures. As Scott has shown, despite the robust censorship file on *Baby Face*, the issue of race in Chico and Lily's friendship is never mentioned: "Since [the SRC's] concern was about Lily's relationship with men, the protective guise of the master-servant relationship may have distracted censors from the social equality and vital relationship Lily and Chico share."[32] Whereas in *Blonde Venus* the spectacle of gold digging was juxtaposed with a bleaker social reality that required the intervention of female relationships, in *Baby Face* gold digging actually masks the subversiveness of the film's interracial female friendship. Furthermore, Chico's positioning as Lily's maid actually reinforces the queer undertones of their relationship: it is clear that Lily's gold digging supports both of them, and their dynamic moves towards a gendered reorganization of labor where Lily is the breadwinner

[31] Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 25.
[32] Scott, *Cinema Civil Rights*, 21.

and Chico performs the domestic labor. Thus, even though their class equality seems to diminish as Lily rises, because of the close affective nature of their relationship we can read them as more of a couple.

One of the striking aspects of this relationship is Lily's devotion to Chico. At the beginning of the film the relationship between the two women is used to establish Lily's positive quality of fiercely protective loyalty. There is never an explicit explanation given for this strong bond, but one reason may be the women's shared experience as victims of Lily's vicious father. Both women are trapped in the same depressing and abusive situation working in Lily's father's speakeasy in a steel mill town. Chico, rather than Lily, is our first image of this abuse. Before Lily is introduced, Chico is shown toiling in the kitchen, wearing shabby clothes, washing dishes and singing a blues song. As Peter Stanfield has pointed out, the song, the "St. Louis Blues," acts as a refrain throughout the film for Lily's sexual transgressions.[33] Shots of Chico are intercut with shots of Lily watching cynically as the workmen just off their shift file into her father's establishment—men, we soon learn, who paw at her and demand sexual favors. Here, however, the song is just as much associated with the work that Chico is doing. We thus get the sense that Chico is as stuck in this world as Lily is. When Chico accidentally drops the dishes, Lily's father heaps abuse on her. Lily enters on this scene and her first lines of dialogue in the film involve defending Chico from her father and establishing her connection with her: "Hey! Easy with the whip…If Chico goes I go" (Fig. 10). There are several important threads that emerge from this statement. First, Lily and Chico's

[33] Peter Stanfield, "An Excursion into the Lower Depths: Hollywood, Urban Primitivism, and St. Louis Blues, 1929-1937," *Cinema Journal* 41.2 (2002): 84-108.

relationship is posited as a line of defense against this abusive man who, has been pimping out Lily to his customers since she was fourteen years old.

Figure 10. “If Chico goes I go!”: Lily defends Chico from her father.

Second, it adumbrates the film’s Nietzchean theme of masters and slaves. Lily’s only other positive relationship in her steel-mill town is with Mr. Cragg, an old German man who is an avid reader of Nietzsche and provides Lily with the philosophy she needs to escape: “You must use men, not let them use you! You must be a master, not a slave!” Notably this dialogue was completely changed in the censored version of the film, which eliminates all references to Nietzsche and replaces them with Christian handbooks; in that version Cragg vaguely advises Lily to “take the right way, not the wrong way,” sidestepping recognitions of gender oppression and challenges to the patriarchal order. In the uncensored version, Cragg’s dialogue about slaves can be read as pointing to both Lily and Chico. First, through slavery and sexual exploitation “white slavery” becomes an operative term to describe Lily’s situation under her father. But by selling herself through gold digging rather than being sold by someone else, Lily becomes her own master, upending the logic on which white slavery labels women as unwilling participants in sex work. This is true even in the censored version of the film: Jacobs

observes that despite Lily's rapid reform in the last minutes, the film fails to fully eradicate the theme of sexual exchange, in spite of the MPPDA's efforts to re-cut the film in anticipation.[34] Lily comes to embody the separation of sex work (gold digging, if not necessarily the same as prostitution, is certainly portrayed as work in *Baby Face*, associated as it is with Lily's job) from victimization, giving the lie to the racial sentimentality of white slavery. But just as significantly, the use of "slave" evokes the context of American antebellum slavery, a latent implication in Lily's comment to her father about the "whip" against Chico. In this way the motif of slavery subtly draws attention to the ways that both Lily and Chico are in socially oppressed positions because of race and gender. This application of Nietzschean philosophy to two subjects, each of whom has been historically negated as a potential Übermensch, further draws their positions together. Lily and Chico effectively escape from "slavery" together, seizing the tools of the master.

Finally, Lily's defense of Chico is repeated later in the film, making it a recurring element of their relationship. When Lily delivers her line to her father, she does so with a flat toughness in her speech that betrays her working-class roots—a trait that she later consciously tries to change as she climbs the social ranks. When later in the film one of her corporate lovers—an older man whom she calls "Fuzzy Wuzzy" in a high-pitched baby voice—suggests she get rid of "that fantastic colored girl," Lily momentarily snaps out of her act and says in the same flat tone as before, "No, Chico stays." A reference to Lily's original defense of Chico at the beginning of the film, this line indicates Lily's true self, in contradistinction to the simpering façade she puts on for men.

[34] Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin*, 70.

This notion of performance extends to how Lily's and Chico's interracial closeness is presented as a relationship that must be hidden from Lily's lovers. Lily's ascent in class demands her and Chico's racialized differentiation, since as a Black woman Chico cannot rise with her. This differentiation manifests as Chico becoming Lily's maid (Fig. 11). And yet, in the same way that we see Lily consciously trying to mask her working-class accent, so too does she deliberately stage her distance from Chico, telling her, for instance, not call her "honey" in front of other people. The film emphasizes the performed nature of Lily's and Chico's class and racial distinction through their slips that reveal their actual intimacy. In this way, the disparity in their social positions are undermined. The film makes clear that the image of difference must be maintained for the sake of white men who find Chico's presence inexplicably threatening—the same patriarchal and capitalistic forces that compel Lily's gold digging. These forces are set in stark contrast to the class and gender affiliations that link Lily and Chico below the surface of appearances, which produce genuine affection and loyalty between the two women. Images of female closeness thus function as spaces of positive counter-possibilities to patriarchal exploitation that would see the two women separated on the basis of race.

Figure 11. Lily and Chico perform the façade of class/racial difference, belied by their affection for one another.

Lily's ability to weaponize her sexuality for survival is portrayed as enabling her to protect *both* women from patriarchal harm. After her father dies in an accident, Lily decides to take Cragg's advice and leaves town with Chico. They try to sneak on a boxcar and are discovered by a brakeman, who threatens to call the cops. Lily, exercising her newfound power of seduction for the first time, sultrily suggests that they "sit down and talk this thing over," implicitly exchanging sex for the brakeman's silence. This scene was cut from the censored version of the film, but it is worth examining for the role that Chico plays within it, an aspect that does not appear to have been part of the censors' concerns. When the brakeman first catches them, he immediately suspects they are both prostitutes, saying, "Too many of you dames getting away with it these days…" Then he grabs Chico by the arm. As with Lily's father, the male physical threat is displaced onto Chico, not Lily. Representationally, Hollywood was generally more willing to portray violence against women of color than against white women, whose bodies were more ideologically inviolable. But we can also understand this scene as suggesting Chico's heightened vulnerability to violence while also emphasizing the shared dangers that both women face as women. In this case, the sexuality of a white woman becomes the shield that protects a Black woman from racialized male aggression. Visually, the film reinforces the diffusion of this male threat through images of the brakeman's gloves. As Lily's suggestion sinks in for the brakeman, a close-up shows his gloved hand loosening on Chico's arm (Fig. 12). A moment later, we see his gloves again as he, off-screen, takes them off and places them by a lamp for his tryst with Lily (Fig. 13). In this way, we

understand the brakeman's threat to be disarmed. Thus, Lily's first act of "using" men is not in fact for economic gain at all; it is for protection against a specifically gendered and racialized threat. In turn, her ascent to wealth can be understood as similarly motivated less by personal greed and more by her desire to escape the dangers that she and Chico are susceptible to as poor women.

Figures 12 and 13. Left: The brakeman loosens his grip on Chico's arm after Lily's proposition. Right: The brakeman's gloves, now removed.

The Chico/Lily relationship also complicates the typical reading of Black women problematizing the racial stability of sexually transgressive women. Stanfield interprets Chico's role as reminding the audience of "the lowly status of Stanwyck's character," but I argue that in the same vein Chico is also a reminder of the perilous life both women have escaped from—a life that, in the censored ending, Lily is forced to return to.[35] Though Chico may symbolize the "raced" aspect of Lily's deviant sexual and class behaviors, we should recall that it is Lily's father who initially forces her into prostitution in contradistinction to the friendship provided by Chico. In fact, Lily's low class status becomes inextricable from male oppression, whereas her relationship with Chico is

[35] Stanfield, "An Excursion into the Lower Depths," 96.

positioned as part of her escape from this fate. In the film, this connection is staged through Lily's moment of crisis towards the end, when Courtland, the one man she actually loves, needs her to give up her half a million dollars in assets in order to save his bank. Choosing her own survival over Courtland's appeals, Lily responds,

> No I…I can't do it. I have to think of myself. I've gone through a lot to get those things. My life has been bitter and hard. I'm not like other women. All the gentleness and kindness in me has been killed. All I've got are those things. Without them, I'd be nothing. I'd have to go back to what I was. No. I won't give them up. [Going into the bedroom, indicating her luggage] Chico, put those things back. Pack the trunks again. We're sailing tonight.

Here, the failure of the male-run banks is displaced onto the failure of female sexual morality. Yet at the same time, it is clear that the high life with Chico in Europe is a possibility for Lily, the alternative to a return to her original economic position. At this moment Lily turns away from Courtland and towards Chico, who is entrusted with their livelihood. While Lily's speech suggests that Courtland's love can redeem her and make her into an appropriate "woman" again, it is Chico, rather, who is associated with Lily's material wealth.

The white heterosexual romance of this film, then, rather than the potentially queer interracial relationship, can be understood as the tie that ultimately enforces Lily's low class position. In the film, instead of going off with Chico, Lily returns to Courtland to find that he has attempted suicide. As they ride in an ambulance, Lily's suitcase full of cash and diamonds falls to the floor. "It doesn't matter now," says Lily as she clutches

Courtland's hand. While Lily does not explicitly lose her wealth in the uncensored ending of the film, in the censored ending the romance plot actually becomes the medium of Lily's Code-enforced punishment. In an additional scene added after the one in the ambulance, a board meeting of the bank announces that Lily and Courtland have given up everything they have to help save that institution. Yet rather than gratitude at their sacrifice, the demeanor of the bankers is one of entitlement and condescension. One banker announces (rather gleefully) that "they haven't a cent," that Courtland is working as a laborer in a steel mills in Pittsburgh, and that "they are working out their happiness together" as another banker smirks in skepticism. Ironically, the ending that was supposed to contain the threat of Lily's gold digging by financially punishing her ends up making her decision, which reinforces heterosexual love as the proper domain for women, seem like a very bad one indeed. Chico, however, remains the figure associated with Lily's escape and rise.

Chico ultimately serves Lily's image, but the enduring dependence between the two women is the opposite of Lily's transient relationships with men. While Chico is not granted the same sexual appeal as Lily is (in the sense that men are not shown being attracted to her), she is also far from a Mammy figure whose juxtaposition with the white star emphasizes the latter's attractiveness, as was the case with Helen and Cora in *Blonde Venus*. Instead, the relationship between Lily and Chico is far more mirrored and suggestive of their shared class experiences. In this way, their interracial female friendship is posited as a refuge against the ruthless world of male capitalism. It is implied that these characters understand something of each other's plights in ways that the male characters emphatically do not.

III. *Belle of the Nineties*

What more can be said about Mae West, that eternal icon of sex and subversion? While most scholarship has tried to undo the myth that she was the reason the Production Code was enforced, it is important to acknowledge her role as one of the most visible and well-known figures (a pun she would appreciate) of the 1930s. If she was not the sole embodiment of sexual vice, she certainly was its main representative. My analysis here will focus on the third film in which she starred, 1934's *Belle of the Nineties*, which was the first film that West made under the new Production Code Administration. West had only just made her transition from theater into feature film when the hammer of the Code came down. Previous to this, she had written and starred in two extremely successful and controversial films in 1933: *She Done Him Wrong* (dir. Lowell Sherman) based on her Broadway play *Diamond Lil*, and *I'm No Angel* (dir. Wesley Ruggles). I chose to end this chapter with *Belle of the Nineties* for two reasons: first, because it is an important transitional film from the Pre-Code era to that of the PCA, illustrating how that institution sought to contain one of Hollywood's most sexually insubordinate women; and second, because of the significant cultural and critical attention given to West's on-screen friendships with Black women.

For a long time now, West scholarship has contended with her complicated relationships with African Americans and gays, which could be appropriative and mercenary as well as appreciative and advocating. Critics have scrutinized her life for signs of her "real" opinions about these groups, and attempted to show how her prolific body of dramatic, literary, and film works—always transgressive in their sexual mores,

and often problematic in terms of the discourses she packaged them in—betray redeemable qualities in spite of the power imbalances that mark them.[36] In her second film, *I'm No Angel*, West's character Tira is affiliated with Blackness through her four African American maids (Fig. 14). In the film, these "great gals," as Tira calls them, seem to understand her in ways that the white female characters do not, and Tira's main maid Beulah (Gertrude Howard) is portrayed as her closest female relationship. The film also uses the maids as a way of commenting on Tira's paradoxical relationship to class. Tira is depicted as indifferent to class boundaries, hostile to class snobbery, and proud of her working-class origins, even when she is weighed down by furs and diamonds. Tira's proximity to her maids is part of how this message is communicated. The women appear as both Tira's maids and her friends—her servants and her "equals." Yet while she and the maids bond together over their shared love of men, music, and bawdy humor, they are also used as signs of Tira's newly-accrued wealth. This differentiation is exacerbated by the fact that the maids frame Tira's glamor, or in Bogle's words, "Often giggling and gaping or even literally kneeling before her…paying homage to the supreme power of their white mistress."[37] Furthermore, Tira constantly orders her maids to perform menial tasks while simultaneously joking with them about the men they like. Even though the maids joke about sex, they are denied the same sex appeal as West. Presenting Black women as maids and mammies was one way of checking the possibility of Black women being seen as the equals of their white counterparts. Though sexual banter could provide

[36] See Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*; Ramona Curry, *Too Much of a Good Thing: Mae West as Cultural Icon* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Jill Watts, *Mae West: An Icon in Black and White* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Marybeth Hamilton, *When I'm Bad, I'm Better: Mae West, Sex, and American Entertainment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
[37] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 61.

the grounds for affinities across racial lines, sex appeal was reserved for the white star. In turn, this excluded Black women from class-rise-through-gold-digging narratives except by proxy. Unlike *Baby Face*, which suggests that Chico and Lily climb out of poverty together, in *I'm No Angel* female relationships reinforce the class distinction between Black and white women, in spite of friendship and affection.

Figure 14. In *I'm No Angel* (1933), Tira is pampered by four African American maids (from left to right: an unknown actress, Mae West, Libby Taylor, Hattie McDaniel, and Gertrude Howard).

In *Belle of the Nineties,* however, West's character's relationship to Black characters is complicated by the fact that she is aligned with a wider array of raced figures than just her maid. The film contains two significant musical numbers that put her in the same frame as jazz bandleader Duke Ellington and to an African American revival meeting. I argue that in *Belle of the Nineties*, Black characters do something distinctly different than signaling West's sexual transgressions or asserting a racialized class distinction. West appropriates Black signifiers to her own image—something she did in her general persona through her blues-inflected style of singing, but that is done visually in *Belle*—in ways that suggest interracial mixing far more potently than her Pre-Code

films do. Here gender adds another layer of complication to West's cross-racial affiliations: while West maintains female friendships with her African American maid Jasmine (Libby Taylor) and her racially ambiguous rival Molly (Katherine DeMille), West's connections to African American cultural forms occur through male characters. These representations carry the added burden of having to maintain a careful distance from West so as to obviate fears of sexualized interracial contact.

However, film censors had practically no concerns about the film's representation of African American characters or West's relationships to them. The plot involves a turn-of-the-century burlesque performer named Ruby who heads to New Orleans to work at a gambling house. The censors were wholly preoccupied with inferences that Ruby was a prostitute with a criminal past, thus with her implied sexual affairs and with the film's backdrop of a criminal underworld where characters steal, murder, and commit arson with no ramifications. All of the changes eventually made to the film had to do with removing these inferences. Breen wrote of an early script, "The story, as we read it, is a vulgar and highly offensive yarn which is quite patently a glorification of prostitution and violent crime without any compensating moral values of any kind."[38] Unlike in *I'm No Angel*, where camaraderie with Black maids acts as a cypher for Tira's questionable class rise, in *Belle* the representations of African Americans do not carry these connotations. Censors had been attuned to the possible ways Tira could be read as affiliated with Black culture in the former film: as Jill Watts points out, film censors "attempted to curtail [West's] blues style" by insisting that a song she sings in the film be changed to a ballad,

[38] Joseph I. Breen to Mr. A. M. Botsford, 7 March 1934, *Belle of the Nineties* (1934) file, Production Code Administration Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA (hereafter cited as *Belle of the Nineties* PCA file).

which shows that they found West's affinity with Black culture threatening.[39] But the PCA file on *Belle* does not indicate that censors saw anything problematic about Ruby's relationships with African Americans. The only objection about the film's racial representations came from Alice Ames Winter, who worked in Public Relations at the MPPDA and objected to the scene of the revival meeting on the grounds that "no matter how simple and crude in its expression religious emotion may be, it is not a thing to be treated as a farcical element."[40] Winter's reading of the scene as farcical appears to have been a somewhat unique one, since the scene is not necessarily legible as comic, and her comment was not followed up on by the PCA. But ironically, it anticipated the reception of the film's racial scenes with the press and by censorship boards in foreign countries. The *Motion Picture Daily* and *Variety* both mentioned the revival meeting scene in their reviews of the film, with *Variety* even clarifying that the scene was "in the offing, but within seeming earshot [of West], and thus she does a semi-spiritual against the heated colored revival meeting background which productionally [sic] is rather well worked in."[41] Thus the review betrays both its fascination with the scene while at the same time emphasizing West's physical distance from Black people. In Britain and Australia, where representations of Black-white interactions where policed even more intensely than in the United States, the entire revival meeting sequence was cut.

The task of the remainder of this chapter is to clarify the complex racial projects of *Belle* and argue that they are different from what has been typically argued about

[39] Watts, *Mae West: An Icon in Black and White*, 173, 179.
[40] Memorandum from Mrs. Winters to Mr. Breen, ca. July 1934, *Belle of the Nineties* PCA file.
[41] "Motion Picture Daily's Hollywood Preview: '*Belle of the Nineties,*'" *Motion Picture Daily,* 20 Aug 1934, *Belle of the Nineties* PCA file; "Belle of the 90's," *Variety*, 25 Sept 1934, *Belle of the Nineties* PCA file.

West's use of Black characters as merely enhancing her white image. One way we can understand West's appropriation of Black cultural forms is as part of a modernist aesthetic. Michael North has argued that the mask of Black dialect (and often, blackface) by white writers and artists was an integral part of 1920's modernism that allowed them to rebel against their traditional racial inheritance through cross-racial identification.[42] We can understand the performances in *Belle* as allowing West a similar kind of resistance to monolithic whiteness—not only to whiteness's sexual standards for women. West's persona also evinced a modernist sensibility through her amalgamations of old and new, high class and low. A thoroughly "New" woman in terms of her outspoken sexual sensibility, West also embodied a past era with her shapely corseted outfits, large feathered hats, and frilled parasols, a look that harkened to the "gay 90s" where many of her films are set. The musical performances in *Belle* register these tensions.

In the sequence where Ruby performs onstage accompanied by Ellington and his band, we see her concerted effort to align herself with the Black musical culture that was a central part of her stage persona. West insisted that they appear in the film as well as actually perform its music, rather than use white musicians for both tasks as the studio wanted.[43] In the same year that *Belle* was released, Zora Neale Hurston had observed that West "had much more flavor of the turpentine quarters than she did of the white bawd," criticizing West's misappropriations of "Jook" music as part of a much larger trend of white performers bowdlerizing Black music.[44] Hurston's larger point is about the

[42] Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
[43] Watts, *Mae West: An Icon in Black and White*, 187.
[44] Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyne Mitchell (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 92.

unrecognized origins of modern American dance trends in African American spaces like Jooks and the audacity of white performers for thinking that their imitations are authentic to what actually occurs there. She posits West as emblematic of this kind of appropriation, and indeed West's invocations of Black music has a long history going back to her early vaudeville career as a "coon shouter" (a blackface minstrel).[45] Thus, we should understand West's performance style in terms of what Eric Lott has described as the contradictory impulse of "love and theft" that characterized white working-class attitudes towards Black cultural forms.[46]

But though this aspect of her musical style is present in her previous two film vehicles, it is only in *Belle* that West actually performs onstage accompanied by Black entertainers. The way gazes function in the Ellington sequence helps to clarify how West positions herself in relation to Black characters. Scholars have discussed West's spatial placing in this scene, noting her distance from Ellington and his band when she performs on stage (and later, her similar distance from the congregants at the revival meeting, whom she gazes down on from a balcony). But tracing the sets of displaced gazes in the Ellington sequence helps complicate this understanding. West commands the male gaze in *Belle*; as Ruby she revels in men's admiring stares, quipping, "It's better to be looked over than overlooked." In this sense, she is hardly the passive "object" of the gaze even when she is the one being looked at (perhaps a result of the creative control she exercised over all of her projects). For instance, at the beginning her performance a shot tracks the row of men ogling her (Fig. 15). But Ruby also does quite a bit of her own looking. From

[45] Watts, *Mae West: An Icon in Black and White*, 22.
[46] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

on stage, she directs her gaze and sings directly at each members of the band as her song uses their instruments as a means of introducing sexual innuendo ("No one can rag it like that piano man/They got a hot cornet that you could never forget/ Aw play it boy!"). The camera is positioned behind her shoulder, but it turns as Ruby turns to each band member, suggesting her point of view (Fig. 16). Given the particular erotization of the gaze in this context, Ruby's gaze implies proximity where physical distance is mandated because of miscegenation paranoia. Members of the orchestra return the gaze at Ruby, suggesting some degree of reciprocation, but never from a shot that implies their point of view; instead, the shots from within the orchestra pit emphasize the band looking at each other rather than at the white woman on stage (Fig. 17). The performance ends, however, with a shot of the row of gazing white men doing just that (Fig. 18). Thus, the erotic gazes of the performance are ultimately displaced onto white men. While this helps to disavow the scene's implied miscegenation, it also subtly incorporates it. Ruby, after all, is not shown gazing at the white men in the same way as she does at Ellington.

Figures 15 and 16. Left: Tracking shot of male audience members staring at Ruby as she performs. Right: The camera moving with Ruby's gaze as she sings to members of Duke Ellington's orchestra.

Figures 17 and 18. Left: Shot from the orchestra pit showing Duke Ellington and his band looking at each other rather than at Ruby. Right: Ruby's performance ends with the gazes of white men.

The prayer meeting scene employs an even more direct method of aligning Roby with African Americans while maintaining the pretense of physical distance. Instead of gazes, images of Ruby and the congregants are imposed onto one another, in an expressionistic spectacle that bypasses the imperative of segregation. The scene is not without racial caricatures in how the congregants' shouting, dancing, and ecstatic faces traffics in ideas of Black religious fervor and primitivism that borders on grotesque. But despite this, the overall effect of the scene is not comic or farcical, as the censor Alice Winter claimed. During the sermon the film shows images of men toting heavy bags along a dock, a reminder of the suffering of hard labor reminiscent of slavery, and Ruby's song that alternates with the preacher Brother Eben's (George Reed) is a slow blues number called "Troubled Waters" (arranged by Ellington) about drowning in sin and scandal. Stylistically, the scene draws on traditions of expressionism in how the backdrop is comprised of abstracted, flickering shadows of waves and through the starkly mirrored reflection of the congregants in water (Fig. 19). Furthermore, this expressionistic mode

allows filmmakers to insert Ruby into the scene even while she ostensibly is removed from the meeting, watching it from a balcony. Ruby's image is imposed over that of the congregants and waves, implying the drowning of her song's lyrics. In turn, as Ruby sings of being overwhelmed, her face dissolves into close up shots of various congregants' intense, enraptured faces (Fig. 20). Though she remains distant and decorous, not sharing in the congregation's religious enthusiasm, in effect the scene implies her desire to share in their absolution. Watts writes of this scene that Ruby and the crowd are "baptized together," achieving symbolic racial intermixing through religion rather than sex.[47] We might also recognize the role that Ruby's maid Jasmine plays in acting as something of a proxy for her. Ruby gives Jasmine money for the collection plate and tells her to say a prayer for her at the meeting, another way of suggesting Ruby's participation. Thus visually, sonically, and narratively Ruby is enmeshed in the prayer meeting. In aligning Ruby with Black signifiers in this way, the film suggests Ruby's (and West's) indifference to racial distinctions. This was certainly a part of West's transgressive star image, and can be understood as an appropriative strategy, since the scene ultimately maintains Ruby's difference from the Black congregants even as it affiliates them. However, we should pay attention to the ways the scene deliberately flouts the taboo of Black-white mixing. It is also telling that foreign censors, who tended to have even more rigid tenets about race and religion that the PCA, singled out this scene for deletion, according to the censorship file. It is not certain on what pretenses the cuts were made—it may be that, as Winters said, they saw the treatment of religious

[47] Watts, *Mae West: An Icon in Black and White*, 192.

worship as lurid—but another reason could very well have been its strong visual insinuations of interracial contact.

Figures 19 and 20. Left: The expressionistic staging of Brother Eben's prayer meeting. Right: Ruby's face imposed on the meeting, which in turn dissolves into the face of an ecstatic Black congregation member.

It is worth pointing out that both the Ellington scene and the prayer meeting scene occur in "staged" musical contexts, allowing interactions between Ruby and Black men through the pretense of a performance. This is in contradistinction to how female relationships tend to occupy off-stage narrative space, since they do not carry the latent threat of miscegenation. What, then, of Ruby's relationships to female characters? While the Ellington scene and the prayer meeting scene have both received more attention from scholars, one figure of the film seems to have escaped critical notice: the character Molly. Played by Katherine DeMille, the adopted daughter of director Cecil B. DeMille, Molly is the tragic scorned lover of New Orleans gambling house owner Ace Lamont (John Miljan) (Fig. 20). In early script drafts, Molly is described as "rather dark complexioned," and in a plot synopsis she is called a "dark beauty."[48] Though nowhere is

[48] Mae West, "Belle of the Nineties—script 1934," 6 Feb 1934, 68.f-B-230, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA; Marion Valentine, synopsis, "Belle of

she described with more explicit racial language, her dark hair and eyes in combination with a deep-voiced accent that hints at a French creole heritage point to a reading of her as an octoroon, a woman with one-eighth African ancestry who was legally classified as Black under the one-drop rule.[49] This implication is enabled by the film's regional setting in nineteenth-century New Orleans, which had a reputation for brothels that specialized in light-skinned women whose Blackness permitted their exploitation for sex work. Through the casting of a racially ambiguous actress and a reliance on setting, the film thus creates plausible deniability around a reading of Molly as Black. Molly's racial status is never verified in the film, and given the fact that she is played by an actress who is believed to be white, it remains ambiguous, which is likely why film censors never mentioned her as problematic; otherwise, she would have fallen under the Code clause prohibiting representations of miscegenation. But we can understand Molly as another site where the film asserts Ruby's proximity to Black figures. She acts as the "dark" counterpart to the platinum blonde Ruby. Throughout the film Ruby and Molly wear similar outfits and hairstyles, work in the same club, and attract the attentions of the same men (Fig. 21). In the scene where Ruby performs with Ellington, a shot shows white men gaze desirously at Molly the same way they do at Ruby, suggesting their similar attractiveness (Fig. 22). The women are also capable of being mistaken for one another: when Ruby's lover the Tiger Kid (Roger Pryor) holds up Ruby and Lamont in a carriage, he believes Ruby to be Molly because she is wearing a veil. This reading of Molly

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the Nineties—script 1934," 6 March 1934, 69.f-B-234, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA.

[49] The one-drop rule was a logic of racial classification under which anyone with any amount of African ancestry was legally "colored." It was adopted into law by various states in the early twentieth century as a way of maintaining racial distinctions.

complicates the assumption that Black women in West's films only enhance her whiteness and glamor as her maids. Though Molly is not overtly understood as Black, the possibility of reading her as such means that there are more possibilities for how West's relationships to Black women could look: as mirrors and counterparts on the same class plane. If the role of domestic prevented Black actresses from being seen as glamorous and sexual in the ways that white actresses were, Molly exceeds that limitation through her deniable racial status.

Figures 20 and 21. Left: Gambling house owner Ace Lamont (John Miljan) and his scorned lover Molly (Katherine DeMille) in *Belle of the Nineties.* Right: Ruby and Molly strike the same pose.

Figure 22. Molly attracts the male gaze, the same as Ruby.

The purpose of Molly's character, in addition to giving Ruby a racialized rival, is to establish Lamont as the film's male villain against the female characters. His disregard of Molly in favor of Ruby adumbrates the general shadiness and cruelty of his character. Unlike in West's previous film, Ruby does not revel in taking a man from another woman. She rejects Lamont on Molly's behalf: "I'm not steppin' into another dame's shoes. I never took a man away from a dame, not unless she played me dirty. It's a principle with me." Thus, the film sets up a more compassionate relationship between Ruby and Molly than it did in *I'm No Angel*, where West's character revenges herself upon a snobby white socialite by stealing her fiancé. No such female acrimony in *Belle of the Nineties*. Rather, Molly is portrayed as a victim of Lamont's physical brutality when towards the end of the film he knocks her out and locks her in a closet while he tries to burn down his establishment. Early drafts of the script outlined his character's previous abusive treatment of women, and film censors requested that his violence against Ruby be "handled with great care" so as to diminish its brutality.[50] Thus Lamont's villainy was intended to draw attention to gendered forms of violence, which the PCA mitigated. Even so, Molly's "tragic" plotline—replaced by another (whiter) woman, and then carelessly discarded—reinforces her "mulatto" status. Within this configuration Ruby becomes Molly's ally against the man who victimizes her. It is Ruby who saves Molly from the fire, saying about Lamont, "He tried to burn her. I didn't think he was that low." Molly's character allows Ruby to demonstrate her solidarity with women—and, if we read Molly

[50] Mae West, "Belle of the Nineties—script 1934," 6 Feb 1934, 68.f-B-230, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA; Joseph I. Breen to A. M. Botsford, 7 March 1935, *Belle of the Nineties* PCA file.

as Black, with Black women in ways that avoid the inherent power imbalance that characterizes her relationship to Black maids.

In this sense it is telling that the relationship with Molly is much more developed than the one between Ruby and Jasmine, played by West's real-life maid Libby Taylor. According to Watts, Taylor was a comedic actress who met West in the 1920s and came with her to Hollywood, hoping to make it in the movie business.[51] Though West expanded the part of Jasmine to give Taylor more lines, the role is not particularly distinctive, and remains limited by the maid-employer dynamic and racial stereotypes.[52] Thus, the one relationship between a white woman and a Black woman in the film is the most "conventional" for Classical Hollywood, and the least subversive of Ruby's relationships with Black characters. Given too West's personal relationship to Taylor, which blurred the lines of fiction and reality, this severely limits any progressive racial messaging that the film may have.

In this chapter I have examined how gold digging presents opportunities for female bonding across racial lines, in ways that present positive female coalitions against male forms of oppression. I have also excavated the extent to which the Code did or did not see these relationships as communicating ideas that threatened its conception of white patriarchy. In focusing almost exclusively on sex and sexuality as the threat presented in gold digger films, censors missed how female friendships undermined some of the imperatives of compensating moral values. Perhaps this was due to the fact that the censors themselves could not conceive of rewards and punishments except in heteronormative terms. Yet the films negotiate their performances of white

[51] Watts, *Mae West: An Icon in Black and White*, 168.
[52] Ibid., 186.

heteronormative desire with more authentic sites of affection that present cross-racial and same-sex relationships for women as potential sites of resistance within the policing of white female sexuality.

If gold digging was one illicit means of ascending the class ladder, passing was another. In the next chapter I will turn to female relationships that more directly approach the interracial dynamics that remain narratively marginal in the gold digger films I examine here. Turning to the Code's clause against miscegenation, I will elucidate how relationships between women in passing novels and films go further in their engagements with both discussions of race and queer female sexuality.

CHAPTER TWO

Passing, Imitating: Racial and Sexual Deviance in *Imitation of Life*

Miscegenation is forbidden.

Motion Picture Production Code, 1930

The figure of the tragic mulatto has existed since the nineteenth century and was a recurring feature in abolitionist literature, but the trope did not disappear after the Civil War. In the early twentieth century, literary passing narratives engaged with the social construction of race against the one-drop rule that continued to segregate Americans along rigid racial lines of Black or white. Jim Crow logic dictated that subjects were one or the other, never both, and the mere act of appearing white while being Black was in itself a social crime that could have violent repercussions. Furthermore, figures who could pass were presumed to be the products of miscegenation, and thus not only challenged what were supposed to be immutable racial categories but also embodied the specter of interracial sexual relations. The fact that the sexual exploitation of Black women by white men had been widespread and sanctioned under slavery was disavowed, and the paranoia of Black men congressing with white women continued to drive white supremacist agendas of systematic lynching and other forms of racist violence in the 1930s. The majority of states had anti-miscegenation laws at some point in their history, and such laws would not be declared unconstitutional until 1967. The Production Code's prohibition against miscegenation, which in some written versions of it is expressly defined as "sex relationship between the white and black races," was in keeping with this repressive cultural ethos.

In literature, meanwhile, Black and white American writers including Charles Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Vera Caspary, George Shuyler, William Faulkner, and Fannie Hurst invoked passing to myriad ends. Though characters who could pass seem ideally poised to challenge the simplified binary of race through their destabilization of visual categories, often there are deep ideological double-binds to this project. Adrienne Gosselin, Valerie Smith, and Gayle Wald have pointed to the ways that passing and its critical reception have in various ways reproduced the logic of race as either/or, reinforcing the coherence of Blackness and whiteness by forcing the subject to identify with one or the other.[1] This is in part due to the fact that the social conditions that compel passing in the first place are not easily escaped—hence the "tragic" aspect of the tragic mulatto, who cannot find a viable futurity in the social order. Other studies have intervened in finding new ways to situate mixed-race characters outside of these confines by removing ideological attachments from acts of passing, including work by Teresa C. Zackodnik, Allyson Hobbs, and Caroline A. Streeter.[2]

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[1] Adrienne Gosselin claims that while black authors used passing narratives "to stem the tide of racial passing in order to build solidarity for the New Negro Movement," white authors used them to "exploit the threat of 'invisible blackness'" ("Racial Etiquette and the (White) Plot of Passing: (Re)Inscribing 'Place' in John Stahl's Imitation of Life," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 28.2 [1998]: 48). Valerie Smith argues that passing narratives "become sites where anti-racist and white supremacist ideologies converge," portraying passing as an act of betrayal to blackness that inadvertently subscribes to black accomodationism (*Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings* [New York: Routledge, 1998], 36). Gayle Wald points out that scholarship on passing often falls into the trap of treating passing as either complicit in the racist social order (in which it is preferable to be white, and white-looking skin is the means of evoking sympathy) or subversive of that same order (*Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2000]).

[2] Teresa C. Zackodnik's study of African American women writers' engagement with the mulatta figure argues, "the ambivalence of passing…go[es] beyond the simply duality of subversive versus complicit acts" (*The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004], xi). Allyson Hobbs contends that those who pass do not "become" what they pass as, and that the core issue of passing is not what is gained by it but what is lost (*A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014], 17-18). Caroline Streeter asserts that the tragic mulatto paradigm no longer applies to the experiences of late-twentieth-century mixed-race women, though they continue to embody anxieties about miscegenation in updated ways (*Tragic No More: Mixed-Race Women and the Nexus of Sex and Celebrity* [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012]).

Additionally, however, twentieth-century passing narratives portrayed characters who passed not only to escape vulnerability to racist violence and persecution, but also to claim a stake in the world of upward class mobility that whiteness afforded. In a world that fancied itself modern but still brutally maintained the color line, passing illuminated the stark limitations to who got to live the American Dream.

This chapter will examine two passing narratives about women—*Passing* by Nella Larsen and *Imitation of Life* by Fannie Hurst—demonstrating how both works use passing to explore the multitude of ways people are compelled to "pass" according to not just dictates of race, but also class, gender, and sexuality. Through these two very different works, I want to suggest that the early twentieth century's cultural preoccupation with passing invited writers to think about what passing as a form brought to bear on different social positions. Judith Butler, writing on *Passing*, argues that our aim in interpreting the novel should not be to prioritize sexuality over race, or sexual difference over sexuality, but to read race, sexuality, and sexual difference as "sites at which the one cannot be constituted save through the other."[3] Taking a similar approach, I argue that the deviance of passing is the lens through which this constitution is made visible. In this chapter, "deviance" refers to the act of passing as it is deployed through multiple categories of identity, revealing how various deviations from perceived norms of behavior come to be understood in terms of passing. Racial passing, in other words, becomes a powerful analogy to illustrate how other simultaneous and interconnected forms of oppression motivate other less-recognized forms of passing. The chapter will then analyze how the 1934 film adaptation of Hurst's novel dealt with the fact of passing

[3] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 123.

and implied miscegenation under the new authority of the Production Code Administration. Before turning to these texts, I will examine some of the historical contexts that enabled this recognition of the intersectional nature of passing.

In 1903 W. E. B. Du Bois famously proclaimed in *The Souls of Black Folk*, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line."[4] He was referring to the "problem" of what racial coexistence would look like after the failure of Reconstruction, a problem that was often understood in terms of Black people themselves, alternately called "the Negro problem" or "the Negro question." His statement, however, also encapsulates the problem of asserting a color line in the first place when that line was so easily crossed. A persistent theme in passing narratives of the period is the fact that passing is often contingent not on what a person does, but how other people see them. While race was culturally conceptualized as a matter of blood and ancestry, in practice the ability to read race rested almost entirely on the ability to visually discern it. For instance, during the Rhinelander trial, a famous divorce case from 1925, a white man attempted to sue his bi-racial wife for an annulment on the basis that he did not know her "true" race before they married. Kip Rhinelander, a wealthy New York socialite, had carried on an affair with Alice Jones, a domestic servant, for several years before their elopement, and seemed to have been familiar with her mixed-race family. It was only after Rhinelander's family discovered the marriage and pressured him to sue for annulment by threatening to disinherit him, and after newspapers broke the news of Jones's Black heritage, that he claimed to have been oblivious to her race. New York at the time did not have an anti-miscegenation law, and thus the trial was not over

[4] W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 9.

whether or not Jones was Black but over whether Rhinelander's claim that he didn't know she was could be grounds for their legal separation. The jury ultimately decided in favor of Jones on the grounds that her race was visibly apparent in parts of her body that Rhinelander would have seen (during the trial she was made to disrobe in court in front of the all-male, all-white jury) and in the bodies of her family members whom Rhinelander knew. The verdict of the Rhinelander trial is telling, because it indicates that it was more important to the jury to assert race as a visibly apparent characteristic than it was for them to prevent a case of miscegenation. In other words, the idea that race could be confused and unascertainable on the visual level was more threatening to the jury than the idea of white and Black people intermarrying. The fact that Rhinelander was a wealthy white man marrying a working-class Black woman also doubtlessly played a role in their acceptance of the relationship, since he maintained positions of superiority over her in terms of class and gender. Their relationship did not embody the main fear motivating anti-miscegenation laws, which was the idea of Black men marrying white women.

When Blackness was not visibly apparent on the body, it can be argued, it fit the model that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick delineates as operating within the binary of secrecy and knowledge encouraged by the late-nineteenth century's reconceptualization of sexuality along distinct lines of homosexual and heterosexual. The presentation of one's sexuality under the new regime of policing often required its own form of passing, under the fear that certain actions, gestures, or behaviors might inadvertently reveal the hidden truth of one's deviant sexuality. And, as Sedgwick points out, one did not actually have to be gay in order for this fear to shape their actions, or for certain actions to be read as proof of homosexuality. The dominant metaphor for this condition became, eventually,

that of "the closet" rather than passing, but if we compare Sedgwick's statements in the opening of *Epistemology of the Closet* with those of Du Bois, the similarities become apparent:

> *Epistemology of the Closet* proposes that many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured—indeed, fractured—by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century.[5]

Du Bois, writing at the beginning of the century, identifies the color line as its main organizing principle; Sedgwick, writing at the end of the same century, points instead to definitions of male sexuality. And yet though they are talking about different categories of identification from radically different historical vantages, at the heart of Du Bois's and Sedgwick's statements, I argue, is the idea of a distinction that is actually constantly troubled by the binaries it projects.

The point here is to illustrate how similarly the binaries of race and sexuality were understood at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Siobhan B. Somerville has insisted, the similarity goes beyond mere analogy. She demonstrates how discourses of homosexuality emerged through, rather than alongside, discourses of race at the end of the nineteenth century.[6] This situating of race and sexuality as embedded concerns also enables analysis of the ways anxieties about race manifest as anxieties about sexuality in terms of who is permitted to sleep with whom under white supremacist regimes, as well

[5] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2008), 1.
[6] Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

as vice versa in how queer sexualities are racialized. It also recognizes the overlap of racial and sexual identities, as recently evinced by Saidiya Hartman's excavation of how Black urban women at the turn of the century organized their sexual lives outside of the impositions of white womanhood.[7] Adding to these studies, I argue that passing narratives are additional sites where the inextricable relationship between race and sexuality plays out, manifesting in ways that also reveal the classed stakes of race.

Extending Sedgwick's claims about the many epistemological binarisms to which the homosexual/heterosexual division gives rise, I read passing narratives as a genre that enacts the transgression of binaries across several fronts. Passing narratives, I argue, are often not simply matters of one kind of passing or another. Within the dualistic black/white logic of racism, they confront other attendant social distinctions as well. In particular, passing manifests class as a framework that undergirds such distinctions and provides a motivation to pass, whether along lines of race, gender, or sexuality. Allison Whitney has modeled how the structure of passing as a means of class rise manifests even when race does not appear as an operative concern, as in the maternal melodrama *Stella Dallas* (dir. King Vidor, 1937). Whitney shows how the importance placed on maternal relationships as signifying the "true" identity of a child (a pattern taken directly from slavery, in which a child born to an enslaved mother followed her condition) serves to racialize Stella's plight. *Stella Dallas* engages a kind of passing narrative because its drama rests on the binary of class difference (rich/poor), but as Whitney argues, because of America's "widespread denial of class difference and obsession with racial difference…race is used as a proxy for class in order to present the latter as an inherited

[7] Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Lives of Social Upheaval* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019).

and visible trait."[8] In a similar vein but taking the opposite tack, Jennifer DeVere Brody reads Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing* in terms of racial passing's class implications. While Clare, the character who is ostensibly passing (having married a white man who does not know about her race), evinces a much more cognizant awareness of her racialized position as a Black person, Irene disavows how her bourgeois position accedes to classed standards of whiteness.[9] In the text, passing functions as a multivalent term that describes the ways that characters navigate many different social expectations and aspirations.

In addition to addressing issues of class, *Passing* adds another layer to its analogy by engaging with sexuality. Irene, who has a comfortable if passionless life as a housewife in the Harlem middle class, internally censures Clare for what Irene views as a betrayal of the race, but she also envies and desires her in ways that are incommensurate with her commitment to bourgeois morality and respectability. It is also implied that Irene's husband Brian, who has a dismissive attitude towards sex, desires an escape from the stultifying confines of heteronormativity. Like Irene, he maintains an outward commitment to the project of racial uplift while unconsciously yearning for a less repressive sexual life. He dreams of moving to South America, which was symbolically imagined as having more liberal attitudes in regard to homosexuality as well as race.[10] At the same time, Irene worries that Brian and Clare may be having an affair, a suspicion that the novel does not confirm or deny. As David L. Blackmore reads it, Irene "displaces

[8] Allison Whitney, "Race, Class, and the Pressure to Pass in American Maternal Melodrama: The Case of Stella Dallas," *Journal of Film and Video* 59.1 (Spring 2007): 4-5.
[9] Jennifer DeVere Brody, "Clare Kendry's 'True' Colors: Race and Class Conflict in Nella Larsen's Passing," *Callaloo* 15.4 (Autumn 1992): 1053-1065.
[10] David L. Blackmore, "'That Unreasonable Restless Feeling': The Homosexual Subtexts of Nella Larsen's Passing," *African American Review* 26.3 (Autumn 1992): 475-484.

her own attraction to Clare by projecting it onto Brian."[11] We might simultaneously understand the affair as embodying Irene's envy of Clare's sexual freedom, which extends beyond the limitations of marriage, race, and by implication, heterosexuality. The novel's ambiguity on this point is part of how it communicates the "closeted" condition of sexual passing, as Irene and Brian do not ever identify their desires as queer. Yet because of the novel's investment in expanding the definition of passing beyond just the line separating Black and white, Irene and Brian's sexual denial can be understood as representing a form of internalized passing.

Larsen's novel is often critically contextualized as an intersectional work for the ways it portrays the overlay of different categories of identity. While the novel depicts anxieties and motivations that attend racial passing, it also uses it as a means of interrogating how race is shaped by factors of class, gender, and sexuality. Irene condemns Clare for passing as white, but her own relationship to Blackness is modeled on a similar desire to "pass" into middle-class respectability through a politics of uplift that reinforces hetero-patriarchy. Irene's and Brian's conformity to this politics compels them to repress their same-sex desires. In addition, when she first re-encounters Clare, Irene is in fact passing for white on a rooftop tearoom in order to avoid the heat, claiming the classed privileges of white womanhood in that situation while judging Clare for wanting the same thing in her life. Yet what Irene finds so threatening (and so enticing) in Clare is how easy it is for her to pass as something else, and what that seems to imply about the sterile life Irene has crafted for herself. Queer desire in the novel helps illustrate not only Irene's ambivalence towards her life of respectability, but also the subject

[11] Ibid., 482.

positions that come to be devalued under it. One of *Passing*'s great achievements is that it depicts Irene's anxieties as not so much about her desire to be Black or white as about how her relationship to Blackness and whiteness are entangled with her other desires—sexual, social, political—in ways that are not easily parsed.

But *Passing* is not alone in using passing to explore the intersection of subject positions. Fannie Hurst's 1933 novel *Imitation of Life* uses the idea of passing, or "imitating," to explore how expectations for gender and sexuality can operate in ways similar to those for race. Hurst's novel follows the rise of Bea Pullman as she transitions from naïve housewife in turn-of-the-century Atlantic City to increasingly masculine careers, first as a door-to-door maple syrup salesman using her deceased husband's name and eventually the head of a global restaurant business. In the shadow of her progress is the plight of Peola, the daughter of Delilah, the African American woman whom Bea hires as a domestic. Peola is light-skinned enough to pass, and while Bea amasses more and more wealth Peola finds herself the subject of repeated humiliating and devastating experiences because of her ambiguous racial position. Most readings of the novel interpolate the parallel between Bea and Delilah, the white and Black single mothers who start a restaurant business and raise their daughters together. Lauren Berlant, for instance, reads the novel's various passings through the issue of embodiment. She argues that in a nation that privileges the abstraction of the white male body as its ideal citizen, "American women and African Americans have never had the privilege to suppress the event of the body."[12] Thus the forms of trademarking in *Imitation* stage the replacement of "the body of pain with the projected image of safety and satisfaction commodities

[12] Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 111.

represent."[13] Bea and Delilah under this reading both strategically "pass" into acceptable commodity brands that reflect their gender and racial difference (Bea by abstracting her female body and its desires, Delilah by giving her representation over to the white imagination). Peola, meanwhile, is left out of either of these possibilities. Other readings draw attention to the novel's staging of the extremely divergent outcomes, according to race, afforded to women by upward mobility. Delilah never leaves the role of domestic; she merely becomes a more well-off domestic to a more well-off white woman. My interpretation, however, argues that the positions of Bea and Peola as the two women who "pass" offer a much more apt paralleling that explores various ways women are socially circumscribed.[14] Deviance in the form of passing allows us to see Bea and Peola as departing from prescribed gender, racial, and implicitly sexual roles, marking them as "problem" subjects in ways that Delilah and Bea's daughter Jessie, who stabilize notions of Black and white femininity, are not. Yet the novel does not condemn Bea's and Peola's acts of passing, but asserts them as reasonable responses to the kinds of oppression they respectively face as they navigate the contradictory, changing demands for women and African Americans at the turn of the century. For both Bea and Peola,

[13] Ibid., 112.

[14] Some critics have made gestures towards the fact that Bea's and Peola's plots are likened to each other's. Kristi Branham says that scholars have focused too exclusively on Peola's plot, privileging the "race question" over the "gender question" that the novel and 1934 film raise, though she goes on to read how Bea and Delilah each navigate concerns of labor and motherhood ("'Thrown on their own resources: Collaboration as Survival Strategy in 'Imitation of Life,'" *Literature/Film Quarterly* 40.4 [2012]: 258-273). Lauren Berlant writes, "like Delilah's light-skinned daughter, Peola, Bea has the perverse opportunity to capitalize on racist patriarchal culture by creating a compensatory 'body' to distract from the one already marked by the colonial digit [i.e. Delilah's]," but she does not pursue this comparison between these two "perverse" characters (*The Female Complaint,* 119). Valerie Smith comes the closest to my point when she observes of the 1934 film, "the situations of [Bea and Peola] invite comparison more easily than do those of either the two mothers or the two daughters: these are the two women who leave their rightful place; these are the two who must be returned to those places at the end of the film" (*Not Race, Not Just Gender*, 49).

their deviant status is tied to their affiliations with modernity—Bea as a burgeoning sexually-liberated and career-driven New Woman of the 1910s, and Peola as a mixed-race woman and New Negro who wants more than the life of a domestic that satisfied her mother. As such, passing comes to emblematize the plight of the modern woman *across* racial identities rather than asserting the difference between them.

Imitation is most well known as the source material for two landmark films, the first directed by John M. Stahl in 1934, and the second by Douglas Sirk in 1959. The novel has been less frequently analyzed for its own sake, though it was a bestseller of the 1930s. According to Daniel Itzkovitz, Hurst was written off as a hack by the modernist critics of her day because of her immense popularity and despite the clear political engagements in her work.[15] And yet, *Imitation*'s construction of the deviance of its Black and white female characters—deviance that is all but written out of Stahl's film, and wholly re-invented in Sirk's—align it thematically with a text like *Passing* in ways that have not been fully explored. In particular, critical work on Hurst's novel has ignored the potential queer reading of Bea as a character who never comfortably fits into heteronormative relationships, and only ever has meaningful, lasting relationships with other women. Similarly, Peola, while not queered in the same way, also comes to represent a sexual register of deviance through her insistence on sterilizing herself so that she can marry a white man without fear that her race will be detected in her children. Thus, both women reflect sexuality as well as class concerns as operative within their acts of passing, similar to how in the previous chapter sex work and class rise function together in the racialization of gold diggers.

[15] Daniel Itzkovitz, "Introduction," *Imitation of Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), xiii.

In the remainder of this chapter I will analyze the ways that Hurst's novel establishes female sexual deviance as a crucial aspect of Bea's character, and then the ways that it aligns her with the racial deviance of Peola. Then I will turn to Stahl's 1934 adaptation in order to show how deviance is re-arranged and reduced in the film under the newly established Production Code Administration.

I. Diagnosing Deviance in Hurst's *Imitation of Life*

The parallel *Imitation* makes between Bea's gender passing and Peola's racial passing is buried by the more obvious narrative comparison between Bea and Delilah, the two mothers. In the novel Delilah takes on the domestic responsibilities of mothering while Bea financially supports their female-headed household as the breadwinner, thus transposing traditional gender roles onto racial ones (white career woman, Black domestic). But aside from their both being single mothers with daughters, there are few similarities linking Bea's and Delilah's characters. One significant reason for this is the novel's form, which is told almost exclusively from Bea's point of view. Even though Delilah's dialogue, which is rendered in dialect, often takes over the narrative and subverts Bea's speech through her blunt naming of racism's realities, she is not granted the same interiority or character development as Bea. Thus the novel is always focalized through Bea's words and experiences. Additionally, Delilah's caricature as a "mammy," even in the context of a commodified fantasy for white peoples' consumption (she becomes the mascot of an Aunt Jemima-like brand of waffle flour), problematizes her characterization and further distances her from the well-rounded character of Bea. While the novel aims to critique the limitations and everyday racism faced by Peola, with

Delilah it participates in racial stereotyping without much discernable irony. She is depicted as physically enormous, uneducated, superstitious, practically magical in her cooking abilities, and solely concerned with the welfare of the white people for whom she works (above her daughter's and her own). While one can certainly read Delilah's subservience as a response to the racist world she inhabits, this social critique comes at Delilah's representational expense. Finally, the representation of Delilah is troubling precisely because she so specifically encapsulates the era's racialized and gendered norms for Black women: working in a white woman's house and happy to do it. In other words, she does not deviate from prescribed social expectations in the ways that Bea and Peola do. If anything, Delilah's character is hyper-conscious of the racial and sexual boundaries that govern her and her daughter's world. Thus even as Delilah recognizes and articulates the injustices of racism, she also tries to instill in Peola the need to accept her subordinate place within its structures. She therefore embodies certain ideological contradictions, but whereas the novel *stages* Bea's internalized oppression, ironizing her thoughts through free indirect discourse, it *participates* in Delilah's through its un-ironic demeaning representation of her.

With this idea in mind, I want to suggest a different way of reading the novel that doesn't attempt to redeem its representations so much as re-configure the analogies it makes between its characters. I contend that Peola and Bea form the twin "imitations" of the novel, drawn together by their deviance in their acts of passing. The fact that the submissive Delilah and the facile Jessie conform to the social expectations for their races and genders makes Peola's and Bea's deviations all the more visible. Just as Delilah fits the image of a mammy, Jessie is the embodiment of affluent white femininity:

expensively educated in Switzerland but with little intelligence to show for it, a leisure-loving, ambitionless socialite whose crowning achievement is marriage. Peola and Bea are, respectively, the opposites of normativity that Delilah and Jessie represent—recognizing how dramatically standards of femininity differ based on race.

"Imitation" in the novel can be understood as a complex term that refers to both more ostensible forms of passing against one's inscribed social identity (passing as white, passing as male) and, more radically, with acts that reveal how conformity to social norms constitutes its own form of passing (denying one's queer feelings, acceding to being socially inferior). In the latter category, for instance, it is equated with the ideals of Victorian middle-class propriety that Bea learns from her mother: marrying for decency's sake, cooking and cleaning for her father and husband, avoiding all discussions of sex, having a baby. Though Bea does all of these things because she is raised to expect that they will bring her happiness, she quickly finds that not to be the case. As she muses to herself, "Yes, indeedy, there were worse fates than being married to Mr. Pullman. Worse fates! What a way to put it! There wasn't any bad fate at all in being married to him. Better say, very good fate."[16] In performing domestic bliss in spite of her submerged discontent, she reveals the imitation embedded in bourgeois wifehood. Motivating this performance is her dread of being left to her own resources and having to work outside of the home, a fate she has learned to deplore from her surrounding social mores. But when later in the text she makes this transition, instead of being demystified, the role of businessman takes the place of her imitated wifehood. Bea's masculinized business ventures forestall her from experiencing romance and having the kind of close maternal

[16] Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life* (New York: Perennial Library, 1990), 59.

relationship with Jessie that she idealizes, thus establishing her work as the imitative life that distances her from true happiness. Work ends up taking the place of romance as Bea sublimates her sexual desires for economic survival. Fantasizing her future success and the leisure it will afford, Bea "bare[s] her teeth while walking, in the grimace of intense desire."[17] Later during a nocturnal reverie, Bea's thoughts alternate between the intimate dramas she observes on her daily sales runs and her ideas for a new restaurant venture, thinking, "Activity was the lid to the jack-in-the-box of a heart that hurt of some sort of deficiency."[18] Bea has no life outside of her work, and her dreams of love and a relationship with her daughter seems ideal precisely because they are never realized; when she does finally attempt them, she is cruelly betrayed when Jessie unknowingly becomes engaged to the man that Bea loves. It would seem, then, that the descriptor of imitation fits both parts of Bea's life: her role as a happy housewife in a decidedly unhappy marriage, and her business pursuits that keep her from the feminized home life she supposedly desires. In doing so, the novel demonstrates the difficulty of finding any site for authenticity in modern life.

The same idea applies to Peola's struggle over her racial identity. Though Peola is understood as Black because of her parentage, the novel eschews representing Peola as definitively Black or definitively white, suggesting instead that she is authentically both. Delilah says that Peola's late father had both Black and white "blood," and when as a child Peola faints after Jessie calls her "nigger," the text describes her complexion as "whiter than chalk," emphasizing the irony of Jessie's distinction.[19] It also emphasizes

[17] Ibid., 97.
[18] Ibid., 108-109.
[19] Ibid., 120, 153.

that Peola speaks more like Bea than Delilah, and is "careful to avoid replica of her parent's diction."[20] Peola may be seen as "imitating" whiteness—especially in the eyes of Delilah, who insists, "Dar ain't no passin'" and tries to keep Peola on her side of the color line by persistently privileging Jessie —but Peola never accedes to this view, unlike her character in Stahl's film.[21] As someone who is Black under the era's racial logic but who is closer to whiteness in her appearance and speech—the result not just of biracial ancestry but of being raised in a biracial household—Peola embodies the uneasy and messy relationship between "authentic" and "imitative" selves. In this sense Peola and Bea are deviant not only because they transgress certain social boundaries, but also because they muddle imitative and authentic modes of being, giving lie to the distinction.

Yet the world Bea and Peola inhabit is intent on maintaining the racial and gendered distinctions that both women flout. In Bea's case, her reticence around sex is part of the same cultural logic that censures working women.[22] Just as Delilah is portrayed as the main enforcer of racial difference in Peola's life, so too is Bea's mother the source of these beliefs. The novel opens with Bea at her mother's funeral, confronting her own lack of sexual knowledge through a kind of primal scene where she becomes aware of the sexual nature of her mother's body. The teenage Bea cannot wrap her head around how her parents, whose relationship she saw as prim and unaffectionate, could have possibly mustered up the passion for sex. This unanswered question takes the form of the unfinished question "How…?" repeated in various iterations, the ellipses

[20] Ibid., 99.
[21] Ibid., 119.
[22] It is worth noting that the novel, though it takes place during the 1910s and 1920s, was written during the Depression, and thus during a period where women increasingly needed to work but were also increasingly barred from working (a phenomenon I address in depth in my fourth chapter).

representing Bea's reluctance to fully voice the sexualized content of her own thoughts. This absence is also attributed to the "clumsy" and "shockingly inadequate" sexual education that Bea's mother attempted to give Bea when she started menstruating.[23] Subsequent moments develop uncertainty around sex as a recurring theme in Bea's early life. In this way Bea's relationship to sexuality, particularly the distance between her sexual "duties" as a wife and her own undeveloped sexual feelings, is posited as the novel's originating form of imitation.

Bea is particularly confounded by the idea of physical attraction to men. The novel's descriptions of male bodies present them as unappealing in Bea's view. Watching couples lounge on the beach, a young Bea thinks, "Most of the hairy, leggy bodies of the men in their two-piece striped bathing-suits, were quite the reverse of tempting…What tempted girls to want to lie in the arms of men while they in turn pasted their cheeks against the cheeks or necks or breasts of the girls?"[24] While Bea puzzles over what would compel the girls on the beach to desire the hairy men, it is striking how this is counterbalanced by what Bea finds self-evidently attractive about the girls' bodies: she dwells on their cheeks, necks, and breasts in an unmodified litany. Meanwhile, she finds the "male aroma" attached to her future husband Mr. Pullman to be "horrid."[25] Likewise, at her mother's funeral she muses over the juxtaposition of her mother's "warm, yielding loins," even as a corpse, with her father, "that crumpled figure over there in the corner of the darkened parlor, his back retching as he cried."[26] This grotesque image of her father foreshadows Bea's first sexual experiences, which do nothing to alleviate Bea's questions

[23] Hurst, *Imitation of Life*, 1-2.
[24] Ibid., 21.
[25] Ibid., 11.
[26] Ibid., 3.

about sex and heterosexual desire. After she is compelled to marry Mr. Pullman, her parents' insipid boarder, Bea is quickly disillusioned by marriage's vague promises of bliss. Her wedding night is marked by terror more than excitement, and as time goes on Bea tries to rationalize the fact that while her husband experiences "what seemed to be almost intolerable ecstasies of the flesh" during sex, she herself feels an "almost clinical detachment," referring to sex as "a clinical sort of something, apparently, that a girl had to give a man."[27] The repeated use of medicalized terminology pathologizes Bea's sexual disinterest. Her neighbor, appropriately named Mrs. Doc Hanson, puts a name to Bea's condition when she advises, "if you are inclined to be one of the frigid ones, don't let [Mr. Pullman] know it."[28] Frigidity becomes the psychosexual label for Bea's position, but we can understand her uncomfortable relationship to marital sex as a queering gesture. In telling Bea to imitate desire she does not feel, the neighbor's advice presents heterosexual sex as a kind of "passing" for sexually normal.

Bea's descriptions of her own feminine body are also far more sensually evocative than those of men's. As with the beachgoers, while Bea can't imagine anybody's desiring Mr. Pullman, she can certainly understand his desire for her:

> It was the queerest experience, this coming suddenly aware of her teasing bodily self. The nape of her neck felt nice and long as she turned her head slowly on it. Under her shirtwaist, lovely white breasts, which, as they had developed, had filled her with secret shame, causing her to bind them

[27] Ibid., 49, 47.
[28] Ibid., 49.

> down to flatness under towels and tight corset covers, seemed part, now, of that strangely exciting sense of her contour.[29]

Tellingly, Bea ruminates on the same parts of her own body as she did with the girls on the beach: her neck, her breasts. The "queerness" of experience of sexual attraction through her own body suggests an orientation that lies outside of that dictated by her mother, father, husband, and neighbors.

Bea's marriage is the first definitive imitation of the novel. We bear witness to her internal monologue as she struggles to convince herself that she is content in what is clearly an unsatisfying relationship. Her forced contentedness is motivated, above all, by the fear of having to support herself financially—another lesson learned from her mother. Even before the death of Mr. Pullman, Bea's thoughts are frequently shaped by the anxiety of working outside of the home:

> What happened to girls thrown on their own resources? They worked, of course […] It was considered all right to work for "pin money," although Mother had thought it made a girl mannish, like those Woman's Rights advocates […] "Thank goodness," Mother used to say, Bea was inclined to the home. No new-fangled ideas.[30]

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues that at the turn of the century the image of the New Woman was in part discredited using sexological discourses that used newly minted "perverse" and "abnormal" sexualities to depict the relationships of many New Women

[29] Ibid., 25
[30] Ibid., 15-16.

as lesbian.[31] Evoking this discourse through the threat of being seen as "mannish," the passage shows the convergence of matters of sexuality with matters of labor, and the proper form of it for white woman (making babies, not money). In this way, we can understand Bea's sexual passing in her marriage as prompted by the fear of gender deviance in working outside of the home. That is to say, Bea commits one form of passing in order to avoid committing another. She eventually does cross over into the mannish world of work, passing literally for a man using her deceased husband's identity, in ways that reflect back on the imitations she performed in her marriage.

If Bea's notions of sexuality and gender are inherited baggage from her mother, this baggage also extends to her views on race. Bea's attitude towards Black people before the arrival of Delilah and Peola is decidedly condescending and suspicious. On her wedding day, an apprehensive Bea frets over Angie, the fourteen-year-old Black girl hired to help with the preparations: "Had Mrs. Vizitelli seen to it that [Angie] had carted nothing away? This one was a great one for stealing laundry soap, and now, what with so much angel-food left over, and an unusually full ice-box—no telling."[32] This theme is elaborated on when later that same day, Bea goes upstairs to her new bedroom and finds a pornographic photo of Mr. Pullman's placed on the mantelpiece and immediately blames Angie:

> Dear knows from where, the black girl had unearthed a picture which must, in some way, have got mixed up with his other belongings. A horrid cabinet-sized thing of a woman, which Bea turned face down, in stockings

[31] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender in Crisis, 1870-1936," in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 245-296.
[32] Hurst, *Imitation of Life*, 41.

> and no clothes, trying on a man's high hat before a mirror. With what seemed actual malice, that picture had been propped up against one of the china pugs. Those darkies…[33]

It is telling that these two instances of Bea's distrustful attitude towards "the black girl" occur in the context of Bea's marriage. Bea's disavowal of her husband's lewd proclivities is projected, fetishistically, onto Angie, who becomes the object of Bea's anger instead. What is disavowed here is not castration and absence, but its opposite: the phallic woman in the photo, with her top hat, signifies the male sexual desire (of Mr. Pullman) that Bea fears. Unwilling to confront this phallic desire, Bea turns to racial difference instead. Bea's disarming the woman in the photo by calling her a "thing" is part of the same discursive strategy that turns Angie into "those darkies." The novel thus implies that Bea's racism in this case is an unconscious response to the gendered and sexual impositions that compel her into a marriage where sex is a requirement.

Race also shapes Bea's ideas about labor. For all her obsessive dread of having to "brave that strange cold world out there in which girls were actually voluntarily venturing nowadays," Bea does not extend this concern to the Black women of Atlantic City who work as housekeepers, waitresses, and chambermaids.[34] Black female labor outside of the home is not socially scrutinized in the same way that white female labor is; instead, it is assumed. The text emphasizes the fact that Black women have their own homes in addition to the ones they work in, via Bea's expression of frustration at trying to find a woman to take care of her family: "Most of the female domestic help, wives, sweethearts,

[33] Ibid., 42.
[34] Ibid., 59.

or what nots […] demanded the freedom to return home evenings."[35] In securing the services of Delilah, Bea "emulate[s] something she had seen her mother do," asking Delilah if she knows anyone willing to take the position and "privately hoping that the scrubbed, starchy-looking negress would offer herself."[36] Once again, Bea's mother forms the precedent for Bea's racial relationships, which always take the form of employer-worker. Furthermore, when Bea fails at homemaking duties, the response is to replace her labor with a Black woman's. When Bea burns a dinner she cooked for her father, he tells her to see if they can get their former domestic, Selene, to come help. Bea thinks, "To begin with, he knew perfectly well that the black woman, Selene, who had helped Mother twice a week towards the end, had moved to Baltimore…He had no intention of taking on the additional expense of Selene *or anyone like her*" (emphasis added).[37] It is worth noting here the ways that the labor of Selene and women "like her" (suggesting her interchangeability with other Black domestics) becomes visible through its demand and economic valuation. Whereas Bea's labor is free and taken for granted (and also the cause of her father's abuse, as he believes her to be a bad housekeeper), Selene's is coveted, a luxury they cannot afford but that Bea's father still presumes must be available to them.

While the context of Bea's thoughts allows for ironic interpretation of her racial statements, at the same time the novel naturalizes Black women's labor by depicting Delilah as having an innate aptitude for cooking, cleaning, and taking care of other people (bringing Bea's domestic failures into relief). Delilah's body practically merges

[35] Ibid., 75.
[36] Ibid., 76.
[37] Ibid., 7.

with the food she makes, in sensuous language that provides the only form of eroticization she is permitted in the text:

> There was no suppressing the enormity that was Delilah, nor was there the desire to suppress it. Her table might appear frighteningly lavish (how she loved the board that groans), but she had skill immense as it was consistent, in utilizing breakfast's left-over bacon into luncheon's coleslaw served with sizzled bacon cubes, and there was no such thing as too many griddle cakes, because once Delilah herself surrounded them, the golden syrup began to pour down their diminishing flanks to form engulfing pools into which she dove with an exaltation not dissimilar to the white-eyed ecstasy with which she soared into her frequent outbursts of Baptist fervor.[38]

In addition to being an unbelievable cook, Delilah also works for Bea for free, diminishing her own agency in the relationship and making it appear more like a matter of family instead of a work arrangement. Delilah's refusal of wages comes in the context of her insisting that she and Bea are "partners," exonerating Bea of exploiting her labor and later, her image.[39] African American critics of the novel and 1934 film were quick to point out this exploitation, criticizing one scene in particular from the 1934 film where Delilah makes a refusal of a 20% share in the company she helped start.[40] But this

[38] Ibid., 81.
[39] Ibid., 80.
[40] Sterling A. Brown wrote a scathing review of the novel and the film ("Imitation of Life: Once a Pancake," *Opportunity* [March 1935]: 87-88). Jane Caputi points out several contemporaneous responses by black writers to *Imitation*, including Langston Hughes's satirical 1938 play "Limitations of Life" ("'Specifying' Fannie Hurst: Langston Hughes's 'Limitations of Life,' Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, and Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye as 'Answers' to Hurst's Imitation of Life," *Black American Literature Forum* 24.4 [Winter 1990]: 697–716).

situation also serves to normalize Bea's deviant non-domestic work by reorganizing gendered divisions of labor along lines of race, where Bea is the breadwinner and Delilah takes care of their children. If before the context of working for "pin money" instead of necessity helped to neutralize the threat of women possibly gaining economic independence from men, now the fact of a Black woman performing the required household duties (maintaining the labor as "woman's work") creates ideological space for the white woman to labor outside of the home. In insisting on their partnership, Delilah's domestic competencies compensate for Bea's lack of them, turning gendered forms of labor into racialized ones.

This applies too to motherhood, as Bea's family transfers their affections from her to Delilah. Bea's invalid father, who is inexplicably cruel and recalcitrant to Bea when she tries to care for him, will only eat Delilah's food. Delilah becomes the only one who can manage him, again highlighting Bea's inability to do so but also normalizing Delilah's role as a caregiver born to cater to the whims of others. Jessie, on her part, refuses to obey her mother, and instead hides behind Delilah, emphasizing Bea's replacement: "The spectacle of her child lingering away from her in the vast shadow of Delilah was the cruel result of the necessity of too often leaving the house early mornings before the lids flew back from those very blue eyes and returning to it long after the child slept."[41] Here, the punishment for Bea's leaving the domestic sphere is her white child attaching to a Black mother, something she tries to undo by sending Jessie to boarding school when she notices her picking up some of Delilah's speech patterns (the opposite of Peola).[42] Not only has Bea lost her status as a mother, the text implies, but motherhood

[41] Hurst, *Imitation of Life*, 102.
[42] Ibid., 99.

and its labors are racialized as the purview of Black women. Non-domestic work, however, becomes the proper domain of white women: Bea fails as a daughter, a lover, and a mother, but emphatically succeeds as a breadwinner.

For Peola, the relationship with her mother also fundamentally shapes her desire to pass. Yet she inverts Bea's responses to maternity's problems: rather than yearning for her absent mother or feeling herself to be an inadequate mother, she distances herself from her mother and renounces motherhood for herself altogether. Bea's gender deviance is couched as the result of a lack of maternal identification; Peola, on the other hand, feels herself to be too close to her mother, whose embodiment compels Peola to escape its signification. In both cases, the mothers represent the stable gender and racial identities that their daughters trouble: a wife and mother in the case of Bea, a Black person in the case of Peola. But whereas Bea's mother's body withholds the secrets of sex and maternity, Delilah's body too visibly displays the marker of racial difference. Under slavery, children born of enslaved women and slave owners followed their mother's condition. From this legacy (and the fact that American narratives generally eschew the scenario of a Black father and a white mother as part of its racist-sexist paranoia), passing narratives often present the mother as the relationship that reveals the passer's affiliation with Blackness and that is sacrificed in the act of passing. Whitney argues that American melodrama's emphasis on maternal sacrifice "emerges from America's racial history and its corresponding narrative tradition of the child whose social capital rests on the mother's disappearance and anonymity."[43] Peola's relationship to Delilah and to passing is part of this convention. In contrast to the scene where Jessie hides behind Delilah to

[43] Whitney, "Race, Class, and the Pressure to Pass in American Maternal Melodrama," 4.

escape Bea, Peola, after Delilah catches her passing for white at school, rages against her, "beating against the bulwark of the body in the rain-glossed rubber cape."[44] As with the corpse of Bea's mother, here Delilah's body is reduced to a mass in which Peola reads the cause of her anguish.

Other parallels emerge in how Peola's discontent is diagnosed by a medical figure. Peola is prone to fainting fits and seizures when she is distressed by experiences of racism. After being caught passing at school, Peola falls ill and a doctor is called in. The doctor, thinking that Peola is Bea's daughter, recommends taking her out of school. But when he learns that she is in fact Delilah's daughter, his prescription changes: "Spank her out of [her seizures] when you see them coming. Gently, of course. Then dose her with castor oil. She may not be so inclined then to go off into them."[45] The language of inclination echoes Mrs. Hanson's prescription to Bea to fake sexual pleasure. Both the doctor and Bea's neighbor view Bea's and Peola's responses to oppression as matters that are in their control, making their non-conformity a matter of morality. But the novel's staging of the doctor's racism undermines his supposed authority and the impulse to pathologize what is perceived as improper behavior, converging clinical and moral discourses. The text makes clear that Bea's and Peola's behaviors are *not* willed, and it depicts their reactions as reasonable for the kinds of experiences they face.

Peola is also affiliated with Bea through her relationship to class. Where Bea appropriates a male identity to find self-made success, Peola justifies her passing as white in the same terms:

> "But as things go in this world, I have been a good girl, morally or

[44] Hurst, *Imitation of Life*, 192.
[45] Ibid., 193.

whatever you want to call it. I've worked. I've studied. I've tried to make the best of myself. And all the time with the terrible odds against me of knowing I could never get anywhere I wanted to get!"

"Oh no, Peola!"

"Yes, Missy Bea! What do you know about the blight of not having the courage to face life in a black world? You've succeeded in a world that matters to you! Give me that same chance."[46]

What Peola does not note, but what the text implies, is that Bea's success was also made possible by an act of passing. Peola invokes the language of a "good girl" who has up to this point stayed within the enforced social confines of her race and gender, but she also points to how being a good girl has limited her own economic possibilities because the same confines that dictate race and gender also limit class. Peola's words stand in stark contrast to Jessie's, who proudly proclaims that she hasn't an ambition in the world (because, as a non-queer white woman of inherited wealth, her world is practically limitless).

There are several episodes in the novel where Peola's plotline disrupts the momentum of Bea's class rise, reminding the reader that for all the historical progress made by the novel's white women, racism persists in shaping Peola's life. In one instance, after a six-year-old Jessie calls Peola a "nigger," Peola undergoes a "severe scalp operation, the result of a hot iron simultaneously cutting and burning her as she was secretly trying to iron out an imaginary kink in her straight black hair."[47] While the narrative seems to pass over this incident in terms of its minor relation to Bea's plot

[46] Ibid., 258-259.
[47] Hurst, *Imitation of Life*, 147.

(partly a symptom of Bea's own lack of concern, since the novel is from her perspective), the reader is meant to discern Peola's psychic trauma at the hands of Jessie's racism. These moments build to Peola's climactic decision to permanently pass into whiteness by marrying her white boyfriend and moving to Bolivia (a move that mirrors Brian's fantasy of escape to the more sexually and racially liberal Brazil in *Passing*).

Yet it is Delilah who is Peola's biggest obstacle to passing. From a young age Peola is told by Delilah to learn to accept and expect the racism she encounters. Her advice to her daughter—"Take it standin'. You gotta learn to take it all your life that way"—mirrors the marital advice of Bea's neighbor.[48] While Delilah articulates this burden as a matter of survival and pride, it manifests as her continually favoring Jessie over Peola over the course of their lives. Delilah's ideas are embedded in the reality of a racist world: she explains to Bea, "'Tain't no use mah chile tryin' to get herself raised on de idea all men is equal. Maybe dey is in de eyes of de Lawd, but it's de eyes of man I's talkin 'bout."[49] In making Peola's acceptance of her Blackness part of the same logic that bestows on her a subordinate status, Delilah, according to the novel, ends up being complicit in the experiences that make Peola want to pass. Even when the children are babies Delilah tries to insist that Jessie has her first tooth before Peola, though in fact it is the other way around:

> In every matter of precedence, including teeth, was the priority of Bea's child most punctiliously observed. The duet of their howling might bring

[48] Ibid., 151.
[49] Ibid., 101.

> her running intuitively to her own, but the switch was without hesitancy to the white child, every labor of service adhering rigidly to that order.[50]

In another instance, Delilah makes the disparity in her treatment explicit when she says to Bea,

> Did mah white chile quit bawlin' 'til I tote her, mah wash a-boilin', every inch of dis mawnin' in mah arms? Did mah black chile make her maw so spankin' mad she spanked her li'l' backside?[51]

Delilah's treatment of the young Peola comes across as transparently unjust, despite the intentions behind it, as does Bea's cavalier acceptance of this order of things.[52] As a result, when Peola eventually decides to permanently pass, it appears as much motivated by Delilah as it is by society.

Furthermore, the novel portrays Delilah's objections to passing as part of this same oppressive logic (she refers to it as "a-cheatin' on color" when she catches Peola doing it at school), making them a backboard against which Peola's arguments for passing positively resound.[53] The novel is sympathetic to Peola in her choice to pass. Delilah does not seem to question the immutability of race, repeatedly referring to it as a matter of Black and white blood that resonates of the discourse of the one-drop rule. Yet

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[50] Ibid., 84.
[51] Ibid., 83.
[52] Jane Caputi, contrarily, does not see any irony in this moment of the text. She writes of this passage, "Told from the perspective of Miss Bea, this is just one more quality that makes Delilah such an 'ideal servant.' Nowhere do we get the point of view of the shunned and abused Peola; nowhere does Hurst acknowledge that Delilah's actions stem from profound alienation and are extremely injurious" ("'Specifyin' Fannie Hurst," 712). Yet while it is true that all of the events of the narrative are filtered through Bea, she is hardly a reliable narrator. Furthermore, Delilah does in fact say at one point, "Dat liddle yaller-headed one of yourn is no innocenter than mah black one, only mine might as well begin learnin' herself now, that what's jes' naughty for a white chile, can be downright ag'in' de law if a black one does it" (101). In this instance, Delilah's seemingly cavalier attitude when it comes to punishment belies the fear lingering behind her words.
[53] Hurst, *Imitation of Life*, 190.

the novel undermines an interpretation of Peola that views her as definitively Black or white. It does this by aligning Peola's speech with Bea's rather than Delilah's. This is in sharp contrast to the visual logic of film, which, according to Kathleen McHugh, "locates the truth of [Peola's] racial identity in Delilah's rather than Peola's face and body."[54] Not only does Peola speak more like Bea than Delilah, whose speech is distinguished by its dialect, but she repeatedly appeals to Bea in her final argument with Delilah. When Delilah sermonizes, "Black wimmin who pass, pass into damnation," Peola cries, "O my God! What chance have I, Missy Bea, against her swamp and voodoo nonsense?"[55] Peola both aligns herself with Bea's presumed rationality and asserts that she wants "the same chance" as her. She becomes the model, rather than Delilah, to which Peola aspires. But underlying this desire to "imitate" Bea is also the fact that Bea is a direct product of the virtues of passing.

But there is a limitation to this imitation. Like Bea, Peola's act of passing plays out in the realm of motherhood, but in a very different way. Her choice to racially pass comes with a renunciation of motherhood that renders Peola deviant along lines of gender as well as race. When Delilah tells Peola that her husband will discover her secret when they have children (a common trope within tragic mulatto narratives), Peola subverts this response with the announcement that she has been sterilized. On the one hand, it means that Peola is foreclosing the possibility of Black futurity. But on the other, in renouncing motherhood Peola is renouncing a potent image of gender normalcy for women—the same one that entrapped Bea. Even more radically, Peola sees nothing wrong with this

[54] Kathleen McHugh, *American Domesticity: From How-to Manual to Hollywood Melodrama* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 140.
[55] Hurst, *Imitation of Life*, 260.

rejection. Whereas pregnancy makes Bea's quiet desperation "all right and normal," Peola rationalizes her sterilization: "I'm not ashamed," she says, "There are millions to populate the world besides me."[56] This deliberate and conscious stance makes her a more subversive figure than Bea. It also illustrates an important generational difference between the two women. Bea, a product of the pre-war era living through the upheavals of modernity, still feels compelled to defend maternity as her primary imperative (even if she does not live it). Peola, a young woman of the 1920s, speaks frankly about her sexuality in ways that the young Bea never could express even to herself.

Thus the ideological meanings of Peola's actions shift depending on whether one understands her via her affiliation with Delilah, her biological mother, or Bea, her adopted mother. Under one normalizing optic that understands Peola purely in terms of her racial maternal relationship, Peola is self-hating, deceptive, and lacking in maternal impulses that she should have.[57] But the text does not lend itself to this reading of Peola as wrong in her desire to pass, just as it is not judgmental of Bea's. Though determined to pass, Peola also acknowledges the ethical implications of her wanting to be white. First, she recognizes the pain that she is causing her mother, avowing, "Everything you've given me has been more than I deserve, and you've given and given and given me since the day I was born…"[58] Rather than resenting Delilah for prioritizing Bea's family over her own daughter, Peola expresses her gratitude and guilt, illustrating how her decision is

[56] Ibid., 260.
[57] Sterling A. Brown said as much in a heated back-and-forth with Fannie Hurst that raged across the pages of *Opportunity* after the first film adaptation was released: he argued that Peola of both novel and film was "so woe-begone that she is a walking argument against miscegenation; her struggling differentiates her unpleasantly from the self-abnegation of the mammy; her cheap yearning to be white is a contemptible surrender of integrity" ("Mr. Sterling A. Brown," *Opportunity* [April 1935]: 122). Here Brown's criticism may be inflected by the fact that he is conflating the novel and the film into one narrative.
[58] Hurst, *Imitation of Life*, 257.

less motivated by selfishness than despair. Furthermore, the novel highlights the difficulty of her decision. Peola attempts to embrace her Black identity and explains that she has "tried to glory in [her] people":

> I've drenched myself in the life of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Booker Washington, and Frederick Douglass. I've tried to catch some of their spark. But I'm not that stuff. I haven't pride of race, or love of race. There's nothing grand or of-the-stuff-martyrs-are-made about me. I can't learn to endure being black in a white world.[59]

Here Peola pre-empts the Du Boisian argument that she is reneging on her duty to uplift the race, again echoing a theme from *Passing*. In many ways, she voices the discontent that Bea refuses to about being a woman in a man's world. While Peola may be self-abasing, the text tries to sympathetically illustrate the immense social pressure placed on her.

While Peola's despair, her foreclosed futurity, and her no-win situation seem to cast her firmly in the tragic mulatto mold, there is a crucial element of *Imitation* that has prompted many critics and readers to interpret Peola's decision to pass as a singular subversive act. This is the fact that Peola never definitively comes to regret her decision. In fact, Peola's goodbye to Delilah is her last appearance in the text. This plot point is a significant, and in many ways unique, departure from other passing narratives. Whereas other narratives make return and remorse a crucial feature of their social commentary on denying one's Blackness (or, more regressively, punishes those who pass), *Imitation* instead permits Peola to actually get away with it. As Molly Hiro argues, the open ending

[59] Ibid., 258.

of the novel allows Peola to in some ways escape the constraints of race melodrama and evade the over-signification with which the tragic mulatto figure is symbolically laden.[60] The reader never hears whether Peola comes to regret her decision, whether her husband discovers her race, or whether she is contentedly living out her days yet. Though Delilah portends doom for Peola, the novel never confirms whether we should seriously heed her. This ambiguity is a radical ending to Peola's narrative, suggesting that the question of passing is less a matter of ethics and more a matter of its contingent success or failure. Bea's ending, by contrast, is a definitive tragedy: finally permitting herself the time and space to pursue a heterosexual romance—Berlant writes that after her failed eroticized attachments with women, Bea "hyper-heterosexualize[s] herself and falls in love with an unattainable man," appropriately named Frank Flake—Bea finds that he has affianced himself to her daughter Jessie.[61] Aged out of romance and replaced by a conventional embodiment of femininity, Bea has no future even as her reproductive line continues. In this sense, not only do Peola's articulations and choices appear far more radical than Bea's, but her ending is also decidedly more liberating.

The 1934 film adaptation, however, would eschew both of these endings, as well as the novel's paralleling of Peola's and Bea's acts of passing/imitating. The film does many things to undermine the more ambiguous aspects of the novel and ensconce its various social commentaries into a plot that abides by the ideological standards of the newly enforced Production Code and the narrative conventions of melodrama. This will be the focus of the next section.

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[60] Molly Hiro, "'Tain't no tragedy unless you make it one': *Imitation of Life*, Melodrama, and the Mulatta," *Arizona Quarterly* 66.4 (Winter 2010): 93-113.
[61] Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 120.

II. "Isn't that a white girl?": *Imitation of Life* and the Production Code

If deviance in Hurst's novel acts as a means of drawing together different experiences of oppression across racial lines, under the ideological pressures of Hollywood's newly enforced Production Code, many of those connections were sundered. Implementation of the Code under the authority of the Production Code Administration began in July of 1934, almost the same month that Paramount began production on the adaptation of *Imitation*. The censors' main concern, as they articulated it, was miscegenation, which was expressly forbidden in the Code. The clause against miscegenation fell under the heading of "Sex," alongside unequivocal prohibitions against homosexuality, prostitution, and venereal disease. Nowhere else in the Code is race mentioned.[62] While it makes some sense that miscegenation, which refers to interracial sexual relations resulting in mixed-race children, would be understood as a sexual category, the Production Code Administration (PCA) file on *Imitation* indicates that this understanding had much farther reaching applications than representations of sex. In choosing to police race as a sexual category, the PCA used miscegenation as the main lens through which to discuss cinematic engagements with issues of race. In doing so, they made it their purview to maintain racial separation, not just across gender lines but also, ultimately, within them.

The censorship of *Imitation* exemplifies this particularly. *Imitation* came under especial scrutiny because of its attempt to frankly address the injustice of anti-Black racism right at the moment where the new PCA saw it as their duty to appease local

[62] Some later versions of the Code included amendments on avoiding racial slurs.

(including Southern) and foreign censorship boards, which were significantly less tolerant of depictions of racial intermixing. This intolerance particularly extended towards Black people, and was codified in the Code's language. In some versions of the Code, the clause against miscegenation is clarified as "sex relationship between the white and black races." Even when this was not specified it seems to have been understood, because interracial romances between white people and non-Black people of color were frequently allowed, having appeared in Pre-Code era films like *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1932) and continuing to appear after 1934 in films like *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935), *Klondike Annie* (1936), and *The Last of the Mohicans* (1936). Miscegenation between a white and a nominally Black character was even a major plot point in the film *Showboat* (1936), where the characters involved were played by white actors (as they almost always were when interracial relationships appeared onscreen). Thus, given that the ban on miscegenation was clearly flexible, the PCA's choice to emphasize the oblique presence of miscegenation in *Imitation* indicates that the clause could be used to justify other forms of racial policing.

Susan Courtney's and Ellen C. Scott's extensive analyses of the PCA's treatment of *Imitation* reveal that film censors were concerned with far more than just miscegenation, which technically does not occur in the film but is embodied in the figure of the mixed-race Peola.[63] Joseph Breen, head of the PCA, immediately focalized Peola's ancestry as the film's main point of contention, writing that despite the "beautiful"

[63] Courtney argues, "the censors' concern was in fact tied to a range of more profound borderlines—in particular, those marking differences of race, color, blood and skin" (*Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender and Race, 1903-1967* [Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005], 143). Scott similarly contends, "Breen's official argument that the film was about miscegenation hid numerous deeper racial concerns—most prominently that it pointed to the problem of American racism" (*Cinema Civil Rights: Regulation, Repression, and Race in the Classical Hollywood Era* [New Brunswick; London: Rutgers University Press, 2015], 23).

maternal themes of the story, the "main theme" was founded on miscegenation and thus was "very dangerous from the standpoint both of industry and public policy."[64] Breen's initial summary of the film suggests a very different plot than the one that would end up being filmed, one that centers on Peola rather than Bea. Corroborating Breen's description, another censor wrote, "The only really gripping and dramatic thread in the story is that of Peola's anguish and her old mother's heartbreak over the whole miserable, unsolvable situation."[65] This language again demonstrates that Peola's narrative arc appears to have originally played a much more central role in the film. The focus on Peola not only differs from the final film but also from the novel, in which Peola only makes episodic appearances.

"Dangerous" is the term used over and over again by film censors to describe not just Peola's existence but *Imitation*'s portrayal of racial inequality between its characters. The PCA expressed concern about how audiences—particularly white Southern audiences—would react to seeing Delilah and Peola so clearly "downtrodden" and left out of the spoils enjoyed by Bea and Jessie.[66] One censor even made this distinction explicit:

> The big problem, as you indicate, is on the subject matter of the proposed picture as a whole. It is not, as we see it, a problem of miscegenation—that is, the act of miscegenation has occurred so remotely in the ancestry of the characters that it need not concern us…[67]

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[64] Joseph I. Breen to Harry Zehner, 9 March 1934, *Imitation of Life* (1934) file, Production Code Administration Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA (hereafter cited as *Imitation of Life* PCA file).
[65] Alice Field to Joseph Breen, n.d., *Imitation of Life* PCA file.
[66] J.B. Lewis to Joseph Breen, 10 March 1934, *Imitation of Life* PCA file.
[67] Maurice McKenzie to Joseph Breen, 3 April 1934, *Imitation of Life* PCA file.

In condemning the treatment of racial issues as a problem, the PCA reveals their investment in maintaining a status quo that appeased white audiences at the expense of Black ones.[68] In another memorandum that enumerates the aspects of the film that fall under the jurisdiction of the Code, the range of concerns is articulated as follows: miscegenation, a scene of near-lynching (which was removed from the film), the representation of prejudice against Black people, the use of the word "nigger," the clear exploitation of Delilah's recipe by Bea, and finally, the reference to the real-life Aunt Jemima pancake flour brand.[69] This list clearly shows the censors' ongoing concern over explicit and realistic depictions of racism. Again and again, the censors express fear that representations of racism might incite "new racial prejudices" and "open hostilities" among audiences—through they do not specify whether they are referring to white audiences or Black audiences, who would be presumably responding for completely different reasons.

Yet how to not offend white sensibilities in a narrative largely about the limitations of Black upward mobility posed no small challenge. Thus, one of the film's strategies is to assert moral differences between the white and Black characters. The film unequivocally condemns Peola's (Fredi Washington) desire to be white and eliminates the racist incidents that motivate her to pass, while at the same time it removes any queer implications of Bea's (Claudette Colbert) character by putting her in a heteronormative romance. Though Bea's foray out of the domestic sphere is narratively compensated by her sacrifice of her love interest, her punishment is tepid compared to Peola's. In the film

[68] See Matthew Bernstein and Dana F. White on the vastly different ways *Imitation* was marketed to black and white audiences ("'Imitation of Life' in a Segregated Atlanta: Its Promotion, Distribution and Reception," *Film History* 19.2 [2007]: 152-178).
[69] J.B. Lewis, 9 March 1934, *Imitation of Life* PCA file.

Peola does not escape to South America, but reappears at Delilah's funeral, tearfully repenting causing her mother harm and thereby "learning her place" as a Black person. Furthermore, the unhappy relationship between Delilah (Louise Beavers) and Peola acts as a foil to the positive resolution for Bea and Jessie (Rochelle Hudson), who exit the film arm-in-arm in a total departure from the novel's ending.

The film, however, is not devoid of irony that subtly critiques its mandated insistence on racial separation. Donald Bogle cogently describes the film's various layers of meaning:

> On the surface, the film was a simple tale of motherly love and motherly woes…Beneath the surface, though, *Imitation of Life* was a conscious apotheosis of the tom spirit and an unconsciously bitter comment on race relations in America.[70]

The result of these warring impulses results in *Imitation*'s sometimes-contradictory stances towards its subject matter, making the film difficult to parse politically. The film is marked by the tension between the desire to address potentially controversial issues of race, often in spite of the constraints imposed by the PCA, and the desire to do so in a way that rendered such issues non-incendiary. At the same time, it is also important to consider that elements of the film that modern scholars have read as ironic were not interpreted that way by many Black film critics of the period.[71] Rather, the film corroborated exactly what they expected of Hollywood's attempt to deal with race in ways that appeased white audiences. Though the film was a major motion picture event

[70] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 81-82.
[71] See Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 218-232.

for the Black community due to the fact that Louise Beavers and Fredi Washington were given co-starring roles with far more depth than those typically allotted to Black actors, the Black press also recognized the demeaning limitations placed on their characters. A "reading against the grain," therefore, rests not only on the ability to perceive the film's racial injustices, but to see them as consciously staged.

Rather than viewing the film either through or without an ironic lens, I believe that the contradictory impulses we find in *Imitation* are key to how it conveys its racial messages. Under John M. Stahl's direction, the film does a virtuosic job of moving between images that are highly suggestive critiques of racism and images that naturalize racial difference. Ultimately, the film satisfied the PCA's demands to carefully toe the color line. James Wingate of the MPPDA commented on the revised script that was ultimately used for the film that while it still indirectly touched on miscegenation, it was "not the main theme of the story."[72] This phrasing suggests that Bea's plot deliberately replaced Peola's as the main arc of the film. The film also disavowed Peola's mixed race heritage by explicitly referring to her father as "a very light colored man," and it carefully reinforced the social hierarchy that separates Bea and Jessie from Delilah and Peola. Just as it normalizes Delilah's subservience to Bea by making her all too happy to serve, simultaneously it works to contain the implications of Delilah's and Peola's class rise, which threaten to make them economically equal to the white characters. But in these concerted efforts to circumscribe the film's racial tensions, we can discern the difficulty of neutralizing the narrative's inherent critiques.

[72] James Wingate to Maurice McKenzie, 26 June 1934, *Imitation of Life* PCA file.

Elements of the film's mise-en-scène and cinematography reveal a different picture than what the narrative and dialogue alone suggest. One such element is the film's deployment of Delilah's smile, which is constantly reproduced as a motif both through Delilah herself and on boxes and signs for "Aunt Delilah's Pancake Flour." In the film's opening sequence, in which Bea struggles to get baby Jessie ready for day nursery while also juggling breakfast and clients on the phone, Delilah is first introduced through the screen of Bea's back door, wearing what will become her signature smile (Fig. 1). The camera tracks in towards her face as she greets Bea, inquiring about an ad in the paper whose address she had misread (it is worth noting that in the film it is Delilah who is seeking help and Bea who generously offers it, whereas in the novel it is the other way around). When Bea has to rush upstairs because Jessie has fallen in the bath, and with breakfast burning, Delilah senses an opportunity. As a distraught Bea tends to Jessie, Delilah takes charge of the breakfast and smiles up at them from the downstairs through the bannister (Fig. 2). The cage imagery is difficult to ignore, and is made more so by its incongruity with Delilah's smile. Both of these shots suggest the limitations of Delilah's world. In this case, the limitations are both figurative and literal: as other shots in the film will demonstrate, Delilah is often relegated to the back door, the downstairs, the front seat of the car. But her smile in these shots perform ideological double-duty: they suggest that she is perfectly happy in her situation, or alternatively, that her smile is part of a role she is forced to perform for survival. Given how Delilah's smile is eventually commodified, its authenticity is easily called into question. But in spite of the symbolism of the bannister shot, its function is to both reassure *and* unsettle simultaneously, depending on the view of Delilah that audiences incline to.

Figures 1 and 2. Left: Delilah's (Louise Beavers) smile through a screen. Right: Delilah's smile behind bars.

After the success of Bea's and Delilah's business and their relocation to a New York City mansion, the upstairs/downstairs distinction between them becomes even more pronounced. The shots framing the interior of the house make it abundantly clear that its setup includes downstairs quarters that Delilah and Peola inhabit separate from Bea and Jessie. In one much-analyzed shot, Bea and Delilah retreat to their separate spaces, highlighting their parallel but unequal positions (Fig. 3). The conversation leading up to this shot, however, is just as telling. Delilah and Bea are discussing what to do about Peola's persistent unhappiness. Bea suggests sending her to "one of those good colleges in the South, for colored people," where she won't "be faced with the problem of white all the time." Bea's wording seems deliberately ambiguous. What exactly is "the problem of white"? Is it the problem of Peola wanting to be white, or the problem of always being reminded the she is not? If Bea thinks that going to a Black college will help prevent Peola from constantly comparing her position to white people, it never seems to occur to Bea why Peola would find this comparison distressing. Rather, she articulates Peola's obvious distress in terms of maladjustment. "You know what a disaster her schooling has

been here," she continues. "We've worked so long and so hard for our two girls. And for Jessie it's been well worthwhile. I want you to get the same satisfaction with Peola." Bea's statement of shared experience ("*We've* worked so long and so hard for our two girls") is immediately tempered with disproportion. Jessie appears to have been the good daughter, even though we later learn that she has no intellectual interests whatsoever—hardly a "worthwhile" education. Just as the film reverses Bea's appeal to Delilah for domestic help, this switch to making Jessie the "good girl" of the pair undoes the elements of the novel that stress Delilah's and Peola's aptitude. Given this context, the shot of the staircase narratively emphasizes the disparity between both Peola and Jessie at the same moment that it visually emphasizes it for Delilah and Bea: as Bea goes upstairs and Delilah downstairs, Bea remains a well-lit spectacle of glamor in her lamé gown while Delilah recedes into darkness. This moment treats Delilah's position below Bea's as seamless, but at the same time it reveals the persistent effort of the film to establish a "natural" hierarchy at odds with the originating text.

Figure 3. The inequality of Bea and Delilah's relationship.

This tension also extends to how the film attempts to delegitimize Peola's discontent. Delilah's subservient relationship to Bea in many ways serves to balance out

Peola's desire to exceed racial limitations. As Courtney writes, "the film excludes any real consideration of the conditions that lead [Peola] to pass but instead jumps to scenes that catch her in the act, figuring her not as a victim of social injustice but as (always having been) a misbehaving liar."[73] While the film shows two incidents in which Peola is a victim of a kind of racism, these incidents are very toned down from how they are represented in the novel: in one instance the young Jessie calls Peola "black" (whereas in the novel she calls her a "nigger"), and in the other Delilah goes to meet Peola at her school and outs her in front of her all-white classmates, which causes the students to whisper that they "didn't know she was colored." The film achieves a view of Peola as deviant not just through her racial ambiguity, which must be contained through a binaristic black/white logic, but also by depicting her unhappiness and resistance as a kind of delinquency rather than a reaction to the restrictions placed on her world.

As I have shown in the previous section, the novel asserts a parallel between Peola and Bea, but the film does away with the novel's parallelism and suggests that the "imitation" of the title refers exclusively to Peola in her desire to be white. In order to undo the novel's cross-racial comparison, the film goes to great lengths to prevent Peola from being compared to Bea or Jessie, and attempts to visually show her similarities to Delilah. Courtney has argued that the film "solves" the problem of Peola's existence by reaffirming the visibility of Blackness in the reproduced image of Delilah, pointing to the ways in which the cinematography draws Peola's body into her mother's while also preventing the viewer from being able to compare Bea and Peola in the same shot.[74] Conversely, Scott argues that the film's mise-en-scène reveals the "messiness of racial

[73] Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation*, 162.
[74] Ibid., 166.

categorization that the film's narrative instructs us to ignore," using "dress, hairstyle, and clothing" to align Peola with the white guests at Bea's party so as to undercut the censor's attempts to maintain racial distinctions.[75] While their readings are oppositional, Courtney and Scott both show the film's difficulty in visually distinguishing Peola from the white characters in the film. The film's strategy to combat this ambiguity is to over-emphasize Peola's association with Delilah to convey her racial difference, effectively re-organizing the novel's cross-racial parallel into an intra-racial juxtaposition between the mother-daughter pairs.

For instance, during a party to celebrate ten years of the pancake company, while Bea is shown surrounded by admiring men who toast to "Aunt Delilah's Pancake Flour," the next shot shows Delilah and Peola on a separate balcony looking up at the party (Fig. 4 and 5). While they are dressed for a party, it seems as though they are not permitted to attend it, even though it is "Aunt Delilah's" company that is being celebrated. Yet the film tries to imply that it is Peola's sulking, rather than enforced segregation, that keeps her separate from the party. As a visibly depressed Peola retreats to her room, Delilah offers to dance with her. While her appeal ostensibly signals to Peola's social reticence, it also reveals that Delilah is the only person with whom Peola *could* dance: unlike Bea, she cannot socially interact with white men. Thus the film disavows the social context that keeps Peola out of Bea's party, while also insisting on Delilah and Peola as the only acceptable "couple" for each other so as to negate any potential sexualized contact for Peola.

[75] Scott, *Cinema Civil Rights,* 24.

Figures 4 and 5. Left: Bea (Claudette Colbert) is surrounded by admiring men at her party. Right: Peola (Fredi Washington) and Delilah stand apart from the festivities.

In addition to keeping Peola separate from white characters, the film also attempts to represent Delilah and Peola as of the same blood in ways that are visibly accountable. In the same scene Peola goes to the mirror and says, "Look at me. Am I not white? Isn't that a white girl?" But rather than showing the viewer what Peola sees in her reflection, the camera remains trained on a side view of her with Delilah standing behind her (Fig. 6). Though Fredi Washington does not look like Louise Beavers—in fact she looks and dresses more like Claudette Colbert—their identical hairstyles insist on the parallel between them. This detail is at odds with the myriad ways in which Peola's appearance is actually at odds with her racial status, including the fact that the shot's primary lighting is on Peola in ways that further visibly distinguish her from Delilah (since Classical Hollywood cinema's lighting was designed for light skin, causing darker skin to disappear). Yet the shot attempts to privilege the camera's view of the association between Delilah and Peola over Peola's view of herself in the mirror as racially distinct from her mother. At other moments in the film Delilah appears behind Peola as a visual reminder of the racial difference that is not otherwise visible. A similar strategy is used to

assert the similarity between Bea and Jessie, whose identical outfits stand in as visual evidence of their biological relationship (Fig. 7). Ironically, it is through the non-biological accouterments of hairstyles and clothing that the film visually attempts to convince the viewer of the racial relationships we otherwise might not see. But these shots also prevent us from comparing Peola with either Jessie or Bea, and only understanding her through Delilah's image. In emphasizing the mother-daughter relationships along racial lines, the film insists that in no way are the interracial kinship ties of this all-female household complicated.

Figures 6 and 7. Left: Similar hairstyles insist on the visual relationship between Delilah and Peola. Right: Bea's and Jessie's (Rochelle Hudson) similar outfits occlude other comparisons.

Yet while the film goes to great lengths to insist on Peola's separation from white characters both male and female, the film actually includes one scene whose allusions to miscegenation were subtle enough to get past the PCA. This scene occurs when Peola has run away from college, one of the "good colleges in the South" which Bea refers to earlier in the film but which Peola bluntly calls a "Negro school." Their terminology indicates the different ways that this space is imagined based on their positionality. While

Bea sees the college as a place of distraction from whiteness, Peola understands it as a space of containment for Blackness. Delilah, meanwhile, calls it a "high-toned college," acknowledging that even within Blackness its upward mobility is predicated on skin color. When Delilah and Bea get word that Peola has left this school, they go to Virginia and find her passing as white and working as a cashier behind a cigar counter (Fig. 8). The rows of cigars are, of course, glaringly phallic symbolism, and Peola's body language in the scene is easy, relaxed, and flirtatious. A white man comes up to pay and asks, "How do you like your new job?" Peola smiles and responds, "Very much, thank you," as she takes his money. Then the man says, "Give me one of those," referring to the cigars. As she presents the box to him she spots Delilah in the window and freezes. Amid this exchange of money and cigars Delilah has caught Peola in the act—of passing, yes, but also of something potentially more lewd.[76] As Delilah's visibly Black figure looms behind Peola's transaction, miscegenation's threat visually does too. Though the film eschews the novel's plot point of Peola's engagement to a white man, in this scene it conveys the idea that in passing into white society, Peola is corrupting it.

[76] In the 1959 Douglas Sirk remake of *Imitation of Life*, the sexuality of Peola's character is hyper-intensified beyond even what the novel represents. This was possible both because of the waning power of the Production Code by the 1950s, and also because the actress playing Peola (renamed Sarah Jane) was not actually black (the actress, Susan Kohner, was the daughter of Mexican actress Lupita Tovar and Jewish producer Paul Kohner), making the blatant sexual prowess of her character less threatening to white audiences.

Figure 8. Cigars, exchanges, and secret Blackness imply potential miscegenation.

Bea's sexuality also undergoes substantial revision in the film, moving from the queer undertones of the novel to emphatic heteronormativity that also reveals the film's investment in maintaining classed conceptions of patriarchy. Her male love interest in the novel, Flake, is a man eight years her junior and an employee in her company, and thus a subordinate to Bea in multiple ways. Undoing this inversion of power, the film splits Flake into two characters: the comedic Elmer (Ned Sparks) who works for Bea, and the charming aristocrat Stephen (Warren William) who has more money and leisure time and money than he knows what to do with. The film prepares Bea for this romantic plot by showing fewer and fewer shots of her working as the film progresses and defines her more and more by her designer outfits. In fact, though we see Bea waitressing at her restaurant in the early days of her business, the film is loath to show her behind a desk in an office (even though she verbally insists that such a desk exists). In this way the film mitigates Bea's independence in ways that undermine her as a romantic object for a (more powerful) man.

A similar logic applies to the film's alterations to Bea's relationship to motherhood. As with the novel, the film's ultimate comment on Bea's situation is that she

cannot have a career, romance, *and* family. But whereas in the novel Jessie is the cause of Bea's loss—motherhood ends up being the root of much of Bea's as well as Delilah's pain—in the film she is the reward. The film nullifies the idea that a woman could be more devoted to her business than to her family, even if her commitment to work is for the sake of her family, as the novel makes clear. Instead the film refuses to image a world in which a woman moves in the male sphere of business, or a world in which a white mother-daughter relationship is thankless rather than fulfilling.

If Bea and Peola are the original deviant figures of the text, then the ways in which the film modifies their characters helps illustrate what would have been perceived as subversive about them. This applies to the final depiction of Peola as tragic and repentant—the conclusion to Peola's narrative that the novel makes a point of avoiding. The film's climactic funeral scene, in which the prodigal Peola returns to publicly throw herself on her mother's casket, begging for forgiveness that is too late to grant, does not originate in the source text. The funeral scene serves as Peola's ultimate punishment for her transgression of wanting to be white, and is also the vehicle for her acceptance of her Blackness and the subordinate status it confers. Bogle has argued that although the film's ending encourages an acknowledgment rather than disavowal of Black identity, it mainly stages Peola's humiliation and punishment for attempting to cross the color line.[77] The scene heaps the blame for Delilah's death on Peola, whose leaving causes Delilah's heart to break (the film, unlike the novel, never gives us another reason for her demise). But while Peola is punished within the logic of the plot, the scene also muddles some of the racial boundaries it had previously established. The scene is the first and only time in the

[77] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 83.

film we see Black people other than the main characters who are not in the capacity of servants and drivers. But it is also a mixed-race crowd that attends the funeral, in stark contrast to the segregation of Bea's party. Though most of the people there appear to be Black, there are at least two white women in attendance whose presence is highlighted when Peola appears between them (Fig. 9). Peola's presence as a racially ambiguous figure in this crowd helps suggest that this is a mixed-race group in more than one sense: in that different people there belong to different races, but also in that as individuals each person may be multiracial. Scott writes of this scene, "the incredible variation in phenotype and skin tone among the crowds…undermine audiences' visual assurance of the distinguishability of Black and white and, by extension, the severability of races."[78] When Peola breaks from the crowd and runs towards the hearse, admitting her wrong and definitively establishing herself as Delilah's daughter, that ambiguity is dispelled. As Peola takes her seat in the front of the car with the driver, while Bea, Jessie, and Stephen sit in the back (a seating arrangement that Black critics of the time noted), the matter of Peola's racial discontent appears to be settled, encouraged by the fact that we learn soon after that Peola has returned to the college she ran away from.[79] However, it is worth noting that as Peola embraces her mother's coffin, Bea appears behind Peola in one of the few shots where the women appear together (Fig. 10). The framing of this shot is very similar to the one in which Delilah stands behind Peola as she gazes in the mirror, her image of herself as white replaced by the camera's image of her as Delilah's daughter. Here, that logic is reversed: as she faces Delilah's coffin, Bea's body might be read as showing that Peola's racial ambiguity persists, especially considering how their skin

[78] Scott, *Cinema Civil Rights*, 24.
[79] See Brown, "Imitation of Life: Once a Pancake," 88.

color resembles each others' in relation to the African American minister who stands beside them.

Figures 9 and 10. Left: An unsegregated crowd at Delilah's funeral. Right: Peola grieves by her mother's coffin.

In short, while passing in Hurst's novel helps align the causes of racial and gender oppression, the film uses it to reinforce distinctions between women of different races. Smith, Courtney, and Hiro have argued that the film transposes its anxieties about gender onto the racial plot.[80] We can understand this process as the disaggregation of the deviance that in the novel is used as a means of drawing women together. By turning Bea from a gender-ambiguous salesperson and reluctant wife/mother to a woman who is flirty, stylish, and feminine, the film concomitantly makes Peola singular in her aberrancy. It is telling that, given all of the language expended on Peola by the PCA, nary a word spoken about Bea and the potential threats she might pose to images of white

[80] Smith argues, "Tensions surrounding motherhood, class mobility, and abandonment are displaced onto the black plot, which performs the emotional labor in the film" (*Not Just Race, Not Just Gender*, 42) while Courtney writes that the film's presentation of Delilah as maternal and nurturing is the film's solution to its gender crisis: "the presentation of a dutiful black servant as the answer to a single white mother's unspoken prayers…leans on an entrenched racial tradition to put down the film's anxieties about working (white) women" (*Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation*, 151). Hiro likewise contends that the film turns race into a "moral dilemma" and renders the "race problem" as a matter of maternal relations ("'Tain't No Tragedy Unless You Make It One,'" 95).

womanhood. Instead, Peola is made to stand alone, both literally (in that there is no one like her in the film—no friends, no family, no love interest) and in her deviance. Bea and Jessie are denied romance, but they have each other, reaffirming motherhood as the proper domain for women. This insistence on family cannot be separated from an insistence on racial purity, given the impermissibility of miscegenation. Yet these efforts to deny Bea's transgressiveness and assert Peola's expose the ways that the film must actively work to deny potential affinities between these two characters. The film permits a tempered alliance between Bea and Delilah, one in which racist power structures remain thoroughly intact, but the more revolutionary potential in the narrative lies with a recognition of the ways that Peola exceeds the narrative bounds placed on her in her similarities to Bea. *Imitation*'s narrative ultimately provides a framework of thinking through some of the ways that passing as a concept offers ways of bringing together the experiences of different marginal racial, sexual, and gender identities.

We have seen how the PCA dealt with interactions between female characters who are white and non-white, that is, ostensibly "raced." Did the PCA express similar concerns between women who were white but ethnicized, otherized, or queered? That will be the question addressed in the next chapter, which will show how the logic of separation persists into the 1940s in regard to characters who violated normativity in less overt ways.

CHAPTER THREE

The Other Woman and the Othered Woman: Adultery vs. Queerness in *Cat People*

> Out of regard for the sanctity of marriage and the home, the triangle, that is, the love of a third party for one already married, needs careful handling. The treatment should not throw sympathy against marriage as an institution…
>
> *Sex perversion* or any inference to it is forbidden.
>
> Motion Picture Production Code, 1934

Women who are not overtly raced can still inhere fears of miscegenation. While the previous chapter looked at relationships between women of different races, this chapter will look at a relationship between women in the horror film *Cat People* (dir. Jacques Tourneur, 1942) who are both ostensibly white but whose difference is conveyed through a discourse of normality that is pervaded with racialized and sexual undertones, in keeping with theorizations of monstrosity and sexuality. Furthermore, it will examine how the figure of "the other woman" is used in this film to actually justify the dissolution of a marriage when racial purity and sexual normativity are at stake, even against the Code's injunction that marriage as an institution be upheld at all costs.

One of the surprising things about *Cat People* is what *does not* appear anywhere in its Production Code Administration file: concerns over adultery. This is strange, given the film's plot. The film centers on a recent Serbian émigré to New York named Irena (Simone Simon) who meets, falls in love with, and marries an American naval draftsman named Oliver Reed (Kent Smith). The relationship is good at first, but Irena is haunted by the legends of her Serbian villages that tell of women who turn into panthers when aroused to sexual passion or jealousy. This fear prevents her from being able to

consummate the marriage, and becomes an obsession that Oliver cannot take seriously. He starts to get closer with his female co-worker Alice (Jane Randolph), who, far from being a husband-stealing seductress, is portrayed as a "good egg," the frank American counterpoint to Irena's mysterious exoticism. Oliver eventually announces to Irena that he is in love with Alice and will "give her a divorce," which drives Irena mad with jealousy. Oliver, thinking her literally insane, consults her psychiatrist Dr. Judd (Tom Conway) who recommends annulling the marriage and absolving Oliver of responsibility for Irena. Oliver, however, decides that the right thing to do is stay married and take care of Irena (even if it still means locking her up in a mental asylum). But before any of this can happen, Irena turns into a panther and kills Dr. Judd, then in human form hurries to the zoo where she frees the caged panther, which kills her. The film ends with Oliver remarking that Irena was telling the truth the whole time, and him and Alice walking off together into the fog, glancing back at the (panther) corpse of Irena (Fig. 1-2).

Figures 1 and 2. Left: Alice and Oliver, the final couple of *Cat People*. Right: The dead panther-monster Irena.

Granted, when I use the term "adultery," I do not necessarily mean it in the way that the PCA would have understood it, which would have been largely in sexual terms.

At no point in *Cat People* is it implied that Oliver and Alice have a sexual relationship. In fact, the film goes out of its way to suggest the opposite. When Alice admits her feelings to Oliver, it is in pointedly platonic terms: "I know what love is. It's understanding. It's you and me and let the rest of the world go by…" Compare this to Oliver's visceral descriptions of his attraction to Irena: "I'm drawn to her. There's a warmth from her that pulls at me. I have to watch her when she's in the room. I have to touch her when she's near." It is clear that Irena's hold on Oliver is erotic in a way that Alice's is patently not. Alice even quips to Oliver how her allure is that she is a good listener, calling herself "the new type of other woman." Even when foregrounding her position as a homewrecker, Alice manages to make her actions look innocuous—doubtless part of the strategy that made her and Oliver's "affair" acceptable to the PCA.

But the other element to this logic is the way Irena is cast as a threat to the American couple, not as the evil other woman trying to break into the marriage but as the wife already in it. Irena is cast as an outsider in a national sense as well as in her perceived sexual abnormality, but that outsider status is formally at odds with her relationship status as Mrs. Oliver Reed. Furthermore, Alice functions as the opposite, as clearly the "right" kind of Anglo-Saxon woman to reproduce with Oliver but one whose status as an outsider to the marriage has to be constantly mitigated. Each woman represents a different kind of "problem" under the Code. What kinds of tensions does this paradox produce within the film?

This chapter considers the plot of *Cat People* against the Code's injunction against adultery. Adultery was not forbidden outright, but it was very heavily policed by industry censors who were particularly concerned with negating any implications of

extramarital sexual acts and making sure adulterers narratively paid for it. Indeed, the triangle in *Cat People* is handled extremely carefully, to the point where not a single censor documented finding it problematic. But I am more interested in what ends up motivating and justifying the act of, if not literal adultery, then the undoing of "the sanctity of marriage and the home" on the grounds of racial and sexual normality. I trace a different logic than what Lea Jacobs outlines in the fallen woman genre as one of punishment for the other woman in films like *Back Street* (1932) and *Anna Karenina* (1935).[1] In this horror film, "adultery" is both justified and rewarded. The reasons underpinning this logic have everything to do with how Irena is represented as ethnically non-white and sexually queer, culminating in a diagnosis of her as mentally abnormal.

As most of the scholarship on the film has noted, *Cat People* is shot through with a discourse of normality that emphatically leaves Irena outside of its definition. Oliver is the first character to deploy the term when he tries to disabuse Irena of her cat people obsession: "You're here in America. You're so normal you're even in love with me, Oliver Reed, a good, plain Americano." The conception of the "normal" as specifically American—and thus the abnormal as rooted in foreignness—is an element of the film's horror logic. The abnormal in this case is located in the "backward" Old World of Irena's Eastern European superstitions. A similar formulation is deployed in the film that *Cat People* replicates, Universal's *The Wolf Man* (1941), in which the titular character is the same sort of "good, plain Americano" who finds himself in a gothic Europe filled with werewolf legends and gypsy curses. *Cat People* inverts this formula by locating otherness not in the setting but in Irena, who embodies difference on multiple fronts.

[1] Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928-1942* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).

If one of these fronts is the realm of ethnicity, another is the realm of the sexual. Irena too deploys the language of normality to describe her unhappy marital condition. Bemoaning her inability to be sexual with Oliver, she tells him, "I envy every woman I see on the street…They are happy. They make their husbands happy. They lead normal, happy lives." Irena brings another issue to bear on the film's conceptualization of normality, one which underlies Oliver's fixation on Americanness: normality as non-queer heterosexuality. Irena's queerness is inextricable from her foreignness, as her belief in her cursed heritage is what prevents her from having a (hetero)sexual life with Oliver. This logic is reiterated by the film's voice of medical authority, Dr. Judd (Tom Conway), who tells Irena during one of their sessions, "You keep going back to the mad legends of your birthplace. Forget them. You surround yourself with cat objects, pictures. Get rid of them. Lead a normal life." Dr. Judd's use of "normal" coalesces Oliver's and Irena's evocations of the term, wherein Irena's cat obsession is interpreted as an unreasonable and childish fixation on her ethnic past that she cannot evolve, or grow, past. In these ways, Irena is marked out as an inappropriate mate for the "Americano." Thus, though Irena is understood as racially white, through this ethnicization of abnormality her and Oliver's union ends up carrying the tinge of miscegenation. This ends up justifying the logic whereby Alice, the good, stalwart American woman, comes to replace Irena. Unlike other forms of ethnicity that, as Diane Negra argues, are successfully representationally assimilated into whiteness within Hollywood cinema, in *Cat People* Irena's ethnic otherness is presented as the exact opposite.[2]

[2] Diane Negra, *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001).

The other woman plot helps facilitate the understanding of Irena as an unfit wife for Oliver, and thus an unfit subject for assimilation into American society. However, this overarching ideological position is not without its inconsistencies. Though Alice is meant to represent the racially and sexually pure woman whose normativity is rewarded with romance and futurity, the film is at some pains to paper over the fact that she is, still, the other woman, and thus automatically outside of at least one boundary of normative female behavior. At other times it struggles to present her as normal under the same logic that labels Irena as abnormal, as many of the things that problematize Irena in terms of otherness end up applying to Alice as well. John Berks, for instance, has argued that Alice is the real "monster" of the film because she stands for the culturally threatening figure of the working woman— a figure who only a few years before was censured for taking jobs away from white men, but who suddenly became indispensable to wartime mobilization.[3] The clear differences embodied by Irena—her Eastern European and vaguely Muslim ethnicity, her subscription to superstition over science, her sexual and mental abnormality—all serve to mask what is "monstrous" about Alice as an independent career woman. By setting Alice against a more transparently threatening figure, her deviance is made unrecognizable as such, and she is accepted into the social fabric; it helps too that in marrying Oliver, she will presumably give up work (which is exactly what we see in the film's sequel, *The Curse of the Cat People*, which I discuss below). My analysis of the film builds on a similar logic as Berk's, but is focalized through Alice's function as the other woman against Irena's *othered* woman. If Irena is portrayed as the deviant character against Alice's normality, there is something inherently

[3] John Berks, "What Alice Does: Looking Otherwise at 'The Cat People,'" *Cinema Journal* 32.1 (Autumn 1992): 26-42.

deviant about Alice's position that in turn helps normalize Irena. In asserting the deviance of one woman against another, the film turns a blind eye to the implicit deviance of its "good" woman. Under this optic, the critical reading of the two women as foils begins to fray: though supposed to be set in opposition to one another, the women end up having more in common through their deviance than they initially appear to.

In this chapter I am using *Cat People*'s multi-valent discourse of abnormality as a way of discerning a logic of deviance that attempts to pit women against one another but ends up comparing their situations. I read this logic as symptomatic of the Code's impact even though the PCA file on *Cat People* does not register any major objections—precisely, I argue, because the film's binaristic logic adumbrates them. The main issue that concerned the PCA about the film were its discussions of sex in the context of Irena and Oliver *not* having it, which was handled with sufficient vagueness to appease the censors. They did not, for whatever reasons, object to the film effectively revolving around the issue of sex. I claim that this was because the film's ostensible assertion of sexual normality over the threat of sexual queerness—which, it must be noted, was not recognized as homosexuality by the censors, though some viewers of the period and subsequent critics have picked up on the film's lesbian subtext—made such content acceptable. Furthermore, I argue that queerness in the film is communicated through a logic of ethnic difference that is in keeping with my conceptualization of deviance as a multilayered position that attempts to load women with manifold signifiers of otherness. Finally, I claim that the PCA's indifference to its own directives about marriage and adultery betrays its deep-seated investment in maintaining an ideology of straight Anglo-Saxon whiteness.

Previous criticism on *Cat People* that has attempted to recuperate it into a politically subversive framework has done so largely by reading the film's characterizations of its Anglo-American characters against its narrative. Producer Val Lewton and director Jacques Tourneur are often credited with "elevating" the period's horror genre above cheap thrills and prosthetic effects, churning out aesthetically conscious films that slipped in small gestures of social rebellion within plots that seem to reinforce self-regulation's ideologies—particularly its racial ones. Such readings that subscribe to this idea see the performances of the WASP characters—Oliver, Alice, and Dr. Judd—as ironically betraying their doltish, conniving, and sinister motives. Irena, alone and misunderstood, becomes the victim of the hegemonic forces represented by these characters. Tom Gunning writes that in spite of the film's ending in which "the death of failed wife Irena allows the creation of the new all-American couple," the final shot of Irena's body "speaks of the film's fundamental sympathy and fascination with Irena."[4] Edmund G. Bansak claims that Oliver and Alice are "square" and exhibit "questionable motives and behavior," arguing that "Lewton and Bodeen [the screenwriter] were able to undermine the appeal of Oliver and Alice with such subtlety that one can easily, upon first glance, mistake them for admirable human beings."[5] Kim Newman claims that "…nothing could make us really like the calculating Alice or the cloddish Oliver. Is it possible that square audiences of the time identified with these limited 'Americanos' and were repulsed by the sinisterly foreign Irena?"[6] This

[4] Tom Gunning, "'Like unto a Leopard': Figurative Discourse in *Cat People* (1942) and Todorov's *The Fantastic*," *Wide Angle* 10.3 (July 1988): 37-38.
[5] Edmund G. Bansak, *Fearing the Dark: The Val Lewton Career* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Company, 1995), 137-138.
[6] Kim Newman, *Cat People* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 44-45.

assumption of the implicit un-likeability of the Anglo-American characters is echoed throughout much of the film's criticism.

But if film reviews of the period are any indication, the answer to Newman's rhetorical question seems to be "Yes." While we can read reasonable irony into *Cat People* that compels viewers to sympathize with Irena, it is crucial to bear in mind that such sympathy does not necessarily come at the expense of the Americanos, whom the film is careful to absolve of all personal responsibility. The trade reviews of *Cat People* indicate that audiences viewed the "normal" Anglo-American characters with complete earnestness. *The Hollywood Reporter*, for instance, describes "A rugged performance of considerable promise is Kent Smith," and continues, "Tom Conway gives an arresting account of the psychiatrist, and Jane Randolph does her best screen work as the girl at the office."[7] Fittingly, the title of this piece is "'Cat People' Excellent Pic; 'Joe' Doesn't Wrangle Much"—the "Joe" in question being Joseph Breen. Thus, a review whose entire tenor is the film's cleanness emphasizes the validity of the American characters, none of whom are described in negative terms. In another trade review, the film's adulterous themes are referenced but wholly contained: the reviewer writes that Simon's character "turns against her young groom and a girl who offers him comfort in his rebellion against an abnormal marriage," and Alice is described as a "sympathetic friend."[8] Once again, Irena's abnormality forms the justification for the film's triangle, turning Alice into an innocent "girl" rather than the kind of husband-stealing vixen we might expect in a different kind of film (like, for instance, Joan Crawford's character in *The Women*). In other publications Alice is described as "the other woman" or "the other girl" without

[7] "'Cat People' Excellent Pic; 'Joe' Doesn't Wrangle Much," *The Hollywood Reporter*, Nov 13, 1942, 3.
[8] "Cat People," *Daily Variety*, Nov 13, 1942.

additional comment.[9] While a trade publication aimed at promoting the film within the industry would not necessarily admit to a critical reading, I include these examples in order to illustrate what the film is doing outside of a subversive framework, and the ways it works *within* the regulations of the Code.

It is also important to consider the issue of deviance in the context of the horror genre because theorizations of monstrosity productively parallel the kinds of marginalized intersections that I have been pursuing in this project. Robin Wood has identified how cinematic monsters often take the forms of that which threatens society's normality—women, racial and ethnic minorities, gays, children, the mentally ill, and members of alternative religions and ideologies—but within any one of these categories monstrosity also encompass multitudes. That is to say, the presence of one kind of deviance is often made to signify others as well. Wood uses the example of the Puritan's views of Native Americans to illustrate how this chain of signification works:

> The Puritans rejected any perception that the Indians had a culture, a civilization, of their own; they perceived them not merely as savage but, literally, as devils or the spawn of the Devil; and, since the Devil and sexuality are inextricably linked in the Puritan consciousness, they perceived them as sexually promiscuous, creatures of unbridled libido.[10]

In other words, the logic of deviance is interlinked: forms of deviance are connected in such a way as to connote one another. In the case of *Cat People*, Irena's ethnic deviance is figured by way of her non-Christian religious heritage and her sexuality. Thus, the film

[9] "The Cat People," *Showman's Trade Review*, Nov 14, 1942, 21; and "Cat People," *Variety,* Nov 18, 1942, 8.
[10] Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant and Christopher Sharrett (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 111.

does not explicitly condemn Irena on the grounds of her being non-Anglo-Saxon; in fact, the film shows Irena being welcomed by Oliver's American friends. Instead, it dispenses with the miscegenation threat she poses through other means. This proclivity to treat otherness as porous means that it can operate as a semantic container in which various social meanings play out simultaneously. This follows Jack Halberstam's notion of monsters as "embodied deviance" that "always combine a plurality of differences even if certain forms of difference are eclipsed momentarily by others."[11] In *Cat People* we can see how multiple signifiers of social threats are sutured together in the figure of Irena. Linda Williams, following a similar logic as Berks, shows how the obvious social difference represented by the monster can paper over, distract from, mask, normalize, and act as a buffer to other forms of difference signified in the other characters. Williams has asserted that the male monster in horror films, who is often mutilated (castrated) or presented as sexually abnormal, is not identified with the male viewer but rather the female viewer and the female victim he terrorizes, who is used to seeing her sexual difference as an object of fear and derision.[12] Thus, the deviant sexuality of the monster and the sexual deviance (usually promiscuity) of the female victim actually function on the same plane of othering, where the latter's "monstrosity" is hidden behind the former's.

It is thus crucial to discern where exactly *Cat People* struggles to maintain its sexual and racial logic in the face of its internal contradictions, and how these

[11] Jack (Judith) Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 5-6.
[12] Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks," in *Re-vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Frederick MD: University Publications of America, 1984), 83-99.

contradictions end up contributing to a likening between the two principle female characters in the places where the film attempts to sunder them. Additionally, the film's manipulation of the mandate against adultery helps us see the PCA's prioritization of racial purity and sexual normativity as concerns that surpass those of adultery, at least when adultery is portrayed as an antidote to those anxieties. In what follows I will outline the ways the film characterizes Irena and Alice individually and in relation to one another. I will then conclude by examining how these tensions also manifest in two subsequent women-centered horror films produced by Lewton: *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) and *Cat People*'s sequel, *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944).

I. Panthers and Housecats

Though Irena is a sympathetic character whose demise is presented as more of a tragedy than a punishment for her actions, she is still symbolically associated with evil, which in turn justifies her death at the end of the film. The witches of the village from which she is descended are described as both Satan worshippers and Mamluks, a caste of Muslim Ottoman slave soldiers from the Middle Ages. These witches transform into panthers when, in Dr. Judd's words, they experience "jealousy or anger or out of their own corrupt passions." This is the film's way of skirting the issue of sexual desire, which is the core context of Irena's fears. Yet in this way, sexual desire comes to be described as inherently depraved—even within the context of matrimony. It is also racialized: the conflation of Muslims, Satan worshippers, and voracious sexual appetites abides by a similar logic as that described by Wood, revealing Christianity to be a racial and sexual category as much as a religious one. In fact, in the film's fictional historical record the

Mamluks and witches are opposed by one King John of Serbia, who is styled as a white crusading knight and a good Christian. The film modernizes him in the figure of Dr. Judd, who appears in Irena's dream as King John, linking his psychiatric methods with a kind of religious purification. Via the figure of King John, who comes to embody a kind of white, patriarchal, rationality (as a statue in Irena's apartment, he brandishes a phallic sword with an impaled panther), Irena is saddled with a multitude of otherness: paganism, non-whiteness, sexual dysfunction, superstition, and insanity.

In addition to the literal implications of Irena's non-white ethnicity, E. Ann Kaplan figuratively sees Irena's identity as a hybrid between a white woman and a black panther as figuring fears and desires of "African American/white 'mixing.'"[13] Throughout the film Irena is visually associated with the color black not only through the motif of the black panther at the zoo, whom she frequently visits, but through her black fur coat and her proclivity to be framed in shadows. While it is crucial to keep in mind that Irena would have still been understood as white by film audiences, there are many ways that the film implies an inner primitivism in her nature that can be read as raced. Kaplan identifies this tension as embodied in Irena herself, but we can also understand it as manifesting through the film's romantic triad. Irena, as the racialized woman set in contrast to the un-problematized whiteness of Alice, risks corrupting white American society by marrying into it. Though Irena's visual whiteness makes her marriage to Oliver acceptable, her failure to participate in normalized sexual behavior becomes the basis through which we understand her ethnic otherness as socially threatening. In effect, the film stages Irena's inability to assimilate. It presents her acceptance into what at first

[13] E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism and the Imperial Gaze* [New York: Routledge, 1997], 114.

appears as a tolerant and diverse American society via her marriage to Oliver, only to negate that acceptance once Irena proves to be different in ways that are rendered as pathological and inherently evil.

Added to this racial signification is the representation of Irena as a dangerous femme fatale—that is, a threatening signifier of sexual difference under a psychoanalytic optic. As Mary Ann Doane and Karen Hollinger have pointed out, female sexuality as embodied in Irena is represented as irrational, unknowable, and uncontrollable.[14] Despite her sexual frigidity, Irena as the female enigma oozes eroticism and mystery, and is often described by other characters in sensual, bodily terms. In addition to Oliver's quote above about being physically drawn to her (while feeling estranged from her), she is thrice identified by her perfumed scent—once by Alice, who wistfully describes it as "strong and sweet…" Even the skeptical Dr. Judd falls under her spell, waxing as if she were a sensual animal, "I take you in my arms. You are so very little, so soft…there is warm perfume in your hair, your body…" Irena's enigma is part of what makes her desirable to the men and women in the film. It is also a source of female power (literally, via her transformation) that is intolerable under patriarchy. Most importantly, we should recognize how Irena's cat curse stems both from her ethnic heritage *and* her sexual heritage as a woman. Though the film is called "Cat People," all of the cat people we see in the film are women. The initial cat people in Serbia are described as "witches," and it is implied that Irena's mother transformed and killed her father while trysting with him in the forest. The story of Irena's origins provided an opportunity for the PCA to object, as

[14] Mary Ann Doane, "The Clinical Eye: Medical Discourses in the 'Woman's Film' of the 1940s," *Poetics Today* 6.1/2 (1985): 213; Karen Hollinger, "The Monster as Woman: Two Generations of Cat People," *Film Criticism* 13.2 (Winter 1989): 36-46.

they did not like the implication that Irena was illegitimate. Though pieces of dialogue from the script were removed in the final film to make this plot point vaguer, the insinuation nonetheless remains in the film. While Irena's ambiguous legitimacy further undermines her fitness for wifehood, it also makes her part of a pure matrilineal line who seem to dispose of men after using them for reproduction (and perhaps for sexual pleasure). This form of cat-ness, then, seems very much to be a female condition.

And yet Irena is far from the typical Hollywood vamp whose overt sexual appetites make her the object of reproach. Though she visually signifies the inherent threat of female sexuality under a patriarchal gaze, in fact her one aim in the film is to be the perfect wife. This is one of the first paradoxes of Irena's character. She laments to Oliver on their wedding night, "I want to be Mrs. Reed, really. I want to be everything that name means to me. And I can't. I can't." Representations of sexually frigid women who needed to be "fixed" by the right man were rather common by the 1940s, often in tandem with the kind of psychiatric plot we see in *Cat People*: one might consider *Now, Voyager* (1942) or *Lady in the Dark* (1944). But while both of those films required that their frumpy and mannish female protagonists learn to be feminine, Irena requires no such cosmetic intervention. Her unhappiness does not stem from her revolt against gender norms in the sense of appearing unfeminine, a problem to be ultimately corrected by a therapist or male love interest (neither of these work in Irena's case). Her "problem" is singularly at odds with her feminine representation and characterization; she actually wants to be exactly like the wives around her. Yet despite her extremely conventional ambitions, Irena is blamed for her failure to live up to this vision. Both Oliver and Dr. Judd see her obsession with the cat people as her choice, and in this way the very

normality of her desires is recast as the site of her mental defects. In this manner, what is conventional and socially acceptable about Irena is buried under the presentation of her as abnormal.

Furthermore, the representation of Irena as erotic and seductive belies her *lack* of sexual activity. Yet what in other contexts would be understood as sexual purity is here cast as the sign of Irena's abnormality. Marriage makes her rejection of sex problematic—an interesting counterpoint to the endless examples of the PCA regulating extramarital sex. It also means that her visual sex appeal is at odds with her actual sexual behavior. But this is precisely the point: functionally, Irena's sensual presentation prevents her abstinence from being recognized as purity. The film's mise-en-scène and cinematography, oftentimes the cinematic space for subversive counter-texts, here do the opposite by making Irena's lack of sexual desire appear sinister and, ironically, impure. Consider, for instance, the scene where Oliver proposes to Irena. The sequence takes place in Irena's apartment, where night has fallen. Oliver has been asleep on her couch while she kneels beside him, and the whole scene is marked by a dark, post-coital languor (Fig. 3). As is frequently the case with Irena, she is framed in shadows—a recurring visual motif linking her to the caged panther at the zoo. And yet despite the intimacy and sexual suggestiveness of the setting, Irena's and Oliver's conversation is about what they *have not* yet done. "I've never kissed you. Do you know, that's funny. When people in America are in love, or even think they're in love, they've usually kissed long ago," says Oliver. Of course, "kissed" should be read here as a euphemism, the film's stand-in for the sex it cannot directly address (later in the film, Dr. Judd also uses "kiss" to imply sex). Yet even as the dialogue insists on the sexual innocence of the relationship, it is

visually pervaded with sexual undertones. Even if Irena is not the typical vampish seductress, she ends up visually occupying that position, making what would otherwise be seen as a female virtue unrecognizable as such.

Figure 3. Irena and Oliver suggestively recline in the shadows as they discuss their lack of physical intimacy.

In an ironic twist, in the film's PCA file, one of the few concerns that censors had is that the dialogue not be too obvious about the couple's *lack* of premarital sexual intimacy. We can attribute this in part to the Code's fastidiousness around all sexual content, but it nonetheless poses a stark contrast to the kind of regulation around sexually active characters like those played by Jean Harlow and Mae West in the 1930s. Irena's frigidity poses a very different kind of threat: her reticence around sex even when she has acceded to the role of Mrs. Reed takes her out of the realm of sexual normativity upon which patriarchy relies. But the PCA did not object at all to the film's plot which stages the eradication of this abnormality. They only objected to the possibility of too direct dialogue about sex—or in this case, the absence of it, which amounts to the same thing. It is clear from the files that censors were not attuned to the film's queer possibilities (though other viewers were, as I will address below); if they had been, they may have

viewed Irena's frigidity as more problematic than they did. Instead, they appear to have taken the film at face value, seeing the cause of Irena's frigidity as supernatural rather than social, and pathological to the point that it justifies her husband leaving her for another woman. Because each of these elements are treated in the film with the kind of visual and narrative tact that the PCA favored, it made the overall structure of the film acceptable.

It therefore falls to Alice to represent a normative form of female sexuality to counter the threatening image of Irena. Doane and Hollinger both use the term "asexual" to describe Alice, effectively writing her off as a kind of genderless figure who can stand for a non-sexualized womanhood without embodying the castrating fear of sexual difference.[15] However, I read Alice's relationship to gender and sexuality very differently. Rather than being devoid of sexual signification, Alice's sexual deviance is overlooked because it she simply assumed to be the opposite of Irena. Her character is marked by the same kinds of paradoxes of form, in which attempts to frame her as innocuous betray her contradictory position. There are some clear ways in which the film sets up the two women as contrasts: where Irena is exotic, erotic, mysterious, and antisocial, Alice is homegrown, frank, friends with everyone she meets, and decidedly non-sensual in her bodily presentation. Whereas Irena is frequently tessellated in shadows and wears black, Alice is brightly lit and wears light colors (Fig. 4). But while Irena plainly asserts her wish to be a normal wife, Alice has very different plans. As the self-proclaimed "new type of other woman," Alice is not presented as duplicitous or conniving. Instead, the film foregrounds her openness and matter-of-factness as a way of

[15] Doane, "The Clinical Eye," 216; Hollinger, "The Monster as Woman," 8.

disarming the marital threat she poses. By showing Alice as a good friend to Oliver, the film skirts the issue of Alice's potentially insidious motives, even though her actions directly lead to the breakup of Oliver's and Irena's marriage. In fact, everything she does to interpose into that union takes the form of her trying to help. For instance, it is Alice who recommends Dr. Judd because Oliver has been confiding in her about his and Irena's sexual problems. When Irena learns that Oliver has shared this, she is humiliated. Oliver insists, "You can tell Alice anything. She's a good egg;" but Irena replies, "There are some things a woman doesn't want other women to understand." In their dialogue we see how the notion of Alice the "good egg" comes into conflict with Alice the "other woman." Alice's innocent attempts to intervene reinforce her position as the wedge in Irena's and Oliver's marriage, driving the couple further and further apart until Oliver decides to leave Irena for Alice—an event the film casts not as selfish, but as inevitable, a result of *Irena's* behavior.

Figure 4. Alice is shot with high-key lighting, suggesting that she is open, even when confessing her illicit love for Oliver.

Just as the film visually insists on Irena's sensuality even as the plot contradicts it, so too does it frame Alice's intrusion into Oliver's love life as completely innocent. We

can compare the scene where Oliver proposes to Irena with the one where Alice admits her love for Oliver. Alice frames her feelings as the antithesis of Oliver's erotic and fleeting desire for the mysterious Irena: "I know what love is…No self-torture, no doubt. It's enduring and everlasting. Nothing can change it." Her speech is marked by a commitment to openness and stability, the opposite of the mystique Oliver sees in Irena. It is meant to show that her intentions towards Oliver are romantically pure and not driven by illicit desire. The aim here, as with the proposal scene, is a kind of masking, in which sexual innocence can be made to look dark and adultery look honest. But the blocking of this scene conveys its contradictory messaging against Alice's dialogue. Oliver and Alice begin this conversation by the office water cooler—as Berks notes, a signifier of transparency associated with Alice in the film (Fig. 5).[16] But as Alice segues into her teary declaration of love, Oliver quickly escorts her behind some file cabinets so that no one will see them, and glances nervously to make sure no one has seen (Fig. 6-7). There is, in fact, an element of secrecy to this workplace "affair." And yet, in stark contrast to the proposal scene, this whole sequence is brightly lit, removing any notion of the illicit or indecent. Alice's speech, which is meant to demonstrate her selflessness in the face of Oliver's marriage, ends up being yet another reason why Oliver eventually leaves Irena for her. Thus, the film reconfigures its sexual logic such that "innocence" looks dark and "adultery" looks honest in ways that align with the film's racial priorities.

[16] Berks, "What Alice Does," 35.

Figures 5-7. When Alice confesses her love to Oliver, they begin the conversation in the open space of the office but quickly move off behind some file cabinets, suggesting secrecy.

In this way the film takes what would be sexually threatening about her as a woman and making it look emphatically non-sexual—"de-clawing" her, so to speak. No wonder that while Irena is associated with the panther, Alice is shown multiple times fondling kittens and housecats. This is the film's way of showing that she is domesticated (literally, fit for the home) in ways that Irena is not. And yet, while the film insists on Irena's and Alice's difference, we have in effect two cat women, neither of whom manage to wholly fit the film's attempted good woman/bad woman binary. In the next section, I will pursue the issue of how sexual queerness inheres in both Irena and Alice, though it has previously only been recognized as a component of Irena's character.

II. Queer Figures and Queer Spaces

The emphasis on sexual normality that we see in *Cat People* is part of a major ideological shift of the 1940s: the move from asserting sexual reticence to asserting compulsive heterosexuality. Though the policing of implied sex acts does not disappear as a concern in American films, performances of heterosexual desire on the part of women become increasingly acceptable as a means of combatting the possibility of queer insinuations.

This is part of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick refers to as the "homosexual panic" that increasingly marked modernity, in which the knowledge that an action or behavior might be understood as queer required constant vigilance against it.[17] Though Sedgwick identifies this impulse as beginning in the late nineteenth century and with men specifically, Laura Horak traces the "lesbian backlash" in film as taking place in the 1930s.[18] By the 1940s, not only had ideas about what counted as normal sexual behavior radically changed thanks to popularized psychoanalysis, but the homosocial spaces of the army and female-driven workforce made people more attuned to the possibilities of and opportunities for same-sex desire.[19] Such possibilities are strongly suggested in *Cat People* via Irena's interactions with another Serbian cat woman (Elizabeth Russell), which showcases how foreignness acted as a cipher for deviant sexualities. The woman accosts Irena in a Serbian restaurant during her wedding reception, addressing her in Serbian as "my sister." *Cat People* screenwriter DeWitt Bodeen recounts in an interview how some audiences of the 1940s read this encounter as having lesbian undertones:

> Although the café meeting of Simone and Elizabeth Russell was very brief, some audience members read a lesbian meaning into the action. I was aware that could happen with the café scene, and Val got several letters after *Cat People* was released, congratulating him for his boldness in introducing lesbiana to films in Hollywood. He was indignant when he called me to his office, demanding to know if I had deliberately written the

[17] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2008), 182-212.
[18] Laura Horak, *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 169-223.
[19] John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 289.

> scene with that meaning. I saved myself by saying, "Val, if you write a scene between two strange women and one says to the other in a foreign language, 'My sister,' you can bet your ass that there will be those who will say, 'ah, lesbians.'" He cooled down then and laughed. Actually, I rather liked the insinuation and thought it added a neat bit of interpretation to the scene. Irena's fears about destroying a lover if she kissed him could be because she was really a lesbian who loathed being kissed by a man.[20]

This passage tells us many things, perhaps foremost among them that the film's possibly progressive politics should not be attributed solely to the auteur "genius" of Lewton. But it also shows us how fundamentally intertwined are Irena's ethnic and sexual differences. Insinuations of homosexuality were almost always shunted to foreign characters so that gays, when they existed, always existed "elsewhere." For instance, the titular character of *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), another Eastern European lesbian-monster who tries to "cure" herself via psychiatry, bears many similarities to how *Cat People* conceives of its racialized queerness. Conversely, Americanness could function as a cover for behavior that might otherwise be understood as queer. As a foreigner, Irena's ethnic difference lays the groundwork for her reading as sexually different, becoming in effect another justification for her exclusion from American society. It also helps to account for why punishing her for her sexual non-normativity takes precedence over condemning Alice's extramarital but also emphatically heterosexual romantic impulses.

However, following the interpretation laid out by Berks, I want to argue that Irena's more ostensible queerness diverts from what is in fact very queer about Alice. In

[20] Qtd. in Gregory William Mank, *Hollywood Cauldron: Thirteen Horror Films from the Genre's Golden Age* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1994), 222.

setting up its opposition between Irena and Alice, the film is at pains to make the latter into a comparable model of femininity. While Alice might be "asexual" under one optic, she might just as easily be read as masculine, especially when compared to Irena. She is clearly "one of the boys" at the office where she works, and not as a secretary but as a draftsman like Oliver. Irena, meanwhile, works as a fashion designer, a similar artistic profession but a decidedly feminine one. We can also read potential queerness in Alice's relations with other women. As Berks points out, Alice is frequently shown bonding with women, specifically women of different class and racial statuses. She also lives and swims at a YWCA. Berks reads these moments as part of the context of wartime conditions, namely the influx of women into the workforce and the need for images of solidarity for the war effort: "the bond of work is made to appear in this film as cutting across class and racial lines, uniting the newly productive (as opposed to 'merely' reproductive) sisterhood."[21] But even though Alice's friendliness in these working spaces is one of her traits that contrasts her to Irena, who is anti-social (another sign of her mental "unhealthiness," and a trait often associated with homosexuality during this period), we might easily read her closeness with men and women as similarly queer, especially when coupled with her muted masculinity in comparison to Irena. Therefore, given how Alice does not really conform to normative ideas of gender, it is surprising that her radicalness was not viewed as more problematic.

Even in the restaurant scene, on which much of the film's queer readings are based, we can see how the focus on Irena's queerness overshadows Alice's. When the cat woman makes her appearance, Irena and Alice are in the midst of a particularly friendly

[21] Berks, "What Alice Does," 39.

moment—really the only one in the film before the tension between them starts to mount (Fig. 8). We might note too that the cat woman and Alice wear a similar curled hairstyle, visually linking them. Given the critical significance of this scene, it seems rather important that the cat woman does not interrupt a moment between Irena and her husband, but between two women. But again, that may be precisely the point. The cat woman's intervention prevents the possibility of Irena's and Alice's budding friendship being interpreted as queer. The more legible queerness of the cat woman ends up diverting attention from this other same-sex encounter, making the two foreign women bear the brunt of lesbian signification while absolving Alice of it. The scene focuses on Irena's agitated reaction to the cat woman, who threatens to "out" her, though it at the very same moment that Alice offers Irena another kind of sisterhood. Because it is not presented in the same sinister way, this problematization of Alice goes almost unnoticed.

Figure 8. The cat woman interrupts a moment of closeness between Irena and Alice at Irena's wedding dinner.

When Alice interacts with other people in ways that could be understood as queer, the film does not portray it in the same tense way that it frames Irena's encounter with the Serbian cat woman. The film's normalizing apparatus makes such moments appear

natural and benign. In two scenes where Alice is shown interacting with her male co-workers and her female roommates, she is fondling a kitten (Fig. 9-10). On the one hand, Alice's affinity for housecats is meant to emphasize her domesticated tendencies, even though she, unlike Irena, never actually appears in a domestic setting. Cats are also another means of gauging on a character's normality: a pet shop owner remarks at one point in the film, "You can fool everybody, but landie dearie me, you can't fool a cat. They seem to know who's not right." On the other hand, in a very literal way, the presence of kittens disarms what might otherwise be read as the potential deviance of Alice. It showcases her congeniality, but also normalizes her ability to move independently between all-male and all-female homosocial spaces.

Figures 9-10. Alice fondles a kitten while she chats with her male co-workers and with the female receptionist at the YWCA where she lives.

The film also normalizes theses spaces that Alice inhabits. We see this in Alice's workplace, where nothing is made of the fact that she is the only woman who works there (in a white-collar capacity, at least). We also see it in the YWCA, in which the threat of potential same-sex relationships is diverted by the quite literal threat of Irena, who in panther form hunts Alice in the pool. When back in her human form, Irena's body

language at the end of this scene suggests both a threat and a come-on (Fig. 11). It is worth noting that after this incident, when Alice admits to Dr. Judd that she believes Irena is telling the truth about the cat people, Dr. Judd admonishes her by *comparing* her to Irena, saying that she and Irena are "both victims of fear." Thus, when Alice threatens to get too sympathetic with Irena, the patriarchal figure of Dr. Judd must step in to put her to rights, lest she be pathologized too. Not coincidentally, then, soon after this incident we see Alice back on the side of patriarchy, plotting with Oliver and Dr. Judd in an Americanized café that stands in contrast to the Serbian restaurant of Irena's wedding, the space of the film's primary queer encounter. Unlike "The Belgrade" with its cauldrons and pig's heads, Alice and Oliver frequent a place called Sally Lunn's, where an affable Black waitress named Minnie (Theresa Harris) serves coffee and pie. Some critics have been intent on reading this character as a comparatively progressive representation for a Black actor, but it is hard to see under what logic this is true, since all she does is serve the white characters and make a joke about gumbo. It seems, rather, that Minnie is in exactly the kind of non-threatening service position that mainstream white audiences of the 1940s would have expected her. While this is not necessarily the case for Harris's roles in the subsequent Tourneur-directed films she featured in, *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) and *Out of the Past* (1947), it is certainly the case here, and, and is, I argue, integral to how the film presents the café as a space of normalized racial boundaries. Such boundaries are more blurred in the Belgrade restaurant scene, as Irena's whiteness is momentarily called into question through her affinity with the Serbian cat woman. Thus, even if Alice's interactions with Minnie suggest female bonding on the

one hand, they do so within a racist framework that emphasizes the hierarchy between them.

Figure 11. Though Alice bonds with other women at the homosocial YWCA, Irena is portrayed as posing the actual lesbian threat.

Furthermore, if the Belgrade is a space of potential lesbian relationships, Sally Lunn's is the place where Oliver, Alice, and Dr. Judd conspire over pie to have Irena committed (Fig. 12). The pie is actually an important point of characterization, as the film makes clear that Oliver always orders apple pie specifically. His affinity for that most American of dishes, coupled with the disinterested rationality of Dr. Judd as he explains Irena's insanity, juxtaposes the café with the queer and Old-World atmosphere of the Belgrade. It is also where the authoritative discourses of psychiatry and law are deployed to account for the fact that Oliver wants to leave Irena for another woman. When in an earlier scene Oliver announces to Irena that he is in love with Alice, he already frames his decision to "give" her a divorce as the "one decent thing" to do, effectively rendering him as the noble husband and implicitly blaming Irena for the demise of their marriage. In the scene at Sally Lunn's, the film further insists on the unselfish motives of Oliver and Alice. Dr. Judd explains to them that one cannot legally divorce an insane person, and

that Oliver has two choices: divorce Irena and give up responsibility for her, or "take care of her" by sending her to an asylum and remain married. The underhandedly sinister nature of this conversation has prompted many critics to interpret the American characters as blithely villainous, since it is clear that Irena is not actually insane. But we should again be attentive to how the film emphatically positions these characters as selflessly looking out for Irena's best interests as they understand them. To Dr. Judd's proposition, Oliver unhesitatingly announces that he has to take care of Irena, and Alice immediately concurs that "it's the only right thing," as if she has no personal stake in the decision. The choice to lock up Irena is thus cast as self-sacrifice on the part of both Oliver and Alice, and not as a mechanism for getting her out of the way—the moral logic by which the new couple is reaffirmed. It is Dr. Judd who pragmatically gives voice to the stakes Oliver and Alice leave unsaid: "I think you [Oliver] should have your marriage annulled. In that way, you are free of responsibility. You two could marry." It is important that this statement comes from Dr. Judd rather than from Alice or Oliver, since if either of them were to voice it, the audience would be reminded of the self-serving motivations that, as the good characters in the unambiguous moral universe promulgated by the Code, they are not supposed to have. If the scene at the Belgrade reinforces Irena's ethnic and sexual otherness, this one emphatically asserts how unproblematic the Americans are, papering over the contradictions of their actions. Having so easily given up their personal ambitions in this scene, it is now acceptable for them to be rewarded with each other at the end of the film, after Irena has conveniently died.

Figure 12. The Americanos (and Brit) are served pie by a Black waitress as they conspire to have Irena committed to an asylum.

In this way Irena comes to be recognized as a threat to the legitimated American couple, rather than Alice being seen as the other woman threatening the legitimate marriage. The sanctity of the American couple is even brought home in a shot where the panther Irena stalks Oliver and Alice at their office. As Oliver brandishes a cross-like T-square at her and says, “In the name of God, leave us in peace,” the silhouette of Oliver and Alice under the sign of the cross validates their relationship as the actual holy union (Fig. 13). The ending of the film also invokes Christian themes through the final title card, which is taken from John Donne’s “Holy Sonnets” and close the film on a note of religious moralization: “But black sin hath betrayed to endless night/ My world, both parts, and both parts must die.” If the fog into which Oliver and Alice walk at the end of the film vaguely suggests that all will not be bright and straightforward for this new couple, the final title card focuses more on Irena’s “sin” than on Oliver’s and Alice’s. Irena’s “blackness,” implicitly the ethnic heritage that she cannot control, is equated with “sin,” and the lines suggests that even if Irena is not all bad, “both parts” must nevertheless “die” to rid the world of the abomination that is her. Even though the

religious tone of this quote is at odds with the psychiatric quote that begins the film, attributed to none other than the fictional Dr. Judd who is instrumental in Irena's persecution and death, both quotes invoke different authoritative discourses in order to justify the same thing, which is Irena's expulsion.[22] *Cat People* is not interested in finding a place for Irena in its society, offering her hope and futurity. She must instead be eliminated to make way for Oliver's and Alice's normative reproduction.

Figure 13. Alice and Oliver as the religiously sanctified couple.

Irena's punishment and death may be rather standard Hollywood procedure for dealing with a socially problematic figure, but the PCA's lack of engagement with the film's other woman plot is an interesting exception to the previous decade's fallen women and gold digger films. In both *Cat People* and these films, women are raced in ways that reveal the era's desire to separate female sexuality from whiteness. But in *Cat People*, racialization and adultery are positioned as oppositional concerns instead of concomitant ones. The other woman set in contrast to the othered woman, rather than

[22] The film's opening title card reads, "Even as fog continues to lie in the valleys, so does ancient sin cling to the low places, the depression in the world consciousness." These lines are attributed to a book called "The Anatomy of Atavism," written by the fictional Dr. Judd, and it appears to have been invented for the film.

being conflated with her, shows how not only were the PCA were perfectly fine with privileging racial and sexual normativity over "the sanctity of marriage," but that the former actually justified deviating from the PCA's usual stance in ways that the censors do not even seem to have been conscious of. The next film that Lewton and Tourneur produced together, *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), uses a very similar formulation in which a woman finds herself as the third in a marriage, and the wife's past sexual deviance is used against her to justify her expulsion and death. I will briefly address that film in the next section, but first I will deal with *Cat People*'s actual sequel.

III. Sequels

Oliver's and Alice's survival at the end of *Cat People* signals to their worthiness of reproductive futurity, but we see that futurity called into question in the film's sequel, *The Curse of the Cat People* (dir. Gunther V. Fritsch and Robert Wise, 1944), whose screenplay was also written by Dewitt Bodeen. In this film, the Americanos now have a daughter and have relocated from New York City to the idyllic suburb of Tarrytown, where they struggle to raise their over-imaginative young daughter Amy (Ann Carter). Alice as the second Mrs. Reed is no longer the sharp, independent career woman of the previous film, but a rather passive, helpless, and uninvolved figure. Though she is the biological mother of Amy, she completely defers to Oliver about how the girl should be raised, even standing by as he beats her in one scene. It is Irena, rather, who returns as a ghost, who manifests the strongest hold over Amy as her imaginary friend. Alice cannot escape the shadow of Irena, as she explains to Amy's teacher: "It's almost as if there were a curse on us. I wouldn't care if it were on me, but it seems to be directed against

the child. Irena haunts this house." Though Alice insists that Irena's otherworldly vendetta is not against her, clearly Irena's focus on Oliver and Alice's child can be read as an attack on the validity of their union. There are two ways we might interpret this ghostly ménage à trois: is Irena the new "other woman" of this marriage, providing a maternal standard that Alice struggles to live up to, or is Alice still in the position of "the other woman," sidelined to the original union that endures through Irena's role as the spiritual mother of Amy? In either case, it is the sequel more so than the original film that highlights the uneasiness of Oliver and Alice's marriage. Even with Irena dead, the new couple cannot escape the literal specter of the original scenario that brought them together.

The second film does not quite seem to know what to do with Alice. She is constantly sidelined both within her own marriage and with her own child. Oliver sees Amy, who is repeatedly described as "different" from the other children due to her overactive imagination and struggles to make friends at school, as similar to Irena, even though Irena has no biological connection to her. Like Irena, Amy is antisocial, and Oliver invokes the language of normality when he remarks this ("It doesn't seem normal"). Oliver also makes the connection to Irena explicit: "[Amy] could almost be Irena's child…I know what can happen when people begin to lie to themselves—imagine things. I love Amy too much to let her lose herself in a dream world where butterflies become pals. I saw what happened to Irena with her cat people." Oddly, Oliver seems to have completely reversed his stance at the end of the last movie, which ends with him admitting that Irena was telling the truth. Instead, he repeats the plot of the first film with his daughter, this time using physical violence instead of psychiatry to try to break her of

her "fantasies." Though Amy's abnormality is not directly sexual as Irena's was, the film does imply that her fractured relationship with her father in part drives her into her world of make-believe. In this way the film subscribes to a Freudian model of psychosexual development, whose end result is supposed to be heterosexuality but which Amy is clearly deviating from. If we compare Amy's situation to that described in Freud's case study of female homosexuality, we can see similarities in the logic of parental structure inflecting sexual development. Freud reads his patient's fraught relationship with her father and her feelings of betrayal towards her mother as driving the patient towards substitute mother figures as romantic objects.[23] Amy may not express any hostility towards her mother Alice, but Alice's general weak presence in her life helps account for Irena's ability to insinuate herself. One trade review of the film mistakenly describes Irena as Amy's biological mother, showcasing just how uninvolved and non-maternal Alice appears in the film.[24] Given the overt psychoanalytic themes of *Cat People*, it is no stretch to read this psychosexual structure as influencing the plot of *The Curse of the Cat People*. As Patricia White argues, such ghost films share an epistemology with lesbian visibility, dramatizing "how the female oedipal narrative functions as a support for another story, a lesbian desire that is both evoked and covered over."[25] We can thus read the buried stakes of Amy's difference as her sexual queerness, further affiliating her and Irena's characters.

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[23] Sigmund Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case Study of Female Homosexuality," *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 1.2 (1920): 125-149.
[24] "Curse of the Cat People," *Variety* (Feb 23 1944), 10.
[25] Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 68.

But if *Cat People* had no qualms dispensing with a grown woman who embodies a dangerous foreign sexuality, *The Curse of the Cat People* is far more willing to indulge in Amy's difference and villainize Oliver for not tolerating it. That is largely because the sexual stakes of Amy's difference are far more muted than they were for Irena, and because Amy's whiteness is stable in ways that Irena's was not. We can thus read *The Curse of the Cat People* as a re-writing of *Cat People* that attempts to affirm Irena's deviance in ways that *Cat People* could not, by turning the protagonist into a sexually innocent, unquestionably white child. The film conveys Amy's Americanness not only through her parentage, but through her affiliation with the place of Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow, the setting of Washington Irvine's classic story of the American Revolution. We can also read it into her relationship with the one person of color in the film, her family's Caribbean servant Edward (Sir Lancelot), which mirrors the racist hierarchy and stereotyping that characterized her parents' relationship to the waitress Minnie in the previous film. Because her whiteness is secure and her sexuality is unacknowledged, Amy's overactive imagination does not seem to pose any real social problem. She may challenge the patriarchal authority of Oliver, but even in this she is presented much more as a victim of his unreasonable parenting.

Irena, too, undergoes a "whitewashing" that turns her from an evil cat woman into a kindly fairy godmother. It is no accident that Irena's ethnicity is recast in this film as Western European rather than Eastern European. Though she is still represented as foreign, instead of the film emphasizing her Serbian roots, Irena sings in French. Because Simone Simon was in fact French, this move associates Irena more with the white actress who plays her rather than the ethnicized character of *Cat People*. Furthermore, Irena

sings a Christmas song, asserting the Christian side of Irena instead of the devil-worshipping witch. This whitening of the two deviant characters makes for a very different kind of film, one in which the forces of authority (namely, the patriarch Oliver) must learn to accept difference so that it can be brought into the social fabric. But the price of this acceptance is the removal of the most socially deviant elements of Irena's monstrosity. If Irena's deviance is represented more positively in this film, that is because the deviance is simply not there in the way that it was in *Cat People*.

The most deviant figures in the film are in a failed mother-daughter couple, the eccentric retired actress Mrs. Farren (Julia Dean) and the daughter whom she accuses of being an imposter, Barbara (Elizabeth Russell). The delusional Mrs. Farren believes her daughter to have died at the age of six, and refuses to acknowledge Barbara's entreaties that she is in fact her living daughter. When Mrs. Farren takes a liking to the young Amy, Barbara becomes extremely jealous of the maternal affection that Mrs. Farren shows to her. Mrs. Farren dies at the end of the film before a reconciliation can be achieved with her real daughter. Both Mrs. Farren and Barbara figure as Amy's possible adult future. As an actress, Mrs. Farren represents an unbridled imagination, living in a world of make-believe that quickly devolves into deranged paranoia. The resentful Barbara, denied a mother figure, turns bitter and violent. In the original film's script, Barbara is a far more malevolent character, a raving alcoholic driven mad by her mother's rejection who tries to murder Amy. In the actual film, Barbara is despairing but not so violent, and is redeemed in the end when she embraces Amy instead of strangling her. Notably, Elizabeth Russell played the Serbian cat woman in *Cat People*, visually figuring her as a member of this deviant feline tribe outside of the sequel film's diegesis. Within its plot,

her spinsterhood, her antisociality, and her fraught relationship with her mother all point to a reading of her as a queer figure. It is Barbara and Mrs. Farren, rather than Irena, who take on the film's monstrous signification. The women live in a decrepit mansion, and the neighborhood children whisper that it is haunted by a witch. When Mrs. Farren's voice first beckons to Amy from a window and tosses her a ring, it evokes the child-luring witches of fairy tales. It is also Mrs. Farren who recounts for Amy the legend of Sleepy Hollow, which frightens her and makes her turn to the comforting presence of Irena with her French lullabies. Mrs. Farren represents another potential mother figure for Amy, but a decidedly failed and sinister one in contrast to Irena. The danger she and Barbara pose to Amy drives the need to resolve the relationship between the girl and her father. Irena may pose no threat, but by including the ominous Farrens, the film suggests the negative possibilities of Amy's future should her home life remain troubled.

By the end of the film, Amy has relinquished both mother figures—Irena and Mrs. Farren—and replaced them with her father. Oliver's final willingness to accept Amy's fantasies allows her to give up Irena, who no longer needs to protect and comfort her. Alice, Amy's actual mother, remains irrelevant to this resolution. *The Curse of the Cat People*, then, is a film about an other woman, but as a mother figure, not as a love interest. Instead, the film turns the other woman plot into a family melodrama whose sexual stakes are articulated through maternal and paternal relations, and whose fears of racial otherness and miscegenation have been whitewashed away. No one turns into a panther in this film; in fact, Lewton wanted the film to be titled "Amy and Her Friend," reflecting the absence of ostensibly monstrous, deviant cat people and figuring Irena's presence as a much more positive force. Yet the sequel retains the queer themes of its

predecessor by transforming the other woman plot into a contest of parental influence and libidinal drives. Though the ending might suggest a heterosexual future for Amy in which she "grows out of" her infantile difference, at the same time Oliver's acceptance of that difference positively affirms its existence in ways that *Cat People* did not.

If adultery and miscegenation as concerns are replaced by a white familial structure in *The Curse of the Cat People*, they are there in full force in the second film Lewton and Tourneur made together for RKO. In *I Walked with a Zombie*, Lewton and Tourneur re-visit the other woman theme with a different kind of monster, one not based in medieval European legend but Afro-Caribbean history. In that film Betsy (Frances Dee), a Canadian nurse, accepts an assignment on the fictional Caribbean island of San Sebastian caring for the invalid wife of a sugar planter. The wife, Jessica (Christine Gordon), is a figure of racial and sexual transgression, only instead of the queerness that marked Irena her crime is actual adultery with her husband's half-brother, Wesley Rand (James Ellison). After her husband Paul Holland (Tom Conway, who played Dr. Judd in *Cat People*) refuses to let her leave him, she falls ill with a fever that leaves her in a catatonic state that some on the island understand as zombification. Betsy falls in love with Paul and attempts to revive Jessica—first with western medicine, then with voodoo—as a way of "giving her back to" him, thus characterizing her as selfless and self-sacrificial in the same vein as Alice. As with *Cat People*, this extramarital romance is not at all sexually suggestive. Betsy's association with the white snows of Canada and her white nurse's uniform assert her as racially white, sexually pure, and rationally Western in one fell swoop. She insists that she and Paul can never be together, and makes plans to leave the island. But before that happens the voodoo practitioners at the

houmfort (voodoo temple) succeed in possessing Wesley to kill Jessica. He drowns in the sea, and as the bodies of the "wicked" couple are carried back to the plantation house, Paul and Betsy embrace (Fig. 14-15). The voiceover, which is incongruously a man's voice instead of Betsy's (the only time this happens in the film), intones a biblical judgment that condemns the actions of Jessica and Wesley and blesses the new couple of Betsy and Paul.

Figures 14-15. The good couple and the bad couple at the end of *I Walked with a Zombie.* Left: Betsy and Paul embrace. Right: The dead bodies of Wesley and Jessica are carried back to Fort Holland. The zombie Carre-four carries Jessica.

As with the PCA file on *Cat People*, adultery does not manifest as a major concern for film censors in *I Walked with a Zombie*, though its possibility is acknowledged in ways that it was not in the first film. In the film's Analysis Chart, which was standard practice for the PCA beginning in the early 1940s, "Adultery" is not marked as an issue present in the film but "Marriage" is marked as being treated "Ind." ("indifferent").[26] This wording suggests that marriage is not openly derided in the film,

[26] "Analysis Chart," 18 Dec 1942, *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) file, Production Code Administration Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA (hereafter cited as *I Walked with a Zombie* PCA file).

but nor is it necessarily endorsed. As with *Cat People*, the absence of an explicitly sexual love affair prevents Jessica's and Wesley's relationship as being seen as flat-out adulterous. But perhaps because Jessica's and Wesley's affair brings up the theme of extramarital relations, the censors seem more attuned to the possibility of that being read into the relationship between Betsy and Paul. For instance, the PCA requested that the word "lovers" be changed to "sweethearts" in Betsy's voiceover monologue as she muses over her and Paul's relationship.[27] Furthermore, in an interesting slip, Breen writes, "We request that you omit the business of Rand, a married man, hugging and kissing Betsy at this point. The present action could not be approved."[28] It seems as though Breen mistook Paul (Holland) for Wesley (Rand), as Wesley is not married and does not hug and kiss Betsy. This statement indicates that Breen was attuned to the potentially problematic adultery element of the film, but his mistake shows him substituting what is supposed to be the film's male lead for his morally suspect brother. In other words, he imposes his own moral framework onto the film that refigures the characters along unambiguous lines of good and bad.

In reality, the film is far less clear-cut in terms of how it levels judgments against its characters, frequently going back and forth and leaving many unresolved contradictions. We can see this, for instance, in how the film presents Jessica as at once a "wicked woman" and as a victim of patriarchal oppression. At the start of the film, Jessica's whiteness has already been compromised as a result of her adulterous affair. Visually, though she wears a flowing white gown, she is aligned with the members of the houmfort, who can control her movements via a doll that wears a similar dress. She is

[27] Joseph Breen to Mr. William Gordon, 15 Oct 1942, *I Walked with a Zombie* PCA file.
[28] Joseph Breen to Mr. William Gordon, 9 Nov 1942, *I Walked with a Zombie* PCA file.

described in local song as "a big white flower," and though her rival Betsy is also associated with white clothing, the luxuriousness and languidness suggested by Jessica's gown makes her more of a figure of the tropics than of the crisp, starched North. Jessica is also linked with the only other zombie in the film, a Black man named Carre-four (Darby Jones) who attempts to retrieve her at the behest of the houngan (voodoo priest) and who carries her body back to Fort Holland after she dies (Fig. 11.2). The imagery of Jessica as under the sway of the houngan and Carre-four is highly suggestive of the sexual and miscegenation themes that, as Anna Brooks Creagh and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert point out, characterize zombie films of the 1930s and 40s.[29] As Creagh demonstrates, *Zombie*'s promotional material over-emphasized the image of Carre-four carrying off Jessica, even though it only briefly occurs at the very end of the film after Jessica has already been killed by her white lover.[30] In fact, Jessica's emphasized visual whiteness via her dress, while highlighting her racial whiteness, at the same time highlights the transgressiveness of her cross-racial contact. Because there is a direct narrative correlation between her act of adultery and the illness that leaves her zombified, we can read her illicit sexual desires as part of the same logic that deems her whiteness as compromised.

Furthermore, the mirrored zombification of Jessica and Carre-four suggests the island's oppressive legacy of slavery also extends to colonialism's patriarchal underpinnings. In the American imagination of the early twentieth century, zombies were

[29] Anna Brooks Creagh, "American Zombielore: Voodoo, Cinema, and the Undeath of Race" (PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2015), 9; Lisabeth Paravisini-Gebert, "Women Possessed: Eroticism and Exoticism in the Representation of Woman as Zombie," in *Sacred Possessions: Voudou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean*, ed. Nargarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 42.
[30] Creagh, "American Zombielore," 213-216.

closely linked with the idea of Caribbean slavery: they were conceived of as corpses that had been reanimated primarily for the intensive and endless toil of sugar planting.[31] Like the motif of the black, weeping Saint Sebastian figurehead that adorns a fountain at the Holland plantation house, Carre-four is a visual reminder of the memory of slavery that haunts the characters in the film, who frequently comment on its traumatic legacy on the island. Like Jessica, Carre-four is completely without will: he never speaks, and only performs the bidding of the houngan. We should not discount the ways that Carre-four is rendered as monstrous, particularly through the large prosthetic eyes worn by Jones that contribute to his uncanny appearance (and seems part of a racist caricaturing). But his visual monstrosity is also tempered by his actions in the film. When he carries Jessica's body back to Fort Holland, his action is not a licentious abduction of a white woman but is far more indicative of their shared tragic status as victims. In fact, Carre-four is frequently in the company of the film's two white women, and in ways that emphasize how he is *not* a threat to them. When Betsy and Jessica encounter Carre-four in the cane fields on their way to the houmfort, he does not harm them, even though Betsy has lost the "voodoo patch" that is supposed to protect her. Furthermore, the first shot of the movie is of him and Betsy walking peacefully along a beach—an event that in hindsight we understand as occurring after the events of the film—implying that Betsy has come to a reconciliation between her heretofore unwavering belief in science and the power of voodoo. It also implies, contrary to the film's original intended ending, that Betsy has decided to remain on San Sebastian rather than return to Canada. Carre-four, then, though the film's monster, is also an important connecting figure for the film's racial and gender

[31] Creagh, "American Zombielore," 7-8.

themes. When he does menace the white characters, it is Paul and Wesley, the descendants of the island's slave owners, who feel the most threatened.

Likewise, there are many ways that the film presents Jessica as a victim of the patriarchal control of her husband. On the one hand, in this film the literal adultery of Jessica and Wesley acts as a foil to the sexually innocent and self-denying relationship between Betsy and Paul, thus making the latter appear more legitimized. But on the other, just as the foiling between the two female characters was fraught in *Cat People*, so too is it with the two extramarital relationships in *Zombie*. If Jessica's and Wesley's adultery is supposed to make the extramarital status of Betsy and Paul's romance more benign, the film drops many hints that Paul was just as culpable in driving Jessica away. These hints are more pronounced in the film's original script, where Paul is a far more sinister character. It is strongly insinuated that he was a cruel husband who drove his strong-willed wife not only into the arms of another man, but to insanity. The film attempts to remove much of this ambiguity so as to present clear moral boundaries that absolve Paul of guilt, but the insinuations are not entirely gone. Furthermore, despite the narrative condemnation of Jessica as an adulteress, the film does not actually present her as an unsympathetic character. Because we never see Jessica before her illness, all of the descriptions of her as selfish and hedonistic come from other characters whose motives are suspect. The Jessica we see, however, is entirely passive, at the complete mercy of multiple outside forces: Mrs. Rand (Edith Barrett), who invoked a voodoo curse that may have caused Jessica's fever; Betsy and the doctor, who perform experimental treatments on her; the houngan, who tries to draw her to the houmfort; Paul, who wants to send her away to an asylum; and Wesley, who ultimately kills her. Despite her backstory, it is

difficult to see the Jessica of the film as anything but a helpless victim. Film censors were far more willing to take descriptions of Jessica's selfishness at face value and not read into the film's ambiguities. In an initial synopsis of the film, PCA censor C.R. Metzger describes the plot point of Jessica's and Wesley's affair as follows: "Betsy gradually learns that Mrs. Holland was a very vain and selfish woman. Mrs. Holland cared little for Holland—and Rand became interested in Mrs. Holland and they asked Holland to permit a divorce which he refused. It was shortly after this that Mrs. Holland became a zombie."[32] As with *Cat People*, we see the absence of adultery as a concern, likely because descriptions of Jessica's and Wesley's romance are handled carefully enough to leave out sexual insinuations. A later PCA synopsis of the film also describes their relationship in sexually innocent terms: "…Jessica had stolen Rand's heart. Rand and Jessica wanted to run away from the island, but Holland wouldn't permit his wife to leave him."[33] But ironically, in downplaying the adultery between Jessica and Wesley, this description actually makes Paul look far more unreasonable and cruel in not granting her a divorce. The oppressive implications of this situation—the fact that Jessica is at Paul's mercy—are lost on the censors. By relying on cursory descriptions of Jessica at the expense of the visuals of the film, the censors miss the film's subversive implications.

Jessica's female foil, Betsy, is also not unproblematized. Betsy might embody what Paul refers to as idealized "clean, decent thinking"—she cannot even conceive that Paul does not actually want his wife back—but her dabbling in voodoo leaves her whiteness seriously compromised in ways that liken her to Jessica. The film visually

[32] C.R. Metzger, "I WALKED WITH A ZOMBIE—RKO," 14 Oct 1942," *I Walked with a Zombie* PCA file.
[33] "'I Walked with a Zombie'—RKO Radio," 18 Dec 1942, *I Walked with a Zombie* PCA file.

conveys this idea in the scene where Betsy brings Jessica to the houmfort. Before they go, the maid Alma (Theresa Harris) gives Betsy and Jessica "voodoo patches" so that they will be recognized as participants. Betsy wears a white patch, and Jessica a black one (Fig. 16). We can read these patches as indicative of the women's racial positions. Jessica's black patch matches the black patches of the people at the houmfort, and as I have argued, her sensuality (associated with the florid tropics) and her zombification (also of a tropical fever—and possibly a voodoo curse) corroborate the idea of her as "blackened" through her affiliations with the island and voodoo (Fig. 18). Betsy's patch, meanwhile, has been the source of some critical speculation. The patches are meant to protect the women from Carre-four, who guards the crossroads; yet Betsy loses her patch in the cane on the way there (Fig. 17). However, when they arrive, Carre-four does not harm them anyway, in what appears to be a plot hole. Some critics have interpreted this inconsistency as part of the film's undercutting of horror and voodoo film conventions, but it seems more like a deliberately symbolic statement about Betsy losing her whiteness by succumbing to the belief in voodoo—whiteness that Jessica has already lost.[34]

[34] Creagh, "American Zombielore," 239.

Figures 16-18. Top left: Jessica and Betsy wear voodoo patches as they walk through the cane fields. Top right: Betsy loses her white voodoo patch on the way to the houmfort. Bottom left: The participants at the houmfort wear black voodoo patches that are the same color as Jessica's.

The film also toys with the idea that should Betsy marry Paul, she might end up as the next Jessica, another victim of Paul's cruelty. In this vein there is significant visual and narrative twinning of the two women throughout the film. Alma, Jessica's maid, serves Betsy breakfast in bed just as she does Jessica. Wesley declares to Betsy, "One of these days he'll start on you the way he did on her," and we learn that Paul berated Jessica in the exact same ways we see him doing to Betsy. Finally, at one point Betsy actually dons Jessica's flowing white nightgown, suggesting that in this Gothic-tropical setting the former woman's sexual purity and resolve might easily become the latter woman's sensuality and victimization. Here, the othered woman hovers as the potential fate of the other woman. Even as the film ultimately reaffirms the morally innocent couple, the subtext leaves open a repetition of history.

We should, however, address the ways that the final voiceover seeks to contain this twinning in the last moments of the film and reassert the dichotomy of good woman,

bad woman. The film up to this point has been narrated by Betsy; but in the final sequence where fishermen find Jessica's and Wesley's dead bodies and bring them back to Fort Holland, an unknown man's voice intones a biblical judgment on the characters:

> O Lord God most holy, deliver them from the bitter pains of eternal death. The woman was a wicked woman, and she was dead in her own life. Yea Lord, dead in the selfishness of her spirit. And the man followed her. Her steps led him down to evil. Her feet took hold on death. Forgive him, O Lord, who knowest the secret of all hearts. Yea Lord, pity them who are dead, and give peace and happiness to the living.

This pronouncement seems to incongruously reaffirm a Christian worldview against the forces of voodoo that have manipulated the events in the film thus far, leading many critics to interpret it ironically. But if taken at face value, this assertion of a Protestant normality coincides with the union of Betsy and Paul, who are shown tenderly embracing as the voice refers to "peace and happiness to the living" (Fig. 14). They clearly embody what this voice understands to be positive moral values, in contrast to the adulterous Wesley and Jessica who, the voiceover insists, got their just desserts. In this way the ambiguity raised in the film about the hypocrisy and culpability of the Holland family (a culpability that extends back to slavery) and the ability of the Black inhabitants of San Sebastian to exact revenge through voodoo is rather neatly resolved through the apparatus of a disembodied, God-like judgment. Having ejected the "corrupted" elements of the family, the film reserves its happy ending for Betsy and Paul. In the script's original ending, the now-married Betsy and Paul are back in Canada, collecting their paycheck from the sugar plantation in between social engagements. It thus presents the Hollands as

a colonial couple, reaping the wealth of the colony from their bourgeois life in the capital. The film nixes this resolution, in which the racial colonial structure remains intact, for a far different conclusion. It ends on a shot of the figurehead of Saint Sebastian, which originally adorned a slave ship and now sits in a fountain at the Holland plantation house. This figure, which the inhabitants of the island call Ti Misery, comes in the film to represent the history of slavery that returns to punish the white Holland/Rand family. This ending is far more of an indictment on the white characters than the original one. But it is tempered by the fact that Paul, the Holland patriarch and owner of the plantation, escapes this punishment largely unscathed. In this way the individual punishment of Wesley and Jessica, which is accounted for by their sexual transgressions, need not represent a direct critique of the history of slavery and the continued legacy of colonialism. Transgressive sexuality provides a moral framework that mutes the racial ideological critique. Betsy's and Paul's union, far from simply affirming their moral goodness, also has ramifications for how the film contains its racial critique. In killing off Wesley and Jessica, the film does not fundamentally disrupt the racist system of power that allows Paul and Betsy to thrive.

IV. Conclusion

These other woman plots reveal yet another way that racialization operates in close proximity to female sexual transgression, but they also show how different transgressions could be pitted against one another within a single ideological framework. In flipping the script on the "fallen woman" plot of the 1930s, *Cat People*, *The Curse of the Cat People*, and *I Walked with a Zombie* show how even the sexual taboo of adultery could be

normalized in favor of asserting white heteronormativity. Not only do these films actively promulgate the image of racial purity as more important than "the sanctity of marriage," but they also demonstrate how normality and monstrosity are portable concepts that can be used to prioritize or displace various forms of difference as needed.

What I hope these readings show is that the hard and fast rules of sexual behavior for women can be mutated to fit the requirements of patriarchy. Deviant women can be punished in numerous ways in Hollywood films—denied romance, denied legitimacy, shamed, killed—but what is unique about these films is their staging of women *within* the validity of marriage who are then ejected from it by other, more "deserving" women. In both cases, the acceptability or unacceptability of women as fit wives has to do with their sexual and racial or ethnic purity. These films do not simply reward women who fit into normative definitions of white femininity, but they punish women who do not. In pointing to this fact, I also hope to draw attention back to how these films, though offering the possibilities of alternative readings, also reaffirm notions of female sexual purity and self-sacrifice to male needs. Though for modern audiences the blandness or insidiousness of the normal characters may be easily legible, we cannot simply ignore all other elements of the film in order to create readings that absolve them. Rather, we should ask ourselves what elements of these films help mask the subtext by attending to the film's contradictions, which can help us see what kinds of implications audiences of the 1940s may have found unsettling.

If *Cat People* registers a historical shift in regard to concerns around the sexuality of women, the next chapter also considers a shift in terms of women's labor. There, the movement from the economic precarity of the Depression to the radically restructuring of

labor during World War II to a "return" to gender normalcy after the war form a crucial backdrop for understanding the stakes of the female relationships in the film adaptation of *Mildred Pierce*.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bonds of Labor: Female Alliances in *Mildred Pierce*

In brief, this is the story of a mother who over-indulges the whims of her completely amoral and irresponsible daughter, only to find that the daughter despises her for all her efforts.

Joseph Breen, *Mildred Pierce* PCA file[1]

In 1944 the Production Code Administration, to everyone's surprise, issued a letter of approval for Paramount's *Double Indemnity*, based on the novel by James M. Cain. The general sordidness of this tale of adultery and murder seemed like it would not pass muster with Breen, who had all but categorically rejected Cain's other work. Ten years earlier, MGM had bought the film rights for *The Postman Always Rings Twice* for $25,000 before the book was even released, only to be told by Breen that a film adaptation could not be made. But amidst the conditions of wartime, in which the Office of War Information (OWI) asserted their authority to screen violent newsreel footage, enough had changed in Hollywood that *Double Indemnity* was approved, earned seven Academy Award nominations, and as the legend goes, started what became later known as the cycle of film noir.[2] As a result, the movie rights to Cain's other titles—*Postman*, *Serenade*, and *Mildred Pierce*—became hot commodities with the studios. Yet while *Double Indemnity* was clearly a crime thriller, *Mildred Pierce*, when it was purchased by Warner Bros. the same year, was from the beginning conceived of as a woman's picture.

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[1] Joseph I. Breen to Jack Warner, 2 Feb 1944, *Mildred Pierce* (1945) file, Production Code Administration Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA (hereafter cited as *Mildred Pierce* PCA file).

[2] Cheri Chinen Biesen, *Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 96-97.

The plot of the 1941 Cain novel reads like a hard-boiled version of *Imitation of Life*, telling a similar tale of a single working mother who starts her own restaurant chain. As with *Imitation,* the adaptation process was not without difficulties, and suggests more than superficial similarities between the two narratives. The six screenwriters who worked on the film over the course of its production struggled over how to reconcile the narrative's complicated and sometimes contradictory themes of mothering, female labor, and class, which Cain's novel renders with the same cynicism and perversity as his crime stories. As was the case with *Cat People*, by the time the final script got to the PCA, the censors' objections were rather mild and predictable (mostly having to do with toning down suggestions of sex); it is rather via the producer's and screenwriters' reworkings of the novel into an acceptable screenplay that we see the stress points caused by ideological differences between the two works.

Many of those stress points have to do with the issue of class. In Cain's novel, Mildred worships her older daughter Veda because she believes her to be musically talented, though Mildred herself hardly knows what that means. But Mildred's ambitions for Veda quickly exceed what she and her middle-class sensibilities can provide when it turns out that Veda is actually a talented opera singer. This development only exacerbates Veda's aristocratic snobbery, which lays the basis for the novel's tragic ending (in which, as with *Imitation*, the daughter ends up with her mother's lover, Monty, spelled "Monte" for the film). Internal accounts of the film's development indicate that filmmakers found this vein of class conflict muddled a neat moral organization of the narrative:

> Since it was clear that Mildred must be the heroine of this story it was necessary to clean up her character. For this reason she was made a

> member of the upper middle class instead of the lower middle class; vulgarisms were dropped from her speech; she was made more the victim of circumstances than a sinner…
>
> Mildred's antagonists in this story were Veda and Monty. For the purposes of heightening this dramatic conflict they were both made a little more villainous than they are in the novel. Mr. Cain's book gave Veda the saving graces of a passionate devotion to music and a genius for singing. We did not wish Veda to have these saving graces and so eliminated this from the picture.[3]

Mildred's abject middle-classness, which make her an object of scorn in Veda's eyes, also condemn her as unworthy of redemption in the eyes of filmmakers. Thus, she is raised to a sophisticated woman who spends much of the movie wearing a $15,000 mink coat (a point I will return to later) while Veda is concordantly lowered to a poseur who affects high-class manners but with no knowledge or talent. The removal of Veda's musical abilities relates to what Linda Williams describes as the film's connection between the "excessive vilification" of Veda and "the related submergence of the class issues that were so important to the original novel."[4] But concerns over class—and particularly the kinds of classed labors that women perform—also inflect the representations of the film's female relationships. The changes made between the novel's presentation of female relationships and the film's will be the focus of this chapter.

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[3] Rudy Behlmer, *Inside Warner Bros. (1935-1951)* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 255.
[4] Linda Williams, "Feminist Film Theory: *Mildred Pierce* and the Second World War," in *Female Spectators: Looking At Film and Television*, ed. E. Deirdre Pribram (London; New York: Verso, 1988), 26.

Set in the suburbs of Glendale, California against the backdrop of the Depression, the novel engages the question of how a single housewife who has never held an outside job and who is also bound by ideas of white middle-class propriety is supposed to find work. Mildred's financial precariousness forces her to take on work that she, and even more so Veda, sees as socially beneath her: housekeeping and waitressing. The novel is fraught with fears about one's ability to socially rise or fall, determined as it is by factors beyond just money. While Mildred ultimately maintains her white bourgeois status by transforming her waitressing job into running her own restaurant (owning the means of production, not being it), no matter how successful her business grows, she cannot shake off the trappings of suburban Glendale enough to please Veda. Mildred can only rise to a point; but she can fall indefinitely. And this tension leads to a central contradiction: in order to acquire the capital necessary for maintaining her class status, she must perform labor that indelibly marks her as anything but.

The film makes major alterations to the four supporting female characters of the novel—Veda, Mildred's neighbor Lucy, her maid Letty (Lottie in the film), and her restaurant manager Ida—in terms of how they each reflect Mildred's predicament as a white, middle-class, working woman. Following from the different historical conditions under which the novel and the film were respectively produced, each of these women embody a set of historicized concerns that help us see how the transition of *Mildred Pierce*'s narrative from Depression to wartime required substantial ideological readjustment. The novel's narrative of economic hard times, self-made success, and class anxiety is far more befitting of the 1930s than the 1940s, when work was in extremely high demand and far more permissive of social mobility across lines of gender, race, and

class. By historically situating these female affiliations, we can discern the film's incipient possibilities of solidarity via shared labor, which undermines the common reading of maternity as the film's primary female relationship. It also complicates the critical consensus on the film's ending as staging the return of working women to the home after the end of the war. What initially looks like a straightforward commentary on postwar readjustment can instead be understood in terms of multiple competing historical configurations of gender and labor.

The imperatives of the Code intersect with this historical restructuring, particularly around the need to blame all the film's ills on Mildred's bad mothering. Bound by the rule of compensating moral values, the film makes the central tension less a matter of class anxiety and more of maternity gone wrong. Unlike the tragic losses or virtuous sacrifice of earlier melodramas like *Stella Dallas* (1937) and *Kitty Foyle* (1940), motherhood in *Mildred Pierce* is represented as wholly thankless, irredeemable, and depleting. There is no section of the Code touching on representations of motherhood, except for the clause prohibiting scenes of childbirth, but the logic behind this rule can tell us quite a lot about how the PCA was invested in maintaining the ideological messaging of women as mothers. Scenes of childbirth were forbidden not just for their graphicness, but because censors feared that the reality of the pain of labor would, in the minds of female audience members, outweigh what was supposed to be the glorified state of motherhood.[5] These were the stakes of how *Mildred Pierce* would handle its extremely bleak mother-daughter relationship. *Imitation* had dealt with this problem by displacing its negative experiences of motherhood onto Delilah and Peola, the Black characters,

[5] Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s* (New York: Weidenfeld, 1990), 88.

suggesting that any problems relating to maternity were actually just matters of race (this too was deliberately changed from *Imitation*'s source novel). In *Mildred Pierce* this kind of racial scapegoating was not an option. Instead, Mildred combines elements of both the white and Black characters from *Imitation*: while her plot resembles Bea's in terms of her stellar economic rise and her ultimate loss of a romantic partner to her daughter, her plight also mirrors Delilah's in terms of how she signifies a subaltern class identity that her daughter despises and wants to distance herself from. Veda, however, is a far more transparently evil character than Peola: she is irredeemably spoiled, greedy, calculating, and insidious. Motherhood may go awry in *Imitation*, though in ways that are ultimately salvageable for the white mother-daughter pair; but in *Mildred Pierce* salvation is not even a possibility. Thus, if maternal relations in *Mildred Pierce* were to be portrayed so noxiously, under the Code there had to be a singular reason why.

On the surface, the reason provided for Veda's existence is Mildred's bad mothering. The film's addition of a murder to the plot (drawn not from Cain's novel but added by the producer and screenwriters as a mechanism for narrative suspense) makes Mildred's lax parenting effectively function as a "crime," providing the logical justification for why things fall apart for Mildred. Promotional materials for the film advertised Mildred, played by Joan Crawford in a major career comeback, as the central female enigma/femme fatale, with posters and lobby cards asking the question, "What did Mildred Pierce do?" *Mildred Pierce* is in effect a maternal melodrama masquerading as a crime thriller. The extensive body of criticism that has been generated by the film is replete with claims about how Mildred's inadequate parenting leads to the film's murder, committed not by Mildred but by Veda. Modern critics, as well as Breen in the quote that

begins this chapter, have been perfectly willing to read the film as putting the blame on Mildred for the sins of her daughter, or in C. M. Gill's words, to agree with Veda when she exclaims to her mother, "It's your fault I am the way I am!"[6]

But I contend that Veda's bad behavior extends far beyond the effects of Mildred's bad mothering, creating a surplus of meaning that the film cannot fully account for. If the vilification of Veda and the proportionate blaming of Mildred is residually indicative of erased discussions of class, perhaps the emphasis on mothering is also a distraction from the other female relationships and forms of alliance in the film that convey their own ideas about class and female labor. I argue that critics have focused on the role of maternity in *Mildred Pierce* at the expense of its other female relationships. In doing so, they have emphasized the toxic mother-daughter pairing as the film's primary female relationship, coming to conclusions about the film's patriarchal messaging without considering how the other marginal relationships offer counter images of female solidarity across lines of race, class, and sexuality.[7] Instead, we should understand Mildred and Veda's relationship as part of a larger configuration of female relationships that triangulate and make legible different aspects of the deviance of Mildred's labors.

Deviance in this chapter is focalized through labor, specifically how labor projects messaging about women's class, racial, and sexual status. Mildred is represented as performing deviant labors presumed to be beneath her standing as a white middle-class married woman whose only work should be reproductive and domestic. If patriarchal ideology wants to keep women outside the sphere of (paid) work, any kind of paid female

[6] C. M. Gill, "Martyring Veda: Mildred Pierce and Family Systems Theory," *Style* 44.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2010): 86.
[7] Janet Walker in particular has read the film through the primacy of its mother-daughter relationship. See "Feminist Critical Practice: Female Discourse in *Mildred Pierce*," *Film Reader* 5 (1982): 164-172.

labor is inherently deviant. Thus the mere act of becoming a female head of household renders Mildred deviant under patriarchy, but the jobs she does in particular emphasize how labor embeds subjects in social identities. The forms of labor represented in the novel and film elucidate this deviance—that is, departing from the expectations for a white middle class woman—by representing it through the jobs of prostitute (sexual), housekeeper (racial), and waitress (class). But just as previous chapters looked at deviance in terms of women's affiliations through specific actions (gold digging) or identities (mixed-race, queer), here labor provides a matrix of social meanings that associates women in ways that are not otherwise discernable.

Under this view, I argue that the depiction of Mildred as a bad mother is a symptom of what is actually socially threatening about her. Mildred's deviance is not rendered through her nominal bad parenting so much as through the social meanings she takes on through her work. Her relationships with other women help bring this deviance into relief. In the novel, Mildred's relationships with other women are both integral to the success of her business and the means through which she is affiliated with the domestic, menial, and sexual labors associated with women of color and the lower classes. This labor provides the staging ground for Veda's successful social ascent and thus Mildred's downfall. Thus, extra-familial female networks allow Mildred to financially survive and succeed, while motherhood merely siphons off the spoils. It is Mildred's misfortune at having an evil daughter that allows Cain to explore the limitations of Mildred's upward mobility, which is the complete opposite of the film's messaging, where parental ambition justifies Mildred's economic punishment. The film's reluctance to account for the "class"-ifying and rewarding aspects of female labor in any context other than the

negative mother-daughter relationship places the onus on Veda to signify Mildred's maternal (rather than class) deviations. As a result, the film asserts Mildred and Veda—that is, the domestic image of mothers and daughters—as the primary site for understanding relations between women, at the expense of other, more liberating female relationships that occur through shared labor.

The novel and the film depict these relationships very differently and in ways that reveal how each work respectively reflects the cultural concerns around female labor of their eras (the Depression for the novel, the impending end of World War II for the film). Whereas the novel is primarily concerned with how different forms of female labor trouble the coherence of the patriarchal white middle-class, the film attempts to eschew discussions of class and displace the sexually and racially deviant aspects of Mildred onto other female characters. Yet because of its inclusion of overt racial and sexual difference, the film is also more direct in representing female labor as a means of affiliation, in keeping with the 1940s' need for womanpower across these distinctions.

The first part of my analysis will examine the way issues of female labor are articulated through the female relationships in Cain's 1941 novel. The second part will shift the focus to the film and the production elements and historical context that compelled filmmakers to change these relationships in fundamental ways. The comparative approach helps shed light on the central role that female relationships play within the narrative. The aim is to demonstrate how these relationships are integral to understanding both the novel's and film's messaging about female labor.

I. Prostitute, Housekeeper, Waitress

Unlike the gold-digger, the mulatto, and the foreign lesbian of my other chapters, Mildred is not ostensibly on the margins of American society. She is by all accounts its mainstream idea of womanhood: white, middle class, married, mother. And yet the necessity to work reveals the extreme tenuousness of these privileges. The same categories that confer respectability prevent Mildred from finding respectable work. Additionally, the work she does secure casts a new and sinister light on the domestic labors she formerly performed for free. Chronicling the rise of Mildred's business, the first part of the novel registers this social contradiction, in which Mildred finds that her experience with work amounts to variations on housekeeping and prostitution. Divisions between the home and the workplace, between wife and worker, are fraught from the beginning of the text. The start of Mildred's "career" as a wife (as she terms it) registers the fine line between these distinctions.[8] At age seventeen, she is seduced by her future first husband Bert while he is showing her a model home, leading to a pregnancy (Veda) and shotgun wedding. The house in which this illicit encounter occurs is identical to the one that Mildred eventually lives in with Bert and their children. This is one of many ways that the novel highlights the inherent sexual charge of the domestic sphere, a space that is supposedly protected from sexual illicitness. In another turn, the very same model home of Mildred's first sexual encounter also becomes the site of her first restaurant, which purports to give customers a nice home-cooked meal. Thus not only is this sexual space commercialized, but its sexualization and commercialization are both masked under the aegis of domesticity. The restaurant functions as a kind of metaphor for the plight of middle-class wives like Mildred, whose domestic and sexual labors are

[8] James M. Cain, *Mildred Pierce* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 38.

ideologically differentiated from paid work but who form a part of those economies nonetheless. Consider, for instance, the neon sign that adorns Mildred's restaurant. When Mildred first envisions this sign, she pictures "a neat blue one, without red or green in it;" but when the sign is actually made, it has "a blazing red arrow through its middle."[9] The red light, whose insinuations Mildred wants to separate from her image, nonetheless points to the unspoken sexualized work that belies the clean image of the home. The novel does not allow Mildred to escape the sexual connotations of her position, and the sign, which spells out Mildred's name, advertises her as for sale as much as the food she makes; it is hardly a coincidence that she meets her lover Monty while at work. By making all of Mildred's labors appear sexually deviant in this way, the novel illustrates how her deviance does not derive from working outside of the home, but predates it in the work she has been performing all along.

This idea of the deviance of female labor is most frequently articulated via interactions between Mildred and other women, each of whom reflects this condition of Mildred's through their own relationships to labor. As Paula Rabinowitz writes, "the lower-middle class women of Glendale understand that both domestic service and waitressing are essentially prostitution," in that both jobs carry the presumption of sexual availability.[10] The foremost of these figures is Lucy Gessler, Mildred's neighbor and confidante who does not appear in the film version. She first announces the paradox of Mildred's plight after the latter kicks Bert out for cheating and, more importantly, being unemployed: "Well, you've joined the biggest army on earth. You're the great American

[9] Ibid., 76, 91.
[10] Paula Rabinowitz, "Domestic Labor: Film Noir, Proletarian Literature, and Black Women's Fiction," *Modern Fiction Studies* 47.1 (Spring 2001): 240.

institution that never gets mentioned on the Fourth of July—a grass widow with two small children to support."[11] In the film, this line is spoken by Wally, Bert's former business partner who wolfishly pursues the newly single Mildred. His comment is meant to insinuate Mildred's need for a man to alleviate her condition—a role he is only too glad to fill. But in the text, Mrs. Gessler's utterance of this line acknowledges the social problem that Mildred represents. The phrase reflects the unreliability of men and the lack of social protections for women, realities which, in a patriarchal society that makes men responsible for women, are not supposed to exist. The statement foregrounds women as susceptible to the same kinds of predicaments of abandonment and economic hardship, experiences which band them together in an ironically feminized "army." In case the tension between the sexes is not clear enough, Lucy follows her proclamation up with an invective against Bert and all of his ilk: "The dirty bastards."[12]

Mildred at first believes that she can maintain the proprieties of middle-class white wifehood outside of the home before quickly realizing that she must reconcile herself to the sexualized aspects of female labor. This lesson, too, comes from Lucy. It is she who tries to convince Mildred to sleep with Wally, in a complicated plan that involves Mildred cooking him dinner rather than letting him take her out so that he owes her, not vice versa. In this scenario, the domestic act of cooking is conflated with the act of sex, and sex in turn becomes a transaction. When Mildred tells Lucy about their sexual encounter the next morning, Lucy responds, "Well—you don't mean he actually left the money on the bureau, did you?"[13] The idea of sexual transactions appears in other work

[11] Cain, *Mildred Pierce*, 13.
[12] Ibid., 13.
[13] Ibid., 32.

contexts as well. Lucy uses this same framework of prostitution when Mildred acquires a waitressing job:

> "…if it's that kind of job, I hope you picked a five-dollar house. You're too young for the two-dollar trade, and personally I don't like sailors."
>
> "I'm a waitress. In a hash-house."
>
> "It rhymes up the same way."[14]

Lucy does not make these comments to demean Mildred, but to help her come to terms with the fundamentally sexualized nature of most female work. She herself is affiliated with illicit work, albeit of a different kind: her husband is a bootlegger who smuggles in liquor from Mexico. Eventually both women, with each other's help, transform their illicit labors into work with the veneer of legitimacy: Mildred by becoming a restaurant owner, and Lucy by running the bars in Mildred's restaurants after Prohibition is repealed (an act which, ironically, puts her husband out of a job). In these ways, the novel depicts women's collective abilities to adapt to shifting economies in places where men fail, because of their ability to seek service work rather than jobs in particular industries.

Lucy is not the only woman who sees the sex work latent in Mildred's labor; nor is she the only woman to give her tough advice about how women like her get by. Early in her search for work, Mildred comes across a hard-boiled female employment agent who berates her for her lack of experience. Mildred writes that she is seeking work as a receptionist without being "quite sure what it meant, but…at least it had an authoritative sound to it."[15] The agent quickly puts her straight by telling her,

[14] Ibid., 49-50.
[15] Ibid., 37.

> "A receptionist is a lazy dame that can't do anything on earth, and wants to sit out front where everybody can watch her do it…If she sleeps with [the boss] she gets twenty bucks a week, if not she gets twelve. In other words, nothing personal about it and I don't want to hurt your feelings, but by the looks of this card I'd say that was you."[16]

Mildred attempts to defend herself by asserting that "making a home" and "raising two children" is "not generally regarded as a disgraceful career," describing her domestic labors in the terms of a job.[17] But the agent insists that what earned her respectability in a domestic context has no traction in the world of waged labor, where ironically the sacred labors of the home translate to the most menial of paid work. This too is a hard lesson for Mildred in the differences between patriarchal ideology and patriarchal reality. Furthermore, the agent's comments affirm the thread of all women's work as prostitution. When later in the text Mildred begins to capitalize on forms of domestic labor that are supposed to be separate from paid work via her restaurant, it brings the illicit tinge of financial exchange to what is supposed to be domestically driven. At the same time, what is supposed to be a purely economic arrangement (a job) is inseparable from its sexual underpinnings. As the agent tersely informs Mildred, "you've let half your life slip by without learning anything but sleeping, cooking, and setting the table, and that's all you're good for."[18] The deliberate ambiguity of "sleeping" here, with its dual meanings of sleeping with the boss (or husband) as well as the leisure of not doing wage work, shows how when taken together, work and sex blur the lines of what constitutes labor,

[16] Ibid., 37.
[17] Ibid., 38.
[18] Ibid., 41.

and how that labor is defined. Mildred's conversation with the agent represents her coming to terms with the fact that the value of her work is illegible outside of a domestic context, but it also highlights the contradictory ways that female labor is understood. While Mildred sees her domestic labors as socially condoned and conferring her with authority, for the agent it signifies the exact opposite: a reduction of her skills to undervalued work in the sexualized marketplace. She recommends Mildred for a different job: housekeeper.

Housekeeping turns out to be an even more fraught position for Mildred than prostitution or waitressing. Race is not explicitly identified as the reason why, but it cannot be separated from the idea of housekeeping. The abjectness with which the novel treats the idea of being a housekeeper—as a depth to which even the desperate Mildred will not descend—implies the transgression of a racialized boundary. Even though the novel articulates this anxiety largely in terms of class, the related issue of race hovers in the background. As her search for work becomes more desperate, Mildred still skips over the many advertisements for "cooks, maids, and chauffeurs," positions associated with people of color.[19] Mildred therefore struggles to maintain her whiteness as she negotiates class distinctions. As she attempts to separate domesticity from being a domestic, housekeeping comes to stand for her consciousness of the racialization of particular female domestic labor. It therefore functions similarly to the tinge of prostitution that inflects all female labor in the text—and indeed as Rabinowitz points out, domestic workers are portrayed as particularly susceptible to the sexual advances of their employers, "sexualizing housework and racializing sex work."[20] Mildred ultimately

[19] Ibid., 33.
[20] Rabinowitz, "Domestic Labor," 235.

rejects the position of housekeeper, but the mere possibility that she *could* be one challenges the view of whiteness as monolithic. Housekeeping, in other words—which is labor that Mildred already performs in her own home—is presented as questioning Mildred's whiteness.

This lesson too comes in the form of a woman—a wealthy white woman in Beverly Hills named Mrs. Forrester, who is affianced to a famous director. Though her life appears to be one of non-working leisure, the text once again highlights sex as the buried work for procuring such a life: Mildred mentally notes that Mrs. Forrester is in her not-yet-husband's house "in negligee, a full month before the wedding."[21] Mrs. Forrester does not recognize the contradiction in her social position and treats Mildred with extreme condescension meant to create distance between their social standings. The text, however, registers an equivalence between both women's implicit sexual labor as wives. There is also a racialized undertone in how Mrs. Forrester attempts to distinguish between herself and Mildred, two white women. Without the visual coding of racial difference, Mildred represents an ambiguous social position in which she could be of any class, a fact that the text stages. When Mildred arrives at the mansion, the presumably white butler greets her subserviently at the front door until he realizes that she is interviewing for the housekeeper position, at which point he makes her come in through the back door. The idea of being formalized in her subservience—coming in through the back, living above the garage, segregating one's children from the mistress's children—is too much for Mildred; fearing for Veda's dignity, she leaves the interview.

[21] Cain, *Mildred Pierce*, 42.

Mrs. Forrester reappears later in the novel to bring up the specter of racialized class difference yet again. This time, however, their encounter takes a very different form, with Mildred attempting to assert their class similarity under fear of discovery. Mildred encounters Mrs. Forrester (now Mrs. Lenhardt) years later when Mildred is the owner of several restaurants and wealthy herself. Mrs. Lenhardt does not recognize Mildred from their former interview, suggesting that Mildred has managed to "pass" from potential housekeeper into blueblood respectability. This analogy to crossing the color line—now a class line—extends to Veda as well. Veda is blackmailing Mrs. Lenhardt by claiming to be pregnant by her son, knowing that the mother refuses to countenance Veda as her son's potential wife. Mrs. Lendhardt's indignance suggests, if not literal miscegenation, then at least a similar kind of naturalization of unbridgeable class difference. In addition to passing and miscegenation, the comparisons to racial melodrama's formulations can also be discerned in Veda's desire to distance herself from her mother's (working) identity. She does not intend to marry the Lenhardt boy—even that is not good enough for Veda—but merely wants money to leave Mildred. In keeping with the trope of the tragic mulatta, Veda realizes that passing is achieved through the severing of maternal ties, which she achieves at the very end of the novel when she disowns her mother and runs off with Monty. In light of these observations, we might retroactively read a racial meaning into the text's introduction of Mildred, in which she is working away in the kitchen with "a smear of chocolate on her face," not on a cake for her family but one she is selling for money.[22] Mildred's whiteness is, as it were, stained by her capitalization of housework.

[22] Ibid., 6.

The novel's racial themes are further elaborated through the character Letty, Mildred's maid. In the film this character is named Lottie and played by Butterfly McQueen, making the racialized connotations of her (Mildred's) labor more overt (I will discuss this change in the next section). But in the novel Letty is apparently white, for she like Mildred is a source of racial misreading and ambiguity. In an important episode that appears in both the novel and the film, Mildred comes home from work to find Letty wearing her own waitressing uniform. She learns that Veda found the uniform while snooping in Mildred's closet and, suspecting the nature of Mildred's job, made Letty put it on as a way of outing her mother. Not only does this episode suggest that Mildred and Letty hold similar social positions by dint of their similar labor, but it also establishes how class distinctions rely on outward appearances and performances. This connection is crucial for understanding another less-analyzed incident in the text,that occurs at the funeral of Mildred's younger daughter Ray. Letty answers the door for the guests before having the chance to change into her uniform, and Mildred's parents shake hands with her, thinking she is one of the mourners. Once they realize she is the maid, they are indignant and embarrassed at their faux pas. As with the episode with the butler, the visual privilege of whiteness conflicts with the laboring mark of class in ways that produce a racialized distinction. Not only are Mildred's and Letty's roles mirrored in these episodes, but it is significant that it is Mildred's parents who cannot tell the difference between their presumed social inferiors and social equals. Their unease speaks to a general anxiety regarding the fragile border between middle and lower class, and their attempt to distinguish themselves from Letty is rendered ironic given their relationship to Mildred, who performs similar work.

Instead of the racial signification of skin tone, aprons and uniforms take on the visual sign of class difference, as well as the presumed sexual availability of lower-class women. We see these issues discursively overlaid when, for instance, Mildred cooks dinner for Wally. She makes a dish that strikes him as "very hightoned"—a word that recurs throughout the novel—and he insists that it must have been the "hired girl" who made it.[23] He also insists that she wear her apron while they eat; and when he follows her into the bedroom when she goes in to change, he says, "I swear to God, I came in here for nothing but to pull those apron strings."[24] His erotization of Mildred is thus mediated by his view of her as a domestic, a role she is constantly projected into by men around her even when she ceases to perform housework. As a waitress Mildred encounters this attitude when her customers grope her legs, fending them off by saying that they "might feel differently if [they] saw her when she wasn't in uniform."[25] The blueblood Monty is likewise enticed by uniforms and aprons, as Veda relays to Mildred: "He says a gingham apron is the greatest provocation ever invented by woman for the torture of man, and that the very best legs are found in kitchens, not in drawing rooms."[26] Mildred's legs, which are constantly being eyed and grabbed, naturalize her relationship to her aproned laboring. By contrast, Veda is sexualized not through her legs but her large breasts, referred to by Monty as "the Dairy"—a nickname that accentuates Veda's whiteness as well as her reproductive potential.[27] Not surprisingly, Veda is the one who gets invited to Monty's drawing rooms and introduced to his family, not Mildred.

[23] Ibid., 29.
[24] Ibid., 30.
[25] Ibid., 61.
[26] Ibid., 146.
[27] Ibid., 125.

Similar to the racialization of housekeeping, waitressing in the novel functions as a homosocial female space associated with the deviance of lesbian relationships. The text signals this affiliation through Mildred's encounter with an implicitly lesbian hiring manager at a department store, which mirrors her exchange with the hard-boiled agent in terms of the lesson it teaches her about the connotations of labor. The novel describes the friendliness and empathy of Mrs. Boole, the woman who interviews Mildred, as compelling her to open up in ways she had not elsewhere. Their instant camaraderie is accentuated further by the text's insinuations of Mrs. Boole's affection for Mildred, which is otherwise unaccountable: she holds her hand, kisses her, asks her to lunch, and admires her figure, all within the span of a few minutes. Additionally, she is upfront with Mildred about her unlikely job prospects, and like the agent she recommends Mildred not for the sales job she was seeking but for a waitressing job that Mildred feels is beneath her. Their miscommunication reads like a failed pick-up:

> The idea of putting on a uniform, carrying a tray, and making her living from tips made Mildred positively ill. Her lips wanted to flutter, and she ran her tongue around inside them to keep them under control. "Why, thanks ever so much, Mrs. Boole. I realize, of course, that it's quite a nice opening—but I doubt if I'm really fitted for it."
>
> Mrs. Boole suddenly got red, and began to talk as though she didn't quite know what she was saying. "Well, I'm sorry, Mrs. Pierce, if I got you down here about something that—perhaps you don't feel you could accept. But I somehow got the idea that you wanted work—"
>
> "I do, Mrs. Boole, but—"

> "But it's perfectly all right, my dear—"
>
> Mrs. Boole was standing now, and Mildred was edging toward the door, her face feeling hot.[28]

We can read the use of ellipses here as standing in for the class context that the two women will not directly address, but the description of the incident also underscores the sexually charged nature of their interaction. The episode also bears a similar logic to the funeral incident with Letty, in which Mildred's identity as understood via her labor is the basis of a supposed misreading. Mrs. Boole has pegged Mildred as one type of woman/worker; and while Mildred denies it, she does end up taking a waitressing job soon after, confirming Mrs. Boole's intuition. Mrs. Boole in fact validates the perception of Mildred that Mildred does not want to admit about herself. Having understood her position as separate from the deviance of sexualized and racialized labor, Mildred now finds that she is somehow innately linked to it in ways that other queer working women can recognize.

The associations between waitressing and lesbianism continue in the text when Mildred secures a restaurant job that places her among a coterie of women who share a resentment of their inept male boss. Ida, who represents this group, establishes its egalitarian nature by introducing herself by her first name. This move contrasts her with Mrs. Forrester, who patronizingly uses Mildred's first name as a way of talking down to her. It shows, however, that Mildred has also resigned herself to being "Mildred" rather than "Mrs. Pierce," at least in a context where everyone is of the same status. No longer socially protected by her married condition, Mildred enters this all-female workforce.

[28] Ibid., 36.

Ida provides Mildred with an education in the work of waitressing—a job which, despite Mildred's initial reluctance, she excels at. Waitressing is rendered as deviant work on two fronts: first, in the ways it advertises Mildred as a sexually available to her male customers, who constantly grope and flirt with her (it is at her work that she is first picked up by Monty); and second, it provides opportunities for female proletarian bonding against a male authority when the waitresses conspire to get Mr. Chris, their boss, to sell Mildred's pies. In Cain's novel, Ida is not necessarily coded as lesbian, but in the film she definitely is in ways that I will discuss more in depth below but that nonetheless still shed insight on the novel. Just as Letty is not Black in the text but still functions to suggest racial ambiguity, so might we read Ida and the homosocial equality of the restaurant as posing a counterpoint to Mildred's male relationships, which almost all take the form of financial exchanges. Like Letty, Ida shadows Mildred in her labor, coming to work for her at her first restaurant, taking over Mildred's second branch, becoming one of Mildred's directors when her company incorporates, and eventually taking over Mildred's company. Ida is the masculine side of Mildred's work—the part that manages and holds authority. Unlike the film's more overt anxiety of the continuation of female businesswomen after the war (to be discussed later), in the novel Mildred's position as head of her company is simply replaced by another woman, one who more transparently represents the gendered inversion of such a position through her tough, competent manner.

In addition to waitressing's queer connotations, Mildred's restaurants are the only spaces in the novel where people of color actually appear. These figures are in extremely marginal positions, only briefly mentioned, never speaking and often physically separated

from the main characters, and all men. They include Japanese and Filipino dishwashers and gardeners whose racial otherness is explicitly marked in the text. We see it, for instance, in the card that Mildred's coworkers send to her after her younger daughter Ray's death:

Ida	Anna	Chris Makadoulis
Ernestine	Maybelle	Archie
Ethel	Laura	Sam
Florence	Shirley	X (Fuji)[29]

The "X" signature of the heretofore-unmentioned Fuji plays as a kind of racist joke, suggesting that Fuji cannot write his name, but it also marks him as emphatically different from the names around him, without any agency to articulate himself. A similar logic applies to the two Filipino dishwashers, Pancho and Josie, who during the flirtatious revelries of Mildred's Christmas party "sat apart, not quite of things, yet not quite out of them."[30] The Christmas party scene appears to assure readers that no interracial sexual contact is taking place, and to strictly delineate the boundaries of Pancho's and Josie's role within Mildred's world of upward mobility. Sitting apart from the sexually charged banter of Mildred's other white employees, they are also feminized, or queered, by being denied the possibility of hetero-masculine participation. None of these characters appears outside of these brief moments in the text, and the brevity of their roles asserts the centralized whiteness of the main characters, even as the novel seems to call into question the stability of that classed whiteness. They also contrast with the ethnic stereotypes represented by Mildred's Greek boss Mr. Chris, Veda's Italian music teacher Mr. Treviso, and Veda's Jewish agent Mr. Levinson, whose class mobility is circumscribed in

[29] Ibid., 102.
[30] Ibid., 142.

different ways. For instance, Veda refers to Mr. Treviso as a "wop" even as she covets his approval, which is the same term Monty uses to refer to his own questionable "Spanish" background.[31] In these cases, the proximity to whiteness enables these characters to rise in ways that Fuji, Pancho, and Josie cannot, and also places them in relationship to women in ways that are denied to these characters.

The absence of women of color, meanwhile, obviates an overt confrontation of the fact that Mildred is reluctant to perform certain kinds of labor because of her whiteness—a fact never directly stated but heavily implied by her refusal to take on certain work. The novel's discussions of class and labor cannot avoid racial underpinnings, and perhaps the reason women of color do not appear is because their presence would bring this unconscious into relief, as well as Mildred's class privileges as a white woman. As Rabinowitz discusses, racial difference leads to drastically divergent narrative outcomes of class rise for Black versus white female housekeepers.[32] We should recall too Mildred's absolute mortification at the possibility of becoming a housekeeper in the novel, preferring the white homosocial space of waitressing to racial uncertainty. Though I have shown the ways that this racial anxiety comes through in the novel, it is the film that ultimately surfaces this subtext.

II. Women at War

The temporal distance between the novel's publication in 1941 and the film's production and release in 1945 is a crucial context for understanding its reworkings of relationships between women. The common reading of the film *Mildred Pierce*'s ending is that it

[31] Ibid., 171, 87.
[32] Rabinowitz, "Domestic Labor," 241.

stages the return of mobilized American women from the workforce back into the home by having Mildred (Joan Crawford) reunite with the now-employed Bert (Bruce Bennett), whom, the film implies, she never should have left.[33] Having toyed with the fantasy of a female-driven workforce, the film safely fades out with the reassurance of a patriarchal status quo—a clear analogy for the state of the nation. Yet this reading does not take into account how abruptly and dramatically the government shifted its messaging about female labor between the Depression and World War II, and the many ideological contradictions that resulted. With the scarcity of jobs in the 1930s, the needs of white men came before those of women. Working women who were married were particularly marked as objects of derision: over half of the states had laws that prevented married women from holding certain jobs, and the federal government issued an order in 1932 that female government workers married to male government workers would be the first to be fired.[34] This attempt to protect male egos frequently invoked the language of the sacred domestic sphere to keep women at home, despite families' overwhelming needs for financial support wherever they could get it. After the United States' entrance into World War II at the end of 1941, however, not only did opportunities suddenly open up for women, but they were bombarded with propaganda that *encouraged* them to work,

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[33] Joyce Nelson, "*Mildred Pierce* Reconsidered," *Film Reader* 2 (Jan 1977): 70; June Sochen, "*Mildred Pierce* and Women in Film," *American Quarterly* 30.1 (Spring 1978): 13; Andrea Walsh, *Women's Film and Female Experience, 1940-1950* (New York: Praeger, 1984), 131; Williams, "Feminist Film Theory," 28; Pamela Robertson, "Structural Irony in *Mildred Pierce*, or How Mildred Lost Her Tongue," *Cinema Journal* 30.1 (Autumn 1990): 51; Kathleen McHugh, *American Domesticity: From How-To Manual to Hollywood Melodrama* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 146; Catherine Jurca, "Mildred Pierce, Warner Bros., and the Corporate Family," *Representations* 77.1 (Winter 2002): 30; Biesen, *Blackout*, 143; and Robert J. Corber, "Joan Crawford's Padded Shoulders: Female Masculinity in *Mildred Pierce,*" *Camera Obscura* 21.2 (2006): 6.

[34] Megan McDonald Way, *Family Economics and Public Policy, 1800s-Present: How Laws, Incentives, and Social Programs Drive Family Decision-Making and the US Economy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 152.

and even censured those who didn't. Between 1940 and 1945, the female workforce rose from 12,000,000 to 19,000,000. Even with the millions of women who sought out employment, the need for labor was still so severe that in 1943 Congress considered passing a bill that would draft women as well as men into compulsory civilian service. It was nevertheless understood from the beginning that the change necessitated by the war was only temporary, which made the radical ideological shift more palatable. Doris Weatherford reports that after the end of the war, most women and men responded to polls with the view that married women "should not be allowed to hold jobs," yet despite this opinion most women continued to work.[35] We can therefore understand the period between 1942 and 1945 as extremely anomalous in its social attitudes towards women, bracketed on either side by years that reinforced the prioritization of male workers.

It is not hard to see this ambivalence towards working women manifested in the cinema of the period. Throughout the 1940s, Hollywood reveled in the image of the working woman with her broad-shouldered suit and no-nonsense wit in films like *His Girl Friday* (1940) and *Lady in the Dark* (1944), celebrating her novelty while also making sure she was thoroughly subservient to a man by the end credits. But if the threat posed by working women was often neutralized via a heterosexual romance plot, that does not mean that working women were outwardly villainized. Mark Jancovich has compellingly argued against readings in which the femme fatale of film noir is usually understood as "a demonization of the independent working woman at a time when there was a concerted effort to persuade women to surrender the jobs that they had taken on

[35] Doris Weatherford, *American Women and World War II* (New York; Oxford: Facts on File, 1990), 307.

during the war."[36] Instead, Jancovich shows how femmes fatales, both during *and* after the war, were "not associated with the independent woman, but rather with the figure of the 'slacker,' the greedy, selfish 'Mrs. Stay-at-Home,' who refused to 'subordinate her personal concerns' to the war effort, despite warnings that 'a soldier may die if you don't do your part."[37] Jancovich's reformulation of working women is in keeping with the language of Philip Wylie's famous 1942 attack on "momism" in *Generation of Vipers*, in which the author condemns not working mothers but their opposite: those he views as lazy, non-working mothers with too much time on their hands. Jancovich does not discuss *Mildred Pierce* in the context of his claim even though it is one of the most significant films (and film noirs) about female labor of the 1940s, perhaps because it represents the historical limits of tolerance for working women. As June Sochen writes, "*Mildred Pierce* ended the playful admiration of the Independent Woman," the culmination of the woman's films that dominated in the 1930s and early 1940s.[38] As a wartime film, *Mildred Pierce* valorizes Mildred's drive to work, while as a narrative informed by the Depression and the impending post war period it also refuses to find a place for her in the national patriarchal narrative. This aspect of the film—the celebration of Mildred's self-made success—has been frequently overlooked by critics, who prefer to focus on its negation via the film's ending.

This ideological unevenness is a symptom of the film's attempt not just to force Cain's narrative into the logic of wartime society, but also to make it abide by the Code,

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[36] Mark Jancovich, "'Vicious Womanhood': Genre, the 'Femme Fatale' and Postwar America," *Revue Canadienne d'Études cinématographiques/Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 20.1 (Spring/printemps 2011): 100.
[37] Ibid., 101.
[38] Sochen, "*Mildred Pierce* and Women in Film," 13.

which still valorized the sanctity of the home and a woman's place in it even if government policy said otherwise. This included maintaining an ideology of the virtues of motherhood. Thus the toxic mother-daughter relationship between Mildred and Veda had to be thoroughly blamed on Mildred in order to account for its existence, and both women punished within the narrative; but in point of fact, Veda's evil comes across as far more excessive than Mildred's few gestures of spoiling can account for. That is because the novel treats this relationship very differently. The Mildred of the text believes Veda to possess exceptional musical talent, which drives her desperation to financially succeed. Cain articulated this theme as follows:

> O.K., says God, you think this girl is talented. You want her to be a concert pianist. But if you want an artist in the family, why not a real one, a coloratura soprano? "Thanks, God," says Mildred, "you sure are treating me swell." But, says God, are you sure you want an artist at all? They're kind of queer, you know. Maybe Glendale is not the place for one. Maybe you're not the mother for one. I can't even hear what you say. So God says, O.K., here she is—I hope you like what you ordered.[39]

What Cain downplays here is the role of class in acting out this drama. Mildred's motivation to work is prompted initially by sheer need, but a need that is deeply imbricated with fantasies of class rise for her daughters. Her investment in a grand piano for Veda, an instrument that Mildred can barely afford and that is ultimately irrelevant to Veda's talent, reflects her role in financially supporting Veda's lifestyle while remaining emotionally ancillary to it. Even her successful restaurant chain is prompted by Veda's

[39] Roy Hoopes, *Cain: The Autobiography of James M. Cain* (Carbondale; Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 248.

snobbery: when Veda scornfully confronts her mother for working as a waitress, Mildred quickly comes up with the justification that she is planning on opening up her own restaurant (thus owning the means of production instead of being it). The entire novel is a contest between Mildred's middle-class notions of work and Veda's desire to escape them.

In adapting the book to film, screenwriters largely nixed both the theme of class and the theme of talent and ambition, concerns that they understood as related. These changes have to do with the Code's general insistence on making clear-cut distinctions between sympathetic and unsympathetic characters. A Warner Bros. memo states that producer Jerry Wald felt "that audience sympathy might be lost for Mildred if Veda had this much talent and ability, and he therefore insisted that she go into a low dive and become a night club singer."[40] Here we see not only how talent is conflated with class, but also how talent and class function to organize the film's moral logic. Veda's lack of talent is understood as a symptom of her inherent lowness, in spite of her class pretentions.

In addition to Veda, two other women triangulate Mildred's character in the film: Lottie (Butterfly McQueen) and Ida (Eve Arden). The character of Lucy is palpably missing, severing Mildred's connection to the illicitness of bootlegging and prostitution. The novel's sexual sordidness was the main concern that the PCA had with adapting the film, and Lucy's insight into the sexual nature of Mildred's work would almost certainly have been censored had it been worked into the script. Lucy's character does appear in early drafts of the screenplay, but she was never cast, and her part was cut before filming

[40] Ibid., 257.

began. Because the main purpose of her character was to give voice to the disillusioning, unsentimental realities of female work, we can understand Lucy as representing a lower-middle-class perspective that filmmakers felt necessary to remove, especially given her relation to Mildred. Ultimately, however, Ida and Lottie visually bring to bear the sexual and racial deviance associated with Mildred's work even as Mildred herself is, in the words of studio internal memos, cleaned up.

Lottie in the film is portrayed as the racist caricature of the ditzy Black maid, a variation of the role McQueen played in *Gone with the Wind.* The choice to make Lottie Black serves the purpose of distinguishing between Mildred's whitened housekeeping and Lottie's (she works for Mildred, not with her), but this decision also ends up reinforcing the non-white affiliations of Mildred's labor. Production documents indicate that Lottie was originally conceptualized as "A white maid, a little on the stupid side."[41] According to Albert J. LaValley, it was William Faulkner (who briefly worked on the screenplay) who first came up with the idea of making Lottie Black, but he pictured someone "like Hattie McDaniel, a Dilsey type."[42] Faulkner envisioned Lottie as a mammy, serving as Mildred's protector rather than her mirror. Instead, the film sought recourse in another kind of racial trope, but with different consequences. Even though Lottie is used mainly for comic relief, the novel's sustained paralleling of Mildred and Letty persists in the film. Lottie is both a figure of racial displacement for Mildred's labor and a figure who makes the racialization of her labor discernible. The scene in which

[41] "Bit Players Needed For 'Mildred Pierce,'" Undated, Folder 2086 "Mildred Pierce" Story-Memos 3 of 4, Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.
[42] Albert J. LaValley, "Introduction: A Troublesome Property to Script," *Mildred Pierce*, ed. Albert J. LaValley (Madison; London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 36.

Veda has Lottie don Mildred's waitressing uniform appears in the film, suggesting how Lottie, in Eric Lott's words, "figures the proletarian fate Mildred is driven to beat and whose disabling likeness suggests Mildred's darkest dread."[43] The scene prior to this one also illustrates the film's anxieties about the double bind of its racial messaging. In this scene, Lottie is helping Mildred bake pies in her kitchen and comments on how hard Mildred works while she (Lottie) just sleeps in all morning. Mildred tersely quips that the work keeps her thin, prompting Lottie to appraise her own body and mutter, "Don't do nothing for me." This is a clear jab aimed at Lottie's presumed laziness, also intended to naturalize the idea of her as "fat" (though McQueen is not) and non-glamorous in comparison to Mildred. In the script, the scene ends with Mildred's line: "It keeps *me* thin…(indicating bankbook) and *this* fat."[44] The joke at the expense of Lottie appears to have been added at the last minute, perhaps to insist on the differentiation of her character. Strange, then, that when Lottie puts on Mildred's uniform in the very next scene, it fits her perfectly (Fig. 1). Thus, the film uses Lottie to defray the social embarrassments that Mildred's position should make her susceptible to, as a woman who performs similar work; but in the process, it cannot help but acknowledge the connection between the two of them.

[43] Eric Lott, "The Whiteness of Film Noir," *American Literary History* 9.3 (Autumn 1997): 560.
[44] LaValley, *Mildred Pierce*, 127.

Figure 1. Lottie (Butterfly McQueen) in Mildred's waitress uniform in *Mildred Pierce.*

Lottie in fact brings into relief many of the class tensions afflicting Mildred's family. She frequently makes remarks that are meant to reveal her simultaneous pretensions and ignorance, such as her comments to another Black maid at Veda's birthday party (Fig. 2):

> Lottie: Eloise, watch out how you pour that champagne. It's Veuve Cliquot 1927.
>
> Eloise: Is that better than '28?
>
> Lottie: Well it's the newest we could get.

The other maid, Eloise, seems aware of Lottie's façade of classiness, as she poses her question ironically rather than earnestly—perhaps an attempt on the part of the actress to undermine the racism of Lottie's character.[45] But we might also compare this moment to when Veda, similarly trying to showcase her classiness, tries (and fails) to speak French. Lottie and Veda's faux pas make Mildred appear more dignified by comparison, but they

[45] Miriam J. Petty describes how African American actors in Classical Hollywood employed various performative strategies to counter the negative roles to which they were subjected. See *Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016).

also stand in as the objects for the kind of classist, patronizing attitude towards upstarts that could just as well be directed towards Mildred. As Lott says, "Mildred increasingly uses Lottie for the differentiating purposes of household adornment, as a sort of failed mistress of the house who puts on ridiculous airs."[46] Mildred and Lottie's dynamic evokes that between Chico and Lily in *Baby Face* as they try to maintain the image of an employer-maid distinction when their situation is in reality much closer, particularly in a scene where Lottie, having moved out of Glendale and into Monte's Pasadena mansion with Mildred, struggles with the proprieties of her new role:

> Bert: Is Mrs. Pierce—Mrs. Beragon—is she in?
>
> Lottie: She's in there. I mean—this way, please.
>
> …
>
> (He follows her to Mildred's office)
>
> Lottie: No no no, I'm supposed to announce everybody. You stay there. Pardon, please. (Loudly) Mr. Albert Pierce.
>
> Mildred: (getting up from her desk) Lottie, not so loud.
>
> Lottie: No?

Lottie's fluttering confusion is a more pronounced version of Bert's over how he should address his remarried (and now very wealthy) ex-wife, but this uneasiness with new class roles also extends to Mildred. Mildred may now be Mrs. Beragon, but not convincingly; there is still something of the lingering middle-class "Pierce" in her, and neither Lottie nor Bert can really see her in any other role.

[46] Lott, "The Whiteness of Film Noir," 560.

Figure 2. Once Mildred is rich, Lottie's labor is more racially differentiated from hers: Lottie wears a maid's outfit and is shown with another Black maid.

Like Lottie, Ida follows Mildred through the various stages of her ascent; but unlike Lottie, Ida is visually emphasized as rising with Mildred as her equal rather than her employee. There are more direct parallels of Ida and Mildred than there are of Mildred and Lottie. As Mildred shifts from waitressing to white-collar work, so too does Ida, a fact conveyed by their tailored outfits (Fig. 3). Mildred also shares authority with Ida: when Mildred takes a trip to Mexico, Ida literally takes over her desk. Furthermore, in an important departure from the novel, Ida is not part of Wally's corporate takeover at the end of the narrative. This means that that at the end of the film, Mildred's business safely passes out of the hands of women (just in time for the end of the war). But it also emphasizes the unbroken loyalty between Ida and Mildred.

Figure 3. Ida (Eve Arden) and Mildred (Joan Crawford) as social equals whose business fortunes rise together.

As many critics have noted, Arden plays Ida as a butch lesbian, "the lover and consort of an increasingly butch Mildred."[47] LaValley points out that "Ida is built up as a confidante of Mildred, filling the role that Lucy Gessler did in the book and earlier scripts."[48] This change from a character who highlights Mildred's sexual promiscuity with men to one who suggests Mildred's masculinity reflects the particular anxieties attending women's increased role in the workforce during World War II. If Lottie betrays the racialized aspects of Mildred's work, Ida implies its sexual invertedness. Lottie helps Mildred primarily in the kitchen, but Ida is part of the management end of Mildred's business. In this way Mildred's labor takes on both working-class and masculine qualities through these side characters, while visually she is emphasized as working in the condoned spaces of the home and the affluent white-collar sphere. This is a strategy by which Mildred herself is kept pure of insinuations of the non-white and queer implications of her work.

[47] Rabinowitz, "Domestic Labor," 240.
[48] LaValley, *Mildred Pierce,* 40.

As is so typical of woman's films, *Mildred Pierce* raises the specter of patriarchal contradictions while ultimately disavowing their existence. We see this in how the film contrasts female labor with the lack of male labor. When Bert eventually lands a job at an aircraft manufacturer, Ida responds sarcastically, "The manpower shortage must be worse than we think!" This is one of the only lines in the film where the war is directly mentioned, and it encapsulates its thematic engagement with its historical milieu. It is hardly incidental that this line is spoken by Ida, who represents the masculine aspect of Mildred's labors in ways that Mildred herself, as the feminized star, cannot. She also has the perspicacity that Mildred lacks, noting the chicanery of all the members of Mildred's inner circle (Bert, Wally, Monte, and Veda). In this respect, the audience identifies with her perspective and her comic critiques. Thus, even as Bert's new job foreshadows his restoration as a patriarch, Ida undercuts his masculine achievement by pointing to the cushy circumstances under which he got that job: in this economy, how could he *not* find work? This element of Bert's character, who is made much more redeemable in the film than in the novel, is in part a holdover from the challenges of adapting Cain's Depression-era narrative to the very different socio-economic context of wartime. But the line also serves to feminize work itself. The male characters in the film are mostly feckless, with the exception of Wally, who is portrayed as something of a wheeler-and-dealer; and while the absence of working men makes some sense in terms of the historical manpower shortage, the male characters seem none too concerned with doing their part for the war effort either as soldiers or civilians.[49] It is Mildred, Lottie, and Ida

[49] Linda Williams argues that the film "manages" the historical issue of women's experiences during World War II by depicting mid-1940s life "without anchoring those images to specific political-historical references," repressing the war as the cause of the upset in gender relations "through the displacement of its real issues on to narratively resolvable ones" ("*Mildred Pierce* and the Second World War," 21, 23).

who perform most of the film's work. Bert's job may be reassuring audiences that after the war things will go back to how they were, but manpower has already been effectively transformed into womanpower, and his off-camera labors pale in comparison to theirs.

Finally, it is important to consider the end of the film in relation to this issue of women's relationships, particularly its penultimate shot that shows Mildred reuniting with Bert juxtaposed with two scrubwomen (Fig. 4). This shot has been the subject of much discussion among feminist film critics. Pam Cook writes that the two scrubwomen are "in the classic position of oppression, on their knees: an image of sacrifice which closes the film with a reminder of what women must give up for the sake of the patriarchal order."[50] Lott says that the image "suggests that the hard labor and its racial dimension [Mildred] seems to have left behind are not in fact distant at all but are, as it were, part of the frame."[51] Kathleen McHugh argues that the shot "positions a now correctly normative and generalized domestic femininity (represented by Mildred) against intragender difference (working-class women)."[52] I want to focus on a particular element of this shot: Mildred's fur coat.

[50] Pam Cook, "Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*," in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 81.
[51] Lott, "The Whiteness of Film Noir," 561.
[52] Kathleen McHugh, *American Domesticity: From How-To Manual to Hollywood Melodrama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 146.

Figure 4. The ending of *Mildred Pierce*. Though Mildred ends up back with her husband, she is still wearing a $15,000 mink coat that she paid for with her own labor.

If *Mildred Pierce* were to have a sole visual signifier of class privilege, it would most likely be the striking, broad-shouldered fur coat Mildred wears in the opening sequences of the film, throughout the police interrogation scenes, and when she walks out into the sunlight with Bert at the end. The furred image of Mildred jibes with the studio's imperative to make her upper-middle class instead of lower-middle, and also cannot be disentangled from the image of Joan Crawford the movie star.[53] It is the outfit most associated with Mildred, in sharp contrast to the ready-made dresses she wears at the beginning of the flashback sequence, which director Michael Curtiz had the studio purchase from Sears for $3.97.[54] The coat also represents the height of Mildred's financial ascent right before her life comes crashing down; as such, being the look most associated with her, it emphasizes the loss and punishment for which she is most remembered. The visual lavishness of this coat is singularly at odds with Mildred's narrative mortification. Although the viewer is told that she loses everything—business,

[53] Robert J. Corber, "Joan Crawford's Padded Shoulders: Female Masculinity in *Mildred Pierce*, *Camera Obscura* 21.2 (2006): 1-31.
[54] Hoopes, *Cain,* 352.

second husband, and daughter—as the impeccable Crawford traipses out of the station sans the leeching Monte and vindictive Veda, to what extent might we read her so-called fall as something else? It should be recognized that the film *intends* the ending to be read as a fall, what *Mildred Pierce* screenwriter Catherine Turney avowed was the proper fate of all cinematic women who "transgressed."[55] And feminist film criticism has almost unanimously agreed that the ending of the film places Mildred back in the kitchen with her cheating husband and bereft of financial independence. But that lavish mink coat might just as well be read against the grain as a vestige of Mildred's (and the wartime woman's) newfound, unrelinquished economic empowerment. In Cain's novel, a brief mention of a mink coat early on is used to showcase Bert's disempowerment within his and Mildred's marriage: "In September [of 1929] he had been rich, and Mildred picked out the mink coat she would buy when the weather grew cooler."[56] Shortly thereafter, the Pierces lose everything in the Crash. Though the film is careful to separate Bert's failure from the catastrophe of the Depression, the Bert of the film seems unlikely to be able to afford Mildred that kind of coat on a middle-class salary. In fact, the only women who can afford to keep themselves in furs are the two financially independent ones: Mildred and Ida, the latter of whom is shown sporting a very similar mink stole in the police station (Fig. 5). Mildred is certainly visually distinguished from the scrubwomen, and their prominent presence reveals how even in a supposedly egalitarian society the possibilities of class rise are distributed unevenly, but they are also a reminder that women have always worked, and will continue to do so after the war.

[55] Lee Server, *Screenwriter: Words Become Pictures* (Pittstown, NJ: Main Street Press, 1987), 235.
[56] Cain, *Mildred Pierce*, 10.

Figure 5. A befurred Ida attempts to speak to a similarly befurred Mildred but a male police officer intervenes.

In this way, the coat exposes the possibilities and limitations of a female coalition based on the shared experience of labor. White women in masculinized positions wield the most power and capital in the film. Black women and lower-class women remain on the margins, though their presence problematizes the coherence of white middle-class womanhood. This is, ultimately, the central tension of female relationships in Classical Hollywood cinema. The idea of an intersectional feminism was still far in the future; yet these films display an awareness of the ways that gender as a monolithic category starts to crumble when women who do not fit into its narrow definitions come into the picture.

Coda

In 1952 the power of the Production Code was significantly weakened by the Supreme Court case *Joseph Bursyn, Inc. v. Wilson*, in which a film distributor successfully sued the New York State Board of Regents for its censorship of the Italian film *The Miracle* (1948) on the grounds of free speech. Though censorship was still legal with regard to obscenity, the case marked the beginning of the end of the Code. In an attempt to accommodate changing postwar attitudes, the Code was significantly amended in 1954 and 1956—for instance, the prohibitions against miscegenation, abortion, and prostitution were taken out. However, the social landscape was shifting too quickly and dramatically for a document that had been written by moral reformers in the 1930s. Joseph Breen departed the Production Code Administration in 1954, and the new regime, headed by Geoffrey Shurlock, was a shadow of the organization's former self. By the 1960s, the Code was all but obsolete. It was finally abolished in 1967, to be replaced by the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America, the new moniker of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America) rating system, a shift that cleared the way for the rebellious filmmakers of the New Hollywood.

The year 1967 saw the release of a number of landmark films, many of which reflect the new latitude in subject matter: *Bonnie and Clyde*, about two glamorous sexual deviants on a crime spree; *In the Heat of the Night*, an interracial buddy cop film that became a genre blueprint; and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, about a white couple learning to accept their daughter's relationship with an African American man. The following year the lesbian film *The Killing of Sister George* was released. Yet what is missing from this list of racially and sexually transgressive relationships is an example of

a cross-racial female friendship foregrounded in the same way, at least in a mainstream film. Some exceptions can be found in Blaxploitation, such as *Black Mama, White Mama* from 1973. This is significant, given Blaxploitation's anti-racist political investments and its place on the margins of film production. Overall, though, among studio-produced films it would take longer for that kind of relationship to move out of the narrative sidelines.

To answer the question of "why?" is beyond the purview of this coda, but I would like to end by briefly discussing an independent film that does center interracial female relationships, and does so specifically within the context of the kinds of Classical Hollywood representations I have addressed in this dissertation. Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) is a landmark film in its own right as the first feature directed by a Black lesbian. The film is staged as a home-movie-esque documentary about a filmmaker named Cheryl (played by Dunye—I will refer to the character as Cheryl and the filmmaker as Dunye) as she seeks the identity of an uncredited African American actress in a fictional film from the 1930s called *Plantation Memories*. Known only as the "Watermelon Woman" (Lisa Marie Bronson), the actress plays antebellum melodrama's typical sentimentalized slave role in a brief bit part where she reassures her distraught white mistress that "Massa Charles" will come home. Despite the demeaning portrayal, Cheryl is taken by the Watermelon Woman's beauty, which sets her off on a quest to make a film about this anonymous woman's identity. What emerges in this exploration of racial representations in old Hollywood is a submerged history of African American actresses' rich cultural lives off screen, in stark contrast to their one-dimensional portrayals on it.

Parallel to this history is another one that Cheryl uncovers: that of Hollywood lesbians, Black and white. As it turns out, the Watermelon Woman, whose real name is Fae Richards, was gay and had a relationship with the white woman who directed *Plantation Memories*, Martha Page (Alexandra Juhasz), modeled on the actual lesbian director Dorothy Arzner. As Cheryl engages with this research, she herself develops a relationship with a white woman named Diana (Guinevere Turner). This relationship puts a strain on Cheryl's friendship with her Black coworker and fellow lesbian Tamara (Valarie Walker), who accuses Cheryl of racial self-hatred. The mirroring of Fae's and Cheryl's relationships with white women continues to play out in how Fae's last lover, a Black woman named June (Cheryl Clarke), tells Cheryl that Martha should have nothing to do with how Fae is remembered. Eventually Cheryl breaks up with Diana, but she does not agree with Tamara's and June's assessments that Black lesbians should only be with their own kind. As critic Laura L. Sullivan points out, Cheryl ultimately rejects June's assertion that Martha is not a part of Fae's story. Sullivan argues that the film refuses to depict a "unified lesbian subject position, either black or white," undercutting a hetero-patriarchal gaze by insisting on difference and irresolution between the lesbian characters.[1]

Rather than offer a full-fledged reading of the film, I want to point out that *The Watermelon Woman* stages how contemporary cinematic relationships among Black, white, and queer women are inescapably part of the legacy left by the problematic images of Classical Hollywood. The film offers its own images of cross-racial representations as a counterpoint, explicitly showing the intimacy that could not be acknowledged in the

[1] Laura L. Sullivan, "Chasing Fae: "The Watermelon Woman" and Black Lesbian Possibility," *Callaloo* 23.1 (Winter 2000): 451.

1930s. It also does this by establishing itself as an act of "critical fabulation" (to borrow Saidiya Hartman's term), whose imaginings stand in for an unrecoverable history. The film *Plantation Memories* and the actress Fae Richards, after all, are made up; and the documentary that Cheryl assembles at the end of the film is comprised of staged photos ending with a title card that reads, "Sometimes you have to create your own history." Notably, Cheryl does not explore the representations in *Plantation Memories* so much as she explores the personal lives of the women behind the film. For her, the image of the Watermelon Woman and her white mistress is not a site of potential recuperation; it is significant only for the history it represses. But Cheryl's relationship with Diana *is* a representational site that undoes some of the power dynamics of the tropes set up by Hollywood. While the relationship is not utopian—as Sullivan points out, Diana has a proclivity to appropriate African American culture—it is not so much a critique of interracial relationships as an acknowledgement of some of the difficulties in trying to navigate intersectional tensions. In *The Watermelon Woman*, the representations Dunye creates of both Fae Richards' history and Cheryl's relationships replace the imprinted cultural images of antebellum nostalgia films like *Plantation Memories* (which stands in for actual films like *Jezebel* [1938], *Gone with the Wind* [1939], and *The Flame of New Orleans* [1941]), in which women are never allowed to be so openly deviant.

It is significant that Dunye chose an antebellum film as the cultural object that both focalizes and limits the image of Fae. I have not addressed any antebellum films in this dissertation, despite their popularity in the 1930s and 40s, because of the ways in which their relationships do *not* fit with the intersectional possibilities of deviance as I have been articulating it. Regressive historical frameworks that romanticize slavery and

formalize racial hierarchy limit these possibilities, and it will take future work to extrapolate how their discourse departs from or amends the claims I have made in this study. It would seem that antebellum films cannot, by dint of their investment in an oppressive past, enable the kinds of subversions we see possible in other relationships that engage with the changing conditions of urban modernity. The films I have addressed in my chapters certainly traffic in similar kinds of stereotypes to those found in antebellum films, but the framework of nostalgia does not lend itself to the same kind of recuperative possibilities. For this very reason, it is relevant that *The Watermelon Woman* evokes this kind of film as its archetype for films of the past. In choosing an antebellum film as her primary example of a Black-white female relationship, Dunye implies that the inherently demeaning dynamic offered in the plantation genre is a major lens through which to understand Hollywood's cross-racial representations.

My point, however, is that these representations are not all uniformly problematic. The films I selected for my analysis offer some exceptional moments of resistance within a cinematic landscape that by and large reaffirms essentialist distinctions. What I have tried to show here is that cross-racial and queer female relationships can perform subversive cultural work, particularly when understood within the context of film censorship. In contrast to Dunye's focus on personal histories, my study has looked to on-screen representations and the archive of self-regulation for evidence of the deviance these images both reveal and conceal. I have established how female relationships are crucial sites for discerning social commentaries that could not otherwise be addressed under the regime of the Code. In shifting attention to censorship as the mediator of Hollywood's images of women, this work helps revise conversations in feminist film

criticism about how to understand the valences of meaning in woman's films. Instead of viewing female relationships as simply undermining patriarchal power and thus requiring narrative containment, I focus on their persistent presence and diverse representations within Hollywood films. Female relationships provide alterative possibilities to enforced heteronormativity and could represent cross-racial affiliations in ways that other relationships could not, and they were not always recognized as suggesting this potential by the industry's ideological regulators. Before presuming that a logic of punishment pervades every aspect of Classical Hollywood cinema's female representations, we should look at these images in ways that censors did and did not.

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