

RE-VISIONING TROPES OF WOMANHOOD

IN EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN ALL BLACK CAST MOVIE MUSICALS

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE HOLY WOMAN AND HER TRANSGRESSIVE
COUNTERPART IN KING VIDOR'S *HALLELLUJAH* (1929), *SPENCER WILLIAMS' THE
BLOOD OF JESUS* (1941) and VINCENTE MINNELLI'S *CABIN IN THE SKY* (1943)

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to interrogate cinematic representations of black female sexuality and spirituality in King Vidor's vision of religious normalcy and black life in the deep south in *'Hallelujah'* 1929, Spencer Williams's 1941 independently produced religious melodrama, *'The Blood of Jesus'*, and the vaudevillesque, folkloric Hollywood musical fantasy of Vincente Minnelli's 1943 *'Cabin In The Sky'*. The paper will examine specific cinematic configurations of black womanhood that were popularised in the all black cast American movie musicals between 1929 and 1943. The highly marked racial and gendered configurations of the Mammy and Jezebel stereotypes function, the paper will argue, as phallogentric constructs of black femininity, firstly in the configuration of the black church woman as the bogeywoman, unknowable, a superwoman and secondly, that of the black female condition as transgressive and the catalyst of male deviancy.

During this period, the Hollywood movie industry's propensity for authoring and fixing racial and religious categories, produced the binary manifestation of the puritanical, defeminised black church woman and her sexually transgressive counterpart. Such filmic representations of black femininities and their deleterious ascriptions and the historical institutions that produced them will be the focus of this inquiry.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to the memory of my beloved Mother who has left for more peaceful and eternal climes, without whose love and total selflessness, support, guidance, prayer and belief in her children, this work, my life and all its riches may never have been realised.

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INTRODUCTION

The production and proliferation of the all black cast Hollywood movie musicals between 1929 and 1959 marked a period of radical cinematic experimentation, direction and risk. These projects include King Vidor's *Hallelujah* (1929) Paul Sloan's *Heart in Dixie* of the same year, William Keighley and Marc Connelly's *Green Pastures* (1936), Andrew L. Stone's *Stormy Weather* (1943), and Otto Preminger's *Carmen Jones* (1954). These critically acclaimed filmic creations, were highly popularised and valued for their commercial successes, due not least in part to their lavish budgets and extravagant designs, but also for the producers' investment in showcasing an impressive line-up of some of the most talented and popular artists of the time. The host of stellar actors, singers, dancers and musicians from the vaudeville stage, radio and screen included Ethel Waters, who had collaborated with Minnelli in the 1935 Broadway review, *At Home Abroad*, Cab Calloway, Katherine Dunham, together with accomplished jazz musicians Count Bassie, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington and his Orchestra, all provided the commercial success associated with the commodification of race and gender identities.

The corpus of films that have been selected for this thesis meet three criteria for the purpose of articulating black feminist critical inspections, namely the contestation of cinematic objectification and exotification of the [mythic] black female subject per se. These criteria establish the inclusion of films produced within the collective fields of *religion*, which provided filmmakers with the technical apparatus to construct images of African

American religious traditions and concomitantly the possibilities of affecting the nature of spirituality and supernatural phenomenon, deploying special effects as well as the morality tale device of vying angels and demons in order to situate the subject's moral position, the portrayal of a *universal and exclusive black milieu* intended to present a racialised account of black life and the subject of *migration* as a marker of temporal and geographic transformation in which the subject shifts from the realities of a rural ideal to the uncertainties and excitement of the cosmopolitan which indicate moral and cultural tensions as determined under patriarchal codes. In turn this transformation allows for a discussion on the binaries of secular-sacred, North-South, Madonna-Whore. In particular, the time frame of these composite movie creations indicates a period of cinematic ostentation which highlights further the construction of spectatorship itself as well as the construction of the black female subject as determined under the gaze of dominant masculine cultures. Whilst a wide range of commercially successful movies offer similar critical inspections, for example *The Green Pastures* (1936), *Porgy and Bess* (1943) and *Carmen Jones* (1954), the less discussed narratives that have been selected, and in particular within the scope of this thesis, provide new critical intersections.

The dominant cinemas alongside their fringe moviemaking production houses were constantly engaged in a process of fetishizing and ghettoizing representations of blacks by linking the African American subject inextricably with performance, musicality and religious sentiments. There had been a growth of interest in African American religion from the early influences of the Broadway stage in the 1920's/1930's. Religious plays within the 'all black cast' contexts were the stock of white playwrights, i.e Bagby Stephen's '*Roseanne*' (1923),

Em Jo Basshe's 'Earth' (1927), *The Green Pastures*' 1930 Broadway hit by Marc Connelly, and according to Weisenfeld, "set the standard for judging every play thereafter that engaged black religion, whether written by black or white playwrights" (Weisenfeld, 2007,10).

The inclusion of Spencer Williams' 1941 film, *The Blood of Jesus*, provides an important black cinematic aesthetic and vernacular. His body of work represents the alternative category of 'race movie', the body of independently produced works by black filmmakers, performed by black artists for the viewing pleasure of black audiences. Recognising that blacks were ostracized from having any creative control, independence or agency within the dominant cinema industry, black filmmakers emerged as a corrective to the institutionalised racist practices of the major film houses. In so doing they were able to expand creative opportunities open to black actors whilst providing a much sought after medium for growing black audience demographics. These include such pioneering contributions from Oscar Micheaux, regarded as the father of the race movie, having made over 40 films, including *The Homesteader* (1919) and *Body and Soul* (1925).

Additional artists to recognise for their contribution to black film production also include producer Emmett J. Scott's *The Birth of a Race* (1918) a filmic response to the racist propagandist machinations of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). It is equally important to note the often eclipsed and understudied works of black women film directors, such as Tressie Souders, writer, director and producer of her own film, *A Woman's Error* (1922),

travelling evangelist Eloyce Gist together with her husband James Gist, who wrote, directed and produced religious movies including *Hellbound Train* (1930), Maria P. Williams' *Flames of Wrath* (1923) producer and director who, along with her husband, Jesse Williams, owned, the Western Film Producing Company and Booking Exchange. Yet despite the strong presence of black women both in front and behind the camera, and the critical perspectives and gendered articulations their voices provided, these women's participation and acknowledgement have been overshadowed and disavowed under the terms of dominant patriarchal cinematic codes.

The minstrelisation of the African American entertainer in black **BLACK FACE** highlighted the complex relationship between race and identity during the 1920's, 1930's and 1940's. Black and white audience consumption and sanction of this art form was equally met with resistance from political organisations lobbying against degrading and insulting images of African Americans in favour of more positive and realistic representations of black life. Walter White, Executive Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), appealed for the provision of more realistic images of African Americans on screen, "the matter of treatment of the Negro in the motion pictures [is] of such importance that it takes rank over some other phases of our work" (White, 2003, 266).

Minstrel shows featuring African Americans maintained popularity in theatres around the United States, including the Apollo Theater performer, Dewey Pigmeat Markham

wearing traditional burnt cork and white paint. Writing in the 1931 publication, *Black Manhattan*, black critic James Weldon Johnson's critique exposed the dialectics of the minstrelsy tradition:

“Minstrelsy was, on the whole, a caricature of Negro life, and it fixed a stage tradition which has not yet been entirely broken. It fixed the tradition of the Negro as only an irresponsible, happy-go-lucky, wide-grinning, loud-laughing, shuffling, banjo-playing, singing, dancing sort of being” (Johnson; 1930, reprinted 1968, 93).

Whilst the major studio houses such as Fox and MGM were constructing racial identities during the early part of the (20th in an increasingly consumerist economy of mass cultural productivity, through the emerging technologies of radio, film, the urban nightclub settings and so on, the racialization of the African subject was being determined, and none more so than that of the disparaging constructions of black womanhood. The thesis will argue that the black female subject is the primary sight and site of oppressive cinematic inscriptions within categories of race, class and gender. Within these objectified spaces the configuration of the bogeywoman articulates the social and cultural practice of ‘othering’ black femininities and constructing black womanhood as the catalyst of male deviancy.

Black feminist have already begun the important task of building a body of work that redresses the critical gaps regarding black feminist theoretical perspectives on film. They include Jacqueline Bobo's "The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers". In *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, 1988, a range of feminist theoretical articulations re-examine black women spectators as a distinctive interpretative community and how the interpretation of cultural products is informed by this specificity; bell hooks' *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, (1992) in which the author challenges the commodification of blackness in the media, calls for interventions in order to contest racist ideological practices which continue to inform the portrayal of black masculinities and black femininities; Michele Wallace's, "Black Female Spectatorship and the Dilemma of Tokenism" (1997) underscores the importance of historical and psychoanalytic approaches in black feminist discourses as a means of deconstructing female spectatorship and the objectified image of black women; Judith Weisenfeld's investigations look at cinematic representations of African American religious expression as central to the Hollywood industry's imagination in *Hollywood Be Thy Name* (2007). Collectively these scholarships articulate black feminist intersections that negotiate gender and racial discourse, and by contextualising these aesthetics in the fields of art, literature and film present the black female image as one which undergoes a process of erasure across multiple mediums.

It is critical therefore, that black feminist analytical inspections are continually exercised in order to rescue these women's social, cultural and political realities from the denigrating limitations imposed by dominant film institutions. The seminal undertakings of black feminist scholars provide vital sources of critique in reading, for example *Hallelujah's*

treatment of its women and offer insights into the ways harmful media constructions of black womanhood have flourished.

Barbara Christian's groundbreaking project, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition* (1980) and Hazel V. Carby's pioneering work *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987) began the process of recovering silenced voices within literary fields, retrieving the lost canons of black women novelists, writers such as Nella Larsen who were combating racist assertions of black womanhood in the 1920s. These undertakings have established an important black feminist articulation that contests the sexist and racist constructions of black women's identities. Crucially these racial as well as gendered interrogations challenge mainstream feminism's holistic approach in identifying women's marginalisation and subordination, which had hitherto failed to recognise the very specific oppressive institutions of racism and classism that women of colour had known. Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of 'intersectionality'ⁱ explores within a legal context, the interconnections of ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation and race, and how these are to be understood in their totality.

In her seminal work, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex* (1989) she puts forward this essential optic in interpreting black women's experiences. Antidiscrimination institutions, namely feminist organisations, Civil Rights leaders, court systems, have historically privileged whiteness and maleness, leaving black women at best, in the liminal position of similarly shared experiences, and at worst at the bottom of the hierarchical pile of disadvantage, and as such, black female identities have been

misunderstood and misrepresented. Crenshaw warns that in addressing these absences and instituting correctives, it is not a simple matter of inserting the black woman into established policies and discourses, but rather to transform those policies and discourse practices altogether. She cites the *DeGraffenreid v General Motors* race and sex discrimination lawsuit in which she concluded the court's failures in recognising the intersectionality of its black women plaintiffs and their unique racial and gendered experiences. The court recognised that race was a contributing factor to these women's disadvantage, and ruled that a case for racial discrimination was therefore a legitimate judgement with regard to failures in the hiring of black women, however as GM had hired white women per se, the court refused to rule discrimination on the collective grounds of sexual as well as racial difference (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw does, however, articulate the "paradigmatic political and theoretical dilemma created by the intersection of race and gender" in that "Black women are caught between ideological and political currents that combine first to create and then to bury Black women's experiences" (Crenshaw, 1989).

The unique struggles of black women under the systems of racism and patriarchy therefore do not correspond to other instances of domination faced by white female or black male subjects. Jacqueline Bobo's examination of Black women's spectatorshipⁱⁱ re-positions them as active cultural interpreters, allowing for subversive, empowering ways of seeing and consuming representations. As bearers of the look and producers of meaning, this disrupts the ways women have been sexually objectified, voyeurised and fetishised by what Kaplan views as the dominant male gazeⁱⁱⁱ. As an historical document, MGM's all black cast musical epic offers black feminist introspections into the attitudes and social conditions which shaped black women's identities in early (20th America).

A key factor in the social conditions which determined constraints on women's lives is the necessity of displacement, and therefore each chapter of the thesis will give focus to the shared narrative themes of migration since this is bound up with the ideological concept of the migrating black woman as social and political problem. Hazel V. Carby interrogates this problematic in her study, *Policing the Black woman's Body in an Urban Context*. She asserts that "the movement of black women between rural and urban areas and between southern and northern cities generated a series of moral panics. One serious consequence was that the behaviour of black female migrants was characterised as sexually degenerate and, therefore, socially dangerous" (Carby, 1992, 739). The Rural South and Urban North dichotomies are geographic and temporal locations defining the threat of modernity, with particular reference to the nightclub location. The contrast of the transgressive black woman and the absolution of male deviance within the context of religious practice features profoundly in which the phallogocentric articulations of the dominant cinemas, mainstream and fringe, pathologize black femininities in their construction of the bogeywoman. The themes of heaven and hell, life and death, damnation and salvation are moral and religious dilemmas the films' subjects must encounter. Vidor's God-fearing Missy Rose together with the spiritual matriarch Mammy Johnson, as moral and corporal antithesis to Chick's worldly, self-destructive nature, are familial dynamics echoed in Williams' pious Martha, and Minnelli's devout Petunia and adulterer Georgia Brown. Each narrative engages a Faustian plot involving angels and demons who provide moral counsel for their charges who are placed at crucial crossroads.

Chapter one will interrogate tropes of black femininity as an ideological site of sexual objectification in King Vidor's Hollywood-produced vision of black life and religious normalcy amongst a fictive, Southern sharecropping community in *Hallelujah*, and traces the category of the transgressive black woman as a catalyst of male deviancy. The chapter will explore the construction of black female sexuality and how this has been normalised historically, socially and culturally, particularly in the context of the sexual proclivities of the Tragic Mulatto figure. Chapter two will examine the black churchwoman as a problematic in Spencer Williams' religious melodrama, *The Blood of Jesus*, whilst Chapter three examines the mythic trope of the superwoman embodied in the Mammy figure, in Vincente Minnelli's folkloric theatrical fantasy of temptation, sin and redemption in *Cabin In The Sky*.

CHAPTER ONE

IN HER OWN VOICE? BREAKING THE SILENCE AS BLACK HOLLYWOOD 'SPEAKS', NEW TECHNOLOGIES, OLD ROBES; IN KING VIDOR'S *HALLELUJAH*

The presence of black women in film has over time produced troubling incongruities. Since representations of black womanhood, primarily configured as sexually transgressive and the catalyst of male deviancy, have consistently been determined within largely white patriarchal systems, as well as other dominant discourse frameworks, it is possible that black feminine identities, and the imposition of an imagined identity can never truly be known. King Vidor's first 'talkie' *Hallelujah* followed the pioneering synchronised sound movie, *The Jazz Singer* (1927) in which Warner Brothers presented Al Johnson in BLACK FACE performance. By contrast, Vidor's creation was to authenticate an essentially reductive visual and auditory representation of the African subject in misogynist and racially disparaging terms.

In *Hallelujah*, the silence of the African American subject was finally broken by the use of sound synchronicity, the superimposition of sound recording over the moving image, an exhaustive and carefully structured yet mechanically fragmented arrangement. Thus the process inaugurated an unusual, inverse form of ventriloquism. To a degree it is this

fragmentation and estrangement that reflects the dominant cinema's ideological tendencies of disconnecting black women's realities from the subject of the film and instead imposing upon them an imagined identity of black womanhood. This inevitably results in further silencing and displacement.

In *Hallelujah* the deleterious representations of a stereotypical black femininity are inscribed upon its primary female characters, in the form of the Tragic Mulatto and Mammy figures. The racially ambiguous, sexually aggressive Mulatto occasionally referred to in her more biblical context as the Jezebel, represented here as the streetwise, libido driven temptress, Chick, serves as a reminder of the dangers of modernity, posed by an urban existence, is also the diametric opposite of the defeminised, strong, pious and domesticated matriarchal Mammy or Aunt Jemima construct, Mammy Johnson. The dangers and corruptness of the city, and the contrasting innocence and nostalgia of a primitive rural existence expressed through various modes of music, Jazz, Spirituals, Work Songs, are arguably social and cultural reflections of black women's identities, primal and dangerous.

These phallogentric configurations place emphasis on the racial and gendered inferiorities of black womanhood, predisposing them to the scopophilic preoccupations of audiences across the spectrums of race and gender. Vidor capitalised on picturizing these long established racial motifs that had been formalised during the period of slavery and later sanctioned in the new and developing media. However, although organisations such as the NAACP (1909) which had been established to combat racial discrimination in economic, educational, social and political systems, fighting tirelessly for improvements for black actors

and better representations of the African American on screen, black audiences by contrast, continued an ambivalent and complex relationship with film consumerism by endorsing the very negative images which were promoting their marginalisation and exclusion.

Writing in *The Crisis* (in 1934), W.E.B Du Bois' official NAACP magazine publication, Loren Miller, a black civil rights attorney addressed black audience attitudes towards Hollywood depictions of African Americans:

“The cumulative effect of constant picturization of this kind is tremendously effective in shaping racial attitudes. Hollywood products are seen in every nook and corner of the world. Millions of non-residents of the United States depend almost entirely on the movies for their knowledge of Negro life, as those who have been abroad can testify. Other millions of white Americans of all ages confirm their beliefs about negroes at the neighborhood theaters while Negroes themselves fortify their inferiority complex by seeing themselves always cast as the underdog to be laughed at or despised” (Quoted in Weisenfeld, p.2).

Continually marked, categorised and spoken for by dominant discourse communities, namely the interpretation, construction and representation of black women's identities in political, literary, social and filmic arenas, King Vidor's *Hallelujah* illustrates through the ironic use of the emerging sound technologies, the disjunctions created by sound synchronicity where the film was shot in silence and sound dubbed in at a later stage. This practice also reflects the ideological dubbing and silencing of black identities, along with the trend in popularising an all black filmic milieu, and how Hollywood engaged with limiting

notions of black womanhood that inevitably contributed to her devaluation and invisibility. Reluctant to endorse Vidor's bold ambition in bringing the black subject from the peripheries to the centre of the text by creating a racially exclusive world, studio executives and financial backers, eager to appease white audience sensibilities and committed to re-enforcing denigrating racial images and motifs on screen, eventually sanctioned Vidor's self-financed project. The film was given its most reductive inscription, however when MGM's president, Nicholas Schenck, legitimized the making of *Hallelujah* on racist ideological grounds, remarking "Well, if you think like that, I'll let you make a picture about *whores*" (Robinson, 2007).

Vidor's idealist projections of an exclusive black rural community and the religious normalcy of Deep South folk customs centre its theme on the rise and downfall of a young black male sharecropper, Zeke, played by Daniel Haynes, then an understudy for the 1929 movie *Show Boat*, when he encounters a trickster in the form of a sassy, fair skinned, femme fatale, Chick, performed by seventeen year old chorus line dancer and newcomer, Nina Mae McKinney, whom Donald Bogle identified in his study on blacks in American film, as "the movies' first black whore" (Bogle, 1994, 31) and precursor to later black actresses performing in a similar vein: "Almost every black leading lady in motion pictures, from Lena Horne in *Cabin in the Sky* to Lonette McKee in *Sparkle* in 1976, owes a debt to the playfully sexy moves and manoeuvres of McKinney's character Chick" (Bogle, 31).

Temptation and redemption in the Hollywood imagination are symptoms of the tensions that exist between religious expression and sexual impulses, and the catalyst of this

conflation, continually at the centre of this dysfunction is the figure of the immoral black woman. This troubling condition placed upon black women's identities had been constructed by dominant institutions throughout history, slavery, literature, the bible and media, all of which had propagated denigrating notions of black womanhood as hypersexual and promiscuous, from the immoral Phoenician Jezebel in Old Testament biblical accounts, to the racist ideologies of (17th European travellers who interpreted African customs as lewd and savage. Consequently, slave traders promoted the sexual objectification of women slaves by publicly displaying black women's naked bodies as property and sanctioned the victimization of those bodies by institutionally dehumanising them. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass had asserted that the "slave woman is at the mercy of the fathers, sons or brothers of her master" (Douglass, 1855, 60). Women were neither content nor silent about the black's disenfranchisement and victimisation. Contesting the pervasive racist ideologies of the time, was, amongst others, Ida B. Wells, Civil rights activist, journalist and one of the founding members of the "National Association of Colored Women". Her social and political influence altered the course of history in campaigning against Jim Crow Laws, lynchings and championing the suffrage of women. It raises issues, as the thesis will later explore, of what constitutes woman's respectability and questions the class and racial codifications used to determine this.

Vidor's reflections on the making of *Hallelujah* illustrates Hollywood's propensity for linking the African American subject inextricably with religion, musicality, performance and sexuality:

“For several years I had nurtured a secret hope. I wanted to make a film about Negroes, using only Negroes in the cast. The sincerity and fervor of their religious expression intrigued me, as did the honest simplicity of their sexual drives. In many instances the intermingling of these two activities seemed to offer strikingly dramatic content” (Durgnat & Simon; 1988, 95). And with equal conviction he added:

“I used to watch the Negroes in the South, which was my home. I studied their music, and I used to wonder at the pent-up romance in them... The story is based on events with which I was familiar as a boy at home in Texas” (*Chicago Defender*, June 8, 1929).

Indeed, the lure of black religious expressions for their entertainment value and for the pleasure of white observers and visitors to the black church has been studied in the Southern Antebellum church. Eileen Southern, a scholar in this area notes in her studies of the same title:

“For many visitors, and Americans as well, the most remarkable feature of black culture was the worship service of the black church. It was there that narrative, song, dance, and drama melded often into profound and moving spectacle, over which towered the African priest-turned-preacher” (Southern; 1991, 22).

As well as a claim to understanding the cultures the filmmaker purported to represent, Vidor regarded himself as an authority on the African American subject and suitably qualified to script, direct and produce his film about their lives. Adopting the role of observer and documentarian, Vidor sought a style of movie making that engendered a somewhat fly on

the wall verisimilitude, a non-fictional style of filmic accountability in its attempt to capture faithfully the cultural practices of southern black folks. African American musical and religious expressions featured wedding ceremonies, river baptisms, spirituals, work and celebration songs, banjo playing, tap dancing children, prayer meetings and sermons. Collectively they define the importance the film industry placed upon the coalescence of the African subject with entertainment, for the purpose of visual pleasure and the transmission of cultural knowledge, particularly African religion and African music, as Knight observes:

“In the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mechanical and electronic recording media – sound recording and broadcasting, photography, film, and then synchronized sound film – added apparently indexical, verisimilar documents to the chronicle of the important place of music in African American culture. As mass reproducible, mass marketable, and particularly in the case of film, mass audience media, these recording media took on special importance in their relation to – and of – African Americans, their “minority” culture, and that culture’s marketable music” (Knight; 2002, 4).

Opting in favour of the rural landscapes and swamps of Tennessee and Arkansas to shoot his film, *Hallelujah* was staged away from the limiting spaces and artifice the studio would have otherwise produced. By definition therefore *Hallelujah* presents *an* image of a real world in which Vidor’s inhabitants express primitive impulses and a simplistic and naïve contentedness towards their environment. In so doing, however, the film disavowed the very real issues of disenfranchisement early (20th African Americans faced on a daily basis. The struggle to access political and economic power, equality and participation, against the institutions of racism, segregation, poverty, and violence was a constant reality of black life, a

reality experienced only in partial terms in Vidor's racially exclusive world. This is given expression in *Hallelujah's* black labouring class who toil slavishly for a meagre living, evoking the character's impoverishment, but whose racially utopian existence negates the realities of racial difference itself. As Thomas Cripps observes:

“More than any other group, Afro-Americans have been kept apart from the centers of American culture by means of southern law and custom, isolation from urban centers, and the absence of usable survivals from the ‘old country’ culture” (Cripps; 1980, 18).

Ultimately Hollywood's propensity for marginalising black images was not confined, but as Mia Mask, author of *Divas on Screen* points out, “During the height of the studio's golden era (1929-60), Hollywood determined the standards of beauty for black, white, and Asian and Latina actresses” (Mask, 2009, 35).

The film's storyline centres on the seduction of its protagonist, Zeke Johnson, eldest son of a Christian, sharecropping family when he encounters the lustful charms of sassy, femme fatale, and inferred prostitute, Chick. In collaboration with her duplicitous partner and pimp, Hot Shot, played by William Fountaine, the temptress persuades Zeke to gamble his entire cotton crop earnings on a rigged dice game. As a result of the violent dispute that ensues, Zeke's brother, Spunk, with Everett McGarrity in the role, innocently caught up in the crossfire is accidentally shot and killed. Tormented with grief and repentant, Zeke finds forgiveness and fulfilment as an itinerant preacher. Attending one of Zeke's revival meetings, a cynical Chick, is subsequently converted and baptised. Temptation once again proves ruinous and passions drive Zeke into the arms of his new convert and away from his calling, his family, and his first love, pure and devout, Missy Rose, performed by Victoria

Spivey. On discovering Chick intends to return to her former lover, Zeke kills both Chick and Hot Shot, in a moment of jealous rage before returning to the forgiving arms of his family.

Central to *Hallelujah's* inherent themes of race, religion and performance are the configurations of black femininity and sexuality as destructive forces of nature in which male deviancies are consequently absolved, reasoned and sanctioned. The opening sequences move rapidly in tone from the densely populated cotton fields, underscored by work songs as the sharecropping community happily go about their labours before shifting to the Johnson family at recreation following their daily toil. Leisure pursuits are emphasised through music and dance as banjo playing, tap dancing and communal singing ensues. During the proceedings, Mammy Johnson, performed by Fanny Belle DeKnight along with Parson, Pappy Johnson, played by Harry Gray, conduct the wedding ceremony for a local family. Whilst Missy Rose, plays the Bridal March on the organ, delighting herself in the pleasure of playing, anticipating her own participation in the occasion as a future bride, Zeke undergoes a transformation which brings out his feral instincts.

Missy Rose becomes the source of sexual objectification. Her Madonna-like sexual purity, her innocence, her kinship to the incorrupt rural utopia, her connection to music and the pleasure she draws from that connection become the catalyst of Zeke's primal impulses. His transfiguration exposes the unpredictable savage, brutal nature of unchecked desires. As the camera pans into a close up shot of Zeke, we witness his metamorphosis, produced not by clever mechanical illusions, but rather by the actor's performance. Zeke's growing animal

passions are expressed in his gradually accentuated wild eyes, his menacing yet tentative advancing steps towards Missy Rose, his overpowering of her as he forces Missy Rose into his arms and kisses her, together with her vocally subdued and frightened protests as she offers little resistance to his advances, demonstrate the rise in sexual excitement and battle for self-control, in a scene which journeys dangerously close to the act of rape. The scene itself undergoes a metamorphosis as the threat of rape is pacified abruptly, or at least curtailed within the ideological framework of the text. Realising the extent to which his lusts have endangered the sanctity of his family and his faith, Zeke, visibly tortured with guilt, is restored to his former self and is absolved of his lechery when Missy Rose unreservedly forgives him. The scene is set thus;

Missy Rose: What's the matter wid you. What's the matter wid your eyes?

Don't look at me like that.

Zeke: (Whilst grappling his victim) I've been looking at you all day.

You sure do look good tonight, Missy Rose.

Missy Rose: (repeatedly) Don't do that.

Zeke: 'Scuse me, Missy Rose. But it looks like the devil's in me here tonight.

Missy Rose: (smiling heavenwards) That's alright, Zeke. I forgive you.

Neither fully meeting the category of Mammyhood in terms of maturity and stature, nor owning the sexual proclivities of the Mulatto, Missy Rose, the young Christian Negress is yet both sight and site of sexual violence. By reducing and normalising the horror of sexual violence against women, the aberrations of rape here were disavowed in this film, thereby

side stepping its social and political devastations upon black women's lives. The wider concerns of black women's marginality and vulnerability to sexual attack are not only trivialised within the filmic structure, but is also repudiated ideologically and historically in the broader discussions of white men's rape of black women, or as W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Damnation of Women* contends, the slave South's "wanton and continued persistent insulting of the black womanhood which it sought and seeks to prostitute to its lust" (Du Bois; 1920, 165). It should be stressed at this point that the plantation mammy, though mythicized as asexual and defeminised, was in reality as vulnerable to sexual abuse by their slave masters as any other woman. It was from these discussions that constructions of black women, as sexually transgressive and therefore culpable of their own vulnerability to sexual assault had emerged, and from which black women's status as moral scapegoats can be interrogated and contested. Patriarchal codes of true black womanhood were being formulated in the early (20th as counter responses towards attacks on black women's character, sexuality and status in the home and community. Booker T Washington along with W.E.B. Du Bois were among those championing the cause of protecting black women from the racist assertions of white detractors, by articulating Racial Uplift Politics, in which the civil and political liberties of blacks under oppressive racist codes were championed and upheld constitutionally, and appropriating a black aesthetic model of true womanhood.

Charges attacking black women's social and moral identifications proliferated during this period, and were politicised and documented as concerns regarding the 'negro problem'. In 1909 William Pickett, writing in *The Negro Problem: Abraham Lincoln's Solution*, warned that an absence in chastity among black women was to blame for "the gravest deterioration in the moral standards of the community where such class exists" (Pickett; 1909, 14). With

equal concern William Hannibal Thomas insisted that, “The moral status of a race is fixed by the character of its women, but, as moral rectitude is not a predominant trait in Negro nature, female chastity is not one of its endowments”, further attacking the virtue of the married black woman, whom Thomas argued; “unresistingly betray their wifely honor to satisfy a bestial instinct” (Thomas, 1901, 183-184).

However, in challenging these accusations, and asserting a counter discourse to established Victorian standards of true white womanhood, members of *The American Negro Academy* further undermined black women’s identities within restrictive patriarchal codes, by assigning her qualities, Anne Stavney observes as “purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Stavney; 1998, 537). But as Mgodmi points out in her study, “Black Women’s Identity: Stereotypes, Respectability and Passionlessness” (1890-1930):

“Black women across classes embraced a new sexual identity of passionlessness. While for working-class women this attitude was a shield against sexual harassment and rape, it was for middle-class women a tool to appeal to Whites and gain status. For this reason, Black women adhered to a cult of secrecy. Even when sexually abused and harassed, they remained silent”. The ideology of silence as a social and political strategy is exorcized in Vidor’s *Hallelujah* in the subsumed narrative of the threat of rape and its apparent dismissal by the forgiving Missy Rose. Mgodmi contextualizes further how during this period the literary world was responding to this troubling condition of silence and denial, and the refutation and suppression of black female sexuality:

“In addition to its being a protective cloak, silence was also a kind of denial of Black women’s own sexuality, which underpinned their claims to moral superiority. This is conspicuously articulated in most of the Black female literary works of that time, such as in Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (1893), Pauline Hopkins’ *Contending Forces* (1899) and Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928)” (Mgadmi; 2009).

Ironically, women’s political efforts to advance a counter discourse of black women’s respectability were re-appropriating the very mechanisms of Victorian bourgeois values they were striving to contest and eradicate. Again as Mgadmi posits further:

“many Black women took courses in domestic service at training schools, such as the *National Training School*, and many others participated in domestic training programs in order to ameliorate their standards of cleanliness and orderliness. Black women’s magazines advertised fashionable and respectable clothes. Female ideologues and activists published articles in African American periodicals and delivered lectures nationwide preaching female respectability. Such institutions for racial reform as the *Urban League*, the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP), the *National Association of Colored Women* (NACW), the *Second Baptist Church* and the *Detroit Study Club* were actively instrumental in these reform tactics” (Mgadmi; 2009).

These contentions present an interesting dialectic since even biological constructions of black women’s identities have been formulated upon their location of ‘otherness’ and ‘outsideness’, in which the normative codes of femininity, against which they are to be

measured and valued, do not apply. Crucially as Elizabeth Ammons argues, the black woman was “not busy casting off a constricting ideal of Victorian femininity. She had never been included in it in the first place” (Ammons; 7-8). Stavney asserts in her study of New Negro women’s writing during the Harlem Renaissance, *Mothers of Tomorrow*: *The New Negro Renaissance and the Politics of Maternal Representation*, “black males produced an idealised image of black womanhood in the form of the ‘moral mother’. From civic leader to politician to writer to artist, black men of the 1920s and ‘30s promoted an ideology of glorified black motherhood” (Stavney; 1998, 534).

Conversely, within *Hallelujah*’s racial and gendered politics, Chick is positioned as ostracised and nowhere at the same time. She represents the fractures of any known models of ideal black womanhood which accounts for her racial homelessness. Her childlessness, her freedom of movement as we see her nomadically positioned in disparate locations throughout the film, i.e. the church, the barroom, the shipping docks, the home she shares with Zeke, even her escape as a metaphysical location, and by implication, her geographic as well as racial homelessness, means that it is not possible for her to aspire to any holistic definition of true black womanhood, since motherhood and spiritual guardianship of the home are among its tenets. Chick provides the text with opportunities for carnal excess as the instigator of female sexual aggression. Initially this occurs when Zeke first encounters her. He is immediately seduced by her pale complexion, referring to her as ‘high yellor’, her exotic cabaret performance, garb and swagger. Religious ecstasy provides another opportunity for carnal investments when Chick is converted and baptised at a revival meeting lead by Zeke, by now a transformed, itinerant preacher. Once more, entranced by the power of the black female presence, Zeke is lured away from his missionary ambitions whilst his

tempter, Chick, also filled with religious and sexual fervour, diverts his attentions from religious obligations.

The explicitness of these highly eroticized moments cannot be underestimated. The myth of rape and the virtuous woman are systematic of misogyny. Brownmiller interrogates this prevailing myth that stipulated “a virtuous woman either cannot get raped or does not get into situations that leave her open to assault” (Brownmiller; 1975). Vidor draws, however, the moral line by merely suggesting the potential of black male sexual violence against the female subject, in much the same way that Chick’s prostitution is inferred under the broader terms of modernity, reflecting transformations of social values, customs and expectations.

These mythic tropes of racial subjectivity had long been established in the annals of history and were given their performative expressions in literature, stage and film with much success. The BLACK FACE minstrelsy traditions had cemented in the minds of theatregoers, both black and white alike, the racialised concepts of African peoples in ways that were made palatable under the guise of entertainment. However, D.W. Griffith’s highly controversial racist depictions of blacks during the Reconstruction Era in *Birth of a Nation* (1915) further dehumanised the character of the African subject. By presenting the pantheon of racial stereotypes, in which white actors used blackface to represent happy mammies and contented slaves, the Coon, Tom, Brutal Buck, Mammy and Tragic Mulatto, continue to inform filmic representations of African Americans as both simple minded, and a threat.

The use of music in *Hallelujah* not only underscores the narrative, not only satisfies the genre as a folk musical and its ideological affiliations to African cultural expressions, but as Jessica H. Howard notes in her analysis of *Hallelujah* as a folk musical:

“...music in this film acts very similarly to the blacks themselves in the story (unpredictable, extreme, evil, godly, dangerous, primitive) and, by extension (for *Hallelujah!* was presented and promoted in its time as an authentic representation of black life in the South), reinforces popular notions (held by whites) of blacks in general. Zeke and others do not merely express themselves through music (which is suggested by the special relationship of black folk thereto), they are expressed by it – and in a larger sense the music is expressive of them” (Howard; 1996, 444).

Modes of musical expressions therefore function as audible referents to the inner values, desires, emotions, actions and status of the films’ characters. Simultaneously, however, they also serve to undermine the black subject. Mammy’s all mother anguish for the loss and protection of her family is externalised through her mournful chants, “Oh, Lord, have mercy on my children”. Missy Rose initiates a communal call and response among the parishioners as she wails and moans, “He’s gone”, following Zeke’s absconding and betrayal. Both women’s lamentations use blues idioms and inflections to augment the emotional potency of the scenes as well as focalising the artist’s vocal dexterities as black songstresses. Indeed, throughout much of the film, *Hallelujah* ostentatiously exploits the actor in the capacity of speciality act performer. Whilst this clearly showcased the actor’s talents, simultaneously it reinforced limiting images and stereotypes of black subjectivity, as Weisenfeld observes:

“The template that *Hallelujah* set for representing African American religion in Hollywood sound films involved insisting on a fundamentally simplistic and imitative theology, a relentless association between the imagined hypersexuality of blacks and their religious expression, and the deployment of religion to characterize African Americans as essentially carefree, morally irresponsible, and apolitical. Music, an essential component of the template, often allowed for the most complex moments of expression in the film but also often served to signal the carefree laziness of southern black life” (Weisenfeld; 2007, 50).

Additionally, Chick’s burlesque song and dance routine, “Shuffle Along”, emphasises her licentious nature whilst emulating with comic energy the minstrelsy spectacle of the vaudeville stage. The rough house barroom setting that provides a platform for hip thrusting choreography, bawdy jazz band accompaniment, and social unrestraint on the part of the barroom revellers, suggests the decadence and moral excesses of black female sexuality. To this end, black women’s identities are delineated by geographical locations. The urban and rural polarities function as signifying strategies to determine black women’s subjectivities. For example, Chick characterises the dangers of modernity: unpredictability, uncertainty, excitement, the unknown, the new found freedoms associated with the progressive North, excess, movement, exploration and experimentation. Indeed the microcosm of the family unit is fragmented, under the corrupting influence of sexual transgressive interloper, Chick. Mammy and Missy Rose represent the past, immovable and primitive. Naremore observes the use of rural-urban polarities in the structure of musical film:^{iv}

“The social tensions and ideological contradictions expressed by this opposition were always crucial to any art or entertainment that involved blackness; notice, for example, how the country-city polarity functioned in early uses of "jazz." . . . Was jazz a primitive music, a people's music, or an entertainment music? All three possibilities were suggested by critics, and the term seemed to oscillate between diametrically opposed meanings. On the one hand, jazz was associated with flappers, skyscrapers, and the entire panoply of twentieth-century modernity; on the other hand, because it originated with African Americans who migrated to the northern cities, it connoted agrarian or precapitalist social relations, and could be linked to a pastoral myth” (Naremore; 1995, 170).

The urban rural binary figurations are key factors in reading race and gender in film. Sheril D. Antonio also stresses:

“The urban-rural binary is an incubator for what I call the composite character, which refers to any form of reinvented blackness. Thus, any character composed of multiple disparate elements or ideologies such as rural and urban, North and South, black and white, rich and poor, etc., is a composite character. This binary is essential to the study of the black identity in films because it represents a central theme in American history; it is core to the development of post slavery blackness and is key to the understanding of black life today” (Antonio; 2009, 116).

In Antonio’s analysis, she reviews the character *Pinky*, from the 1949 film of the same name, on the theme of interracial love, directed by Elia Kazan, “navigating the urban and

rural landscapes” (*Ibid*, 122). A young Mulatto who passes for a white woman, sent to the North to improve herself, returns to her rural South home, and comes to terms with her racial hybridity. Yet despite her in-between-ness, is forced, as Bogle puts it, “to face the debilitating plight of being a Negro in the Deep South” (Bogle, 1988, 165). Whilst Vidor’s exclusively black cosmos eradicates the black-white dichotomies from the racial politics of the text, he nonetheless re-positions racial hierarchies and difference to reproduce the same concerns regarding economic survival and equality. The white presence, though rendered invisible to the camera is, nevertheless ideologically present in the context of the film’s construction of the characters’ subjectivities. For example, the agrarian class system of sharecropping productivity is thematised in the film’s opening sequence and recapitulated throughout moments of the narrative.

The images portray the community of men, women and children engaged in manual labour, hand picking cotton and organising their crop by the use of machinery. Zeke’s work song, “Cotton, cotton, cotton” is not only economical in its reiterations, but speaks of the importance of the cotton economies to the labouring classes. One could presume that Vidor was imposing a utopian, egalitarian ideal in which the economy of the cotton industry was a self-sustaining one, free from hierarchical or racial institutions that had otherwise dominated and excluded citizens, whilst at the same time he shatters the illusion of a democracy by the imposition of a labouring force, which implies its subjectivity to the existence of a ruling class. However, in *Hallelujah*, this hierarchical presence is not explicit or referred to in the text, only the toil of its black subjects is apparent. Equally, participation in the labour economy is envisioned as progression and opportunity for citizenship in Vidor’s all black world in which gender distinctions are suspended in the cotton field landscapes. Black Press

Historian James R. Grossman, writes on the topic of The great Migration in *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*, “Many migrants viewed migration as an opportunity to share – as black people – the prerequisites of American citizenship. These included not only participation in what seemed to be an industrial economy from which they had previously been excluded, but also good schools” (Grossman; 1989, 9).

But how has the stereotype of the inferiority of black womanhood and black female transgressivity persisted and survived, despite her participation in the economies and her increasing citizenship? As has already been argued, the propagation of an idealised model of black womanhood had been formulated, legitimised and contested against existing models of white womanhood, and continues to do so. Nonetheless, where have mythic constructions of black femininity originated and who or what institutions have been responsible for their inception and formulation? Patricia Morton contextualises this problematic:

“Myths do signify subjective, perceptual reality, constituting metaphorical representations of how the world is perceived based upon experience and emotion. Myths and stereotypes are sometimes used by scholars interchangeably, both being pictures in the mind, while one mystifies reality the other simplifies it” (Morton; 1991).

If the ‘black woman’, already signified as transgressive because of her gendered and racial negations, is to be read, scrutinised and judged, in any discursive sense, then it follows that oppositional, hierarchical evaluations of womanhood must also be interrogated and exposed. As *Hallelujah* is structured upon oppositional precepts so that the realities of a

black world might be differentiated from that of the white, then it follows that the Victorian model of true womanhood, is contested by the taint of black womanhood. Indeed, Lorraine O'Grady expands upon this concept:

“the female body in the West is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse: on one side, it is white; on the other, not-white or, prototypically, black. The two bodies cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West's metaphoric construction of "woman". White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she had better not be” (quoted in *Racechanges*, 2000, 16-17).

It is the western female body that gives signification and determines womanhood. Her whiteness gives her visibility and brings her into being. Her obverse therefore is eclipsed, unrecognisable and unknowable. Aronowitz argues that black woman is “labeled temptress, symbolically considered the embodiment of the dark side that links race with sexuality” (Aronowitz; quoted in Rhodes, *Structures of the Jazz Age*, 188). Whiteness historically had always inferred morality, chastity and purity. The system of slavery had encoded the appearance, customs and values of the ‘other’ as representative of sexual decadence and immorality. Bogle asserts that negative cinematic images of blacks, “were merely filmic reproductions of black stereotypes that had existed since the days of slavery and were already popularized in American life and arts. The movies, which catered to public tastes, borrowed profusely from all the other popular art forms” (Bogle; 1989, 4).

The biblical figure of the hypersexual Jezebel, the gendered embodiment of “sin” itself, resonates powerfully in its associations with black female identities. Indeed, Collins asserts that the “Jezebel’s function was to relegate all black women to the category of sexually aggressive women...” (Collins: 1990, 177). Racist formulations of black women’s sexuality in turn denied her the values of virtue and true beauty on the basis of her hue. Furthermore, the mythic evaluations of her sexuality were attributed to her sexual contact with animals. Thomas Jefferson’s lengthy quotation illustrates the virulence of racial hatred towards black women:

“... Is it [the difference] not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races? Are not the fine mixture of re [the Indian] and white, the expression of every passion by greater or less suffusions of colour in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances of that immovable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race? Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form, and their own judgment in favour of the whites, declared by their own preference of them, as uniformly as is the preference of the Oran-ootan [sic] for the black woman over those of his own species. The circumstances of superior beauty is thought worthy of attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man” (Jordan, 1968, 458). However, historical accounts of Jefferson’s sexual relationships with his slaves, and in particular, his relationship with Sally Hemings and the numerous children she bore him, demonstrate the glaring hypocrisies and standards of the time.

The figure of the dehumanised, sexually aggressive female is transferred onto the Mulatto, Chick. Her predisposition to corporeal abandon throughout her performance

provides the narrative with the necessary mechanisms for destabilising the moral order. Her influence is transformative and destructive both within as well as external to herself. For example, her conversion, rather than reaffirming the possibility of transcending a life of sin, subverts the Christian tenets of spirituality and chastity. Sexual ecstasy is veiled or at least interpreted as religious ecstasy as Chick lures Zeke away from the religious activities. Whilst the congregation respond to the call for redemption and salvation, the scene portrays the unreserved corporeal display of physical, emotional and spiritual excess. Chants, prayers, exhortations, weeping, falling in the spirit, all culminate in a moment which suggests that the experience is unique to African American religious practice and its potential for visual pleasure. Since, however, God is referred to in generic terms, the occasion for expressing spirituality is presumed to be a universal one. Chick's response once more, falls outside the universal order of things. The pleasures of the flesh are the nexus of the moment and unsurprisingly, prompted by Chick. As she exits in a charismatic and sensual dance, in yet another close up shot highlighting her sexual passions, she lures Zeke away to fulfil the sincerity of her animal desires, biting Zeke's hand even as she does so. The lines between spiritual purity and spiritual taint have been blurred by the ambivalence of Chick's involvement.

Though Vidor's creation was by his own admission, the product of his benign observations, the major film houses, such as MGM and Fox, nonetheless have continued to have a peculiar relationship with African American religious expressions and spirituality as one of the defining qualities of black identity, and have continued to manipulate the genre to reinforce notions of racial difference, a quality Weisenfeld affirms in her study, *Hollywood*

Be Thy Name, in which she chronicles the centrality of religion to representations of African Americans between the 1920s – 1940s:

“Where the New Negro movement emphasized and facilitated self-representation and agency in picturing African Americans, however complicated and contested this process might be, the marginal status of blacks in these early Hollywood films necessarily meant that the images produced were largely out of their control. The way African American religious leaders, expression, and institutions would appear in the Hollywood imaginary would be largely the result of a series of negotiations between white men in Hollywood and in the various agencies that managed the products of the industry” (Weisenfeld, 2007, 26).

In the river baptism scene, the white robed baptismal candidates form an outstretched line in a manner of reverence and dignity whilst observing in bemusement and disapproval, Chick’s heightened, uncontrolled physical and vocal outbursts, as she undergoes a spiritual transformation. Mammy chides the newly converted Chick for having “too much religion” in her, which is a sexually explicit allusion to the illicit bond Chick has formed with Zeke. Mgadmi’s study on black women’s identities within which she interrogates ideological codings of respectability, provides insightful contextualisations of the Mulatto configuration:

“Lydia Maria Child introduced the literary character that we call the tragic mulattain in two short stories: *The Quadroons* (1842) and *Slavery’s Pleasant Homes* (1843). She portrayed her as the offspring of a White slaveholder and his Black female slave. This mulatta’s life was tragic as she was ignorant of both her mother’s race and her own, believing

herself to be White and free. Her father died, her "Negro blood" was discovered, she was deserted by her White lover, and died a victim of slavery and White male violence" (Mgadmi p.40-45, 2009).

Hollywood's propensity for relegating black actors to limited categories has been all pervasive, though these very images have been contested by presenting alternative discourses of black femininities. For example stand-up comedian Moms Mabley (1894-1975), whose early career began, amongst many locations, in the Cotton Club circuits, offered a radical alternative to the stereotype in her bedraggled persona and her comedic attacks on the bigotries of racism. By and large during the early (20th black actresses were offered limiting roles and even fewer that attested to the realities of black women's lives. For example, one of the devastating effects of the Great Migration during the 1920s Depression Era, was its impact upon black women's status who were already experiencing oppressions on multiple levels, more than any other social group. Having lost jobs en masse, the reality of poverty, joblessness, and sexual discrimination among black women further isolated their identities. hooks affirms in addition that, "Images of black women that are shown as positive usually are those that depict the black woman as a long-suffering, religious, maternal figure, whose most enduring characteristic is her self-sacrificing self-denial for those she loves" (hooks; 1981, 66). Rarely given the opportunity to flourish outside of marginal roles that pander to representational stereotyping, black actresses were assigned roles that were either sexual or comedic in the narrow definitions of black femininity. Norma Manatu argues that the codes laid down by stereotyping means that:

“Such coding assures black women’s exclusion from participation in the verisimilitude housed in serious dramatic roles. There are, for example, no black ingénues; no black romantic heroines; no black socio-political heroines; no black action heroines” (Manatu; 2003, 42). *Hallelujah*’s presentation of black female transgression above and beyond any other subject, has indelibly promoted her silence and erasure, and whilst presenting an irony, when understood in the context of a sound and visual medium, is nonetheless, ideologically unsurprising. Vidor, though positioned as documentarian and observer in the making of *Hallelujah*, nevertheless deployed the many racial, class and gender discourses of the time that further marginalised black women’s identities and limited the range of possibilities opened to black artists.

CHAPTER TWO

Martha Paints the Town Red; the Problem of Migration as the

Problem of the Black Churchwoman in Spencer Williams' *The Blood of Jesus*

In Spencer Williams' *The Blood of Jesus*, the use of the symbolic is all pervasive and illuminating. The invocation of sacred folk songs and hymnody, religious iconography, cinematic images of blacks and the ideological evaluations of race, religion, gender, economic exclusion, labour and suffering, highlight that whilst independent black filmmakers possessed the creative opportunities of self-reflexivity, inaugurating a black filmic aesthetic, emancipating the black subject from the established norms of representation, visually and textually, away from the hegemonic, disparaging machinations of white-owned Hollywood studio houses, they nonetheless engaged to a large extent, with existing dominant discourses of race and gender, appropriating the limiting patriarchal codes in the construction of black womanhood, in this instance from a black male perspective. Williams' *The Blood of Jesus* as a critique of black femininity, particularly in the narrative's central character, Martha Jackson, suggests that black female agency is unstable and destructive, where the loss of control of the body is inevitably gendered, and maps out this problematic through the medium of the symbolic, the heroine's journey from perdition to salvation.

The plot in brief concerns itself with the individual's religious convictions and moral choices in which the outcomes of salvation or damnation are determined. The liminal placement of a young woman's temporal and corporeal reality in Williams' Protestant evangelical text focuses on her unrested soul as it wanders between the realms of life and death. The central character inhabiting this unique position is Martha Jackson, played by Cathryn Caviness, a newly wedded and newly baptised Christian who is seduced by the material trappings of city life, the narrative's extended metaphor of Hell. Martha naively barter her body and soul in exchange for the consumerist interests of the suburbs. She succumbs to the temptations of a newly discovered sexual freedom, delighting in the liberal expressions of the city night club, whilst becoming aware of and celebrating in her own exotic appeal and subsequent transformation. Martha's engagement with or at least lack of resistance to the depravities of the night club and its exploitations, reaches its climatic resolve when faced with the realisation of the importance of her faith and the dangers she has exposed herself to in denying it.

Martha's journey from perdition to salvation not only demonstrates her Christian commitment, having accepted the redemptive and healing power of the blood of Jesus, but portrays a temporal and geographic return to the Southern rural ideal where the threat of masculine rage against the black female body is averted. In the city, or the dichotomy of the North, and finally the figurative location of Hades, Martha is at her most vulnerable to earthly impulses and certainly to the corruptions of the metropolis. The film articulates the loss of

black female bodily territory where agency is unachievable in Williams' symbolic world and where Martha becomes the sight and site of misogyny and victimisation. Whilst Martha flees from the brothel house in which she has found herself forced to work, she is mistaken for another prostitute who has stolen money from a client, and is pursued by an angry mob of men intent on ritually stoning her to death.

Woman as the 'sign' of sexual objectification and sexual transgression are reinforced in Williams' biblical referencing of the woman caught in adultery. As the spectator's view of normalcy is disrupted by shocking and unexpected threats of sexual violence, as with Vidor's Missy Rose who narrowly escapes the threat of rape, here too in Williams' narrative, the disturbing associations of the lynch mob cruelties are conferred upon the female subject. Innocent of the crime she is presumed to have committed, her angry pursuers threaten to "mash her brains out" with a rock. Interspersed with scripture, a voice representing the voice of God announces, "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone at her".

Ras Jackson, husband of Martha, played by Spencer Williams, who had in addition written and directed *The Blood Of Jesus*, represents the socially negligent, spiritually redundant male who depends upon the rectitude and moral fortitude of his dutiful and religiously devout wife. Martha pleads with her husband therefore to find faith, "Ras, why don't you try to pray and get religion? We could be so much happier if you would". The implications of the happiness with which Martha refers, are unspecified and offer possibilities for varied interpretation. The observer is able to infer a marital and spiritual happiness between husband and wife. Martha's vision of happiness can be understood alternatively in

terms of socio-economic advantage and material acquisition. Williams' keeps all these possibilities open.

Ras chooses instead to occupy himself in the pursuits of hunting; and in this instance it is the theft of a neighbour's hog that has drawn the errant male away from his moral obligations. When Ras's hunting rifle unexpectedly discharges, Martha is accidentally and near fatally wounded. The moment is underscored with the 'Heavenly Choir's spirituals rendition of *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*. As the bullet passes through her heart, it also pierces the image of the sacred heart of Jesus that hangs above the Jackson's bed, another recurring symbol deploying Catholic iconography. As Martha's life hangs in the balance, the connections between body and spirit are temporarily severed. Therefore Martha is confronted by temptations and its chief architect, Satan, played by Jas. B. Jones, fully clad in restoration devil costume, horned and caped. His instrument of manipulation comes in the form of Judas Green, played by Frank H. M. Clennan, in order to lure Martha into the trappings of city life, its consumerist preoccupations and unrestrained sexual vices. However, Martha is also required to heed the wise counsel of the guardian angel, played by Rogenia Goldthwaite, who warns Martha:

“That road leads to the highway of life. There at the crossroads you will find that which you seek. The road to the right leads to happiness and eternal life. The road to the left leads to death, hell and destruction. Be on your way, but walk clear of temptation and beware of the hypocrite and the false prophet. Go”.

Ultimately, Martha's faith and fidelity are compromised as she surrenders to the pleasures of the spectacle that is the entertainment scene, applauding its ostentation and approving its questionable morals, a scene in which the black female form is voyeurised and exoticised in acrobatic, tap dance and blues singing performance. And although Martha's performance at this point is that of a spectator, Williams' isolated, close up framing of his subject, positions Martha in the category of the sexually objectified. Crucially, Martha's participation, pleasure and guilt, having surrendered to the proclivities of the night club scene are critiques of the disavowal of marital obligations, where Ras' temporary absence is entirely unacknowledged. Her absence of guilt having surrendered her Christian tenets, together with the pleasure she draws from the masculine attentions of Judas and Rufus Brown, played by Eddie DeBase, re-positions her as morally duplicitous and sexually transgressive, the antithesis of her Christian self. The depictions are a stark contrast to the solemnity of the river baptism scene at the film's opening. The black churchwoman even in this instance however is constructed as a problematic in Williams' narrative. The occasion for reverence and unity are disrupted in the gossiping preoccupations of two female parishioners, Sister Ellerby (played by Heather Hardeman) and Sister Jenkins, played by Juanita Riley. Sister Ellerby remarking that, "Dat gal don't look like she got nothin'" and questions Ras's absence from the occasion. Notably Martha's conduct during the ceremony is expressed in sober and reverent terms when compared to the hysteria and abandon displayed in Chick's baptism in *Hallelujah*.

Rufus is introduced to Martha as a business man, and whilst his offer of work as a means of earning easy money is sufficient to prompt Martha's consent, the means by which Martha is to earn this money has not been made explicit. In the following scene it is clear

that Martha has unwittingly entered the world of prostitution. Her realisation forces her to reconsider the validation of the crossroads, she begs for God's mercy on her soul, but is now trapped by her pimp boss, Rufus. The signpost is metamorphosed into the crucifix and it is through the crossroads that Williams fuses Western and African religious semantics to express the transformation of the soul through faith in God. The cross which symbolises the crossroads between life and death in Protestant Christian terms is also representative of the demarcation between the living and an ancestral past grounded in African religious beliefs. The choices of direction indicated by Hell to the left, or the city locale and Zion to the right, the idyllic homeland of the South, also indicate uncertainty as a critique of the nature of the black churchwoman as uncertain and unstable. Indeed, Weisenfeld observes that:

“In the context of exploring the meaning of both urbanization and the rise of secular entertainments for church communities, many race films also addressed the strong presence of women in black churches as a potential problem. In these films, the concern with the present and future of the ministry is directly related to the perception of the church arena as destructively feminized, and the nightclub frequently appears as an arena that allows the unchecked expression of female sexuality” (Weisenfeld, 136-7). Martha represents the sign of destructive femininity within the church context, since she is the catalyst for the gossip that ensues amongst the other churchwomen and her ambivalence within the nightclub setting, or her succumbing to the lures of the city, compromise her moral status within the church itself.

In *The Blood of Jesus* the nature of sin is clearly gendered. Indeed, Williams' film postulates that immorality is a primarily female condition. It follows a long narrative tradition of women constructed as materially driven and lacking agency, consequently losing

control over their bodily territories. Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* written at the turn of the (20th critiques the ever changing capitalist excesses of America, and envisions this in the transformation of its protagonist Caroline Meeber. Her rise to wealth and success become meaningless commodities as they fail to empower or satisfy her desire for signification. Historically however, it is the material possession of women's bodies inscribed within the paternal institutions of marriage, colonialism, class, education and so on, in which the quest for female agency has been fought for and denied. The (18th seduction novels such as Suzanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, 1791, in which the life of fifteen-year-old school girl, Charlotte ends in tragedy, affirms the barbarity of a patriarchal system which normalises the possession and destruction of the female body. The publication of horrific accounts and experiences within the genre of the slave narrative, which includes such works as *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave* (1831), and *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson* (1866), demonstrate ultimately, the ruptures in connection African American women have with their own bodies under the system of slavery, racism and sexism.

The desire for material gain is confined to female ambitions, and so it is with little persuasion that Martha agrees to accept Judas Green's gift of a pretty dress and shoes, if she is to adapt to life in the city. As Weisenfeld points out, "The enticement of beauty and material goods for Christian women and the emphasis on their need to overcome such temptation in the context of faithfulness to their conversions is a concern in other extant religious race films from the period" (2007, 103), going on to cite comparisons from the 1947 religious feature film, *Going to Glory, Come to Jesus*, in which Lillie-Mae, the film's main character and daughter of Rev. Scott, is teased by her peers for being ugly, uninteresting, and badly dressed. Bessie, her main tormenter, attributes all of these negative characteristics to

Lillie-Mae's religion and tells Lillie-Mae and her friend Ethel, "Religion or no religion – I wouldn't wear clothes like that to a dog's fight. I wouldn't even be caught dead in a dress like that one you have on... You see, I'm hep and you- you little amen-corner-square, you don't know anything but your prayers, catch on? It takes clothes, jewels and plenty of experience to make a woman – you dig - ?" (2007, 103).

As Lillie-Mae is lured into the city night club by Prince O' Hades, so too is Martha enticed by the devil, under Judas Green's lead, in order to undergo a similar transformation. Martha's guardian angel warns her, "Be not over anxious for what you shall put on. Life is a more wonderful gift than clothing for the body". and she continues to warn Martha, "Sell not your soul for the raiment of a peacock. Seek Ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added onto you". Martha's conversion, Williams' religious drama demonstrates, is the beginning of the individual Christian's journey through faith, and the trials and temptations facing a newly converted soul are those which strengthen that faith. Martha's soul must pass through the city realms, the very seat of temptation in order to return to her body, and re-unite her physical bond with her husband and community and her spiritual union with God through her faith in Jesus.

The intersections of Zion and Hell are signposted on a wooden cross in one of the many recurring images of the symbol of Christ, and represent the moral choices Martha faces, the central theme of Christian sentiments and the improving of the soul. These images are continually underscored with sacred music that is contrasted to the modernity of Jazz and the popular music culture of the city. However, the oversimplifications of the North equals Jazz

equals bad and so on, whilst the South correlates simply to all that is pure, edenic, valued and nostalgised is undermined when evaluating the theological and cultural uses of the spirituals. James H. Cone's study, *Black Spirituals: A theological Interpretation*, contends that at the heart of the spirituals is a theology of liberation. Indeed, Angela Davies postulates that modes of music have the capacity to emancipate individuals from racism. Folk songs, Spirituals, Plantation Songs all transcend the horrors and iniquities of the institution of racism and empower the performances with the "capacity to speak the unspeakable" (Davies, 1998, 168).

Williams' religious drama read in this way argues for a refutation of Southern principles, which in one sense valorises the commitment of black citizens to sustain, protect and spiritually as well as economically support their members, but equally to address oppressive institutions of segregation and racism that deny their humanity and hinder their progression in the world. However, woman's place within this black theological understanding remains rooted in the marginalisation and silencing of the black churchwoman under patriarchy and further contradictions regarding the political and social culture of the South are evident in Williams' prologue:

"Almost gone are the days when peace ruled the earth with a firm and gentle hand; when fear of God dwelt in the hearts of men and women and children; when the ten original commandments were the accepted laws of every civilized country and nation on the face of the globe; when those who went to church on Sunday did not go back home to prey on their

neighbors the remaining six days of the week; when religion was practiced with unfalse solemnity and honest sincerity and when soul salvation was a heritage from heaven for not merely a few thousand, but for many millions. Those days are almost gone from the earth... almost". Though Williams' film does not avoid the realities of labour and poverty, the harsh realities of poor access to education, racial violence and intimidation, abject poverty and inequality are unchallenged.

Black liberation theologian, James H Cone asserts that, "The divine liberation of the oppressed from slavery is the central theological concept in the black spirituals" (2003, 779) and that what white Christianity taught black slaves was "a distorted interpretation of the gospel, geared to the ideological enforcement of white racism" (Cone; 2003,777). Cone defines spirituals as "historical songs that speak about the rupture of black lives; they tell us about a people in the land of bondage and what they did to hold themselves together and to fight back. We are told that the people of Israel could not sing the Lord's song in a strange land. But for blacks, their *Being* depended upon a song. Through song, they built new structures for existence in an alien land. The spirituals enabled blacks to retain a measure of African identity while living in the midst of American slavery, providing both the substance and the rhythm to cope with human servitude" (Cone; 2003,778). Cone places the importance of the thematic use of 'freedom' to slaves; "These songs show that black slaves did not believe that human servitude was reconcilable with their African past and their knowledge of the Christian gospel. They did not believe that God created Africans to be the slaves of Europeans. Accordingly they sang of a God who was involved in history – their history – making right what whites have made wrong. Just as God delivered Moses and the

Children of Israel from Egyptian bondage, drowning Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea, so also he will deliver black people from American slavery. It is this certainty that informs the thought of the black spirituals...” (Cone; 2003,779):

The opening sequences are underscored with the spiritual, *Good News the Chariot's Coming*, sung by The Heavenly Choir, led by Rev. R. L. Robertson. The lyrics express the anticipation of a new corporeal order of material satisfaction and spiritual regeneration, which in itself is bound in the symbolic of emancipation from a life of suffering, material want and social injustice. The song highlights the spiritual transition in opulent terms,

Good news, the chariot's coming, good news, the chariot's coming, good news, the chariot's coming, and I don't want to be behind. As the song progresses it is followed by verses that attest to the longing for spiritual wealth and fulfilment; *Long white robe in heaven I know, Golden Slippers in heaven, I know, Starry crown in heaven, I know.* The scene is followed by the choristers dressed in white robes complete with chained crucifixes about their necks, whilst the minister is staged centrally at the pulpit, as they sing another spiritual of emancipatory significance, *Let my people Go*. Material desire is vindicated in religious terms, however it seems that aspiration for the material in a gender specific context is considered transgressive, hence the scriptural remonstrance of Martha's material desires.

Williams' racially homogenous utopia offered its black audiences new narrative and entertainment possibilities that placed emphasis, unlike many other contributors to the all

black movie genre, on exploiting the missionary potential of movies to promote moral conduct and encourage Christian faith. The black vernacularisation of cinematic imaging had valorised film as a powerful conduit for religious instruction. As Weisenfeld points out:

“Spencer Williams was also clearly moved by the Christian narrative of redemption from sin, and his personal interest in religion figured prominently in many of his films. He took up with vigor the possibility of using the medium to provide religious education and foster religious development, and he saw as much entertainment potential in religious films as in movies that dealt with other subject matter” (Weisenfeld, 3,89). However, recognising the tensions that existed between the church and the entertainment industries, filmmakers such as Williams operated strategically. As Weisenfeld noted, during the 1930s and 1940s, a range of race movies that were produced primarily for entertainment purposes and not for specifically religious ends explored how the arenas of church and commercial entertainments would relate to each other in the urban environment. “Spencer Williams and the other filmmakers who produced black-audience religious films in the 1930s and 1940s must have thought quite carefully about the often fraught relationship between the film industry and many black religious individuals and institutions. These filmmakers employed a variety of strategies that sought to reconcile the two realms and to show that film could make important contributions to African American religious life” (2007, 90).

Williams was able to integrate the secular arts with church sentiment successfully. Undoubtedly the influence of his mother’s Christian Catholic faith together with his

successful acting and moviemaking career informed the production of his work. Williams was a privileged producer and artist and contributed in many aspects of a movie production as director, writer and actor. Again, Weisenfeld asserts that, “While filmmakers in the race movie industry of the 1930s and 1940s created a range of movies with plots that sometimes involved religious characters, settings, and themes, Spencer Williams, along with a few other African American filmmakers in this period, made and exhibited films with the explicit intention of producing religious affect in their viewers and motivating moral transformation within the context of Christian values” (Weisenfeld; 3 89-90).

Whilst black women’s representations in film were primarily dominated by patriarchy, women’s contribution to the Hollywood industry was nonetheless in operation, though has received little scholarly attention. Examining the rise and fall of women filmmakers, Karen Ward Mahar redresses this lack in her historical study of women filmmakers between the silent eras of 1896 to the era of sound in 1927, *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood*, 2006. She argues that women wrote more than half the silent era’s screen plays, headed the “scenario” departments at film studios, and routinely earned the industry’s highest salaries for their work. Producer, Emmett J. Scott’s *The Birth of a Race* (1918) formulated a counter- response to the racist propagandist machinations of Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). The works of black film directors were often eclipsed and understudied. These works include black women film directors, Tressie Souders, writer, director and producer of her own film, *A Woman’s Error* (1922), travelling evangelist, Eloyce Gist together with her husband James Gist, wrote, directed and produced religious movies including *Hellbound Train* (1930), Maria P. Williams’ *Flames of Wrath* (1923) producer and

director who, along with her husband, Jesse Williams, owned, the Western Film Producing Company and Booking Exchange. Yet despite the strong presence of women both behind and on camera, these producers of film have themselves disappeared in the silence of discrimination having been denied full participation in the movie making process.

Before 1929 the majority of race movie productions were in the hands of black owners, however, with ever increasing costs to meet the demands of the new sound technologies, the escalating distribution costs and of course, the advent of the depression era, many producers were forced to abandon their projects. Increasingly these projects were adopted by white production houses by the 1930s and 1940s. However, Williams' was able to receive the backing of a white owned producing and exhibiting company, Alfred N. Sack, who was a distributor of all black cast movies which included the distribution of Oscar Micheaux's movies, including *Lying Lips* (1939). The inauguration of a black cinematic vernacular provided black filmmakers across the gender divide, the means to authenticate the black psyche and re-inscribe the African American subject organically, establishing an autonomous, black artistic nouveau, thereby altering the production, distribution, consumption and conception of 'race' in movies. They include such pioneering contributions from Oscar Micheaux, who produced counter narratives of Racial Uplift, *The Homesteader* (1919), *Within Our Gates* (1920), *The Brute* (1920) and amongst many others, *The Spider's Web* (1927), although at times controversially, re-inscribing some of the negative tropes he along with other independent race movie-makers were attempting to undermine, notably in *Body and Soul* (1925) featuring a bogus, sexual predatory preacher. Raymond Knapp, author

of *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*, observes this phenomenon,

‘Most often denied a legitimizing place within mainstream films, many blacks sustained their careers by making “race films”, produced by black-owned companies and distributed mainly to “colored” theatres; of these companies, only the Micheaux Company, run by Oscar and Sean Micheaux, survived into the 1930s after the stock market crash of 1929, although others would later appear’¹ (Knapp, 2006, 81).

Race moviemakers of religious films, however “remained committed to charting a path that would make film part of the work of black churches and of the religious experiences of individual viewers” (Weisenfeld, 3, 90-92). Jacqueline Bobo traces these early beginnings of successful and struggling black film production corporates and distributors in her study, “‘The Subject is Money’: Reconsidering the Black Film Audience as a Theoretical Paradigm’:

“The efforts to start a Black-controlled production and distribution industry began in the first part of this century”. The first black controlled production company was the Foster Photoplay Company in Chicago, 1910, “But the first Black production and national distribution company was the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, which produced and distributed six films between 1916 and 1921” (Bobo, 1991, 423). “Early Black filmmakers ceased production because of a lack of consistent financing, an inefficient distribution

network, the refusal of many white-owned theatres to show Black films, and the tendency of white producers to overtake Black filmmakers in the making of Black-cast films” (Bobo, 1991, 424), though by the time Williams had made his religious melodrama, black theatres had proliferated with over 430 all-black theatres across 31 states, Bobo observes, noting also that throughout the history of cinema, the scale of black audience members has been significant.

Given those opportunities to reach a mass black audience, and although the black-owned movie industry possessed the power to re-inscribe the African American Woman positively, the universal language of cinema with its biased inflections continued to construct distorted configurations of black womanhood, and not excluding the black churchwoman, which had been given expression across the range of medias, art, literature and commerce, serving the social, economic and political interests of a male hegemony. As bell hooks warns of the dangers of influence in [mis] representations in her feminist deconstructions of race, sex and class in movies:

“Whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people. It may not be the intent of a filmmaker to teach audiences anything, but that does not mean that lessons are not learned” (hooks, 1996, 2). Whilst Williams possessed the power of influence and instruction as a filmmaker and a filmmaker of religious sentiment and moral and social advancement, his narrative endorsement of black womanhood as an agent of potential moral transformation is founded primarily and fundamentally upon her status as

destructive and transgressive both within and without the church. Black womanhood within Williams' text is as symbolic of ambivalence, encompassing the extremes of realities and uncertainties, the extremes of moral choices, of corporal agency, as the symbolic ambivalences of the world in which she occupies within a black patriarchal theological context, whether it be expressed in the sexual proclivities of the city or the sanctuary of the church.

CHAPTER THREE

TELLING OLD WIVES TALES

Cinematic Representations of The Black Church Woman and Problematising Folkloric Practice In Vincente Minnelli's *Cabin In The Sky*

'Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly' 1 Timothy 4:7 (NIV)

'Womanist theo-ethicists, many of whom are ordained ministers... grapple with a bogeywoman, the stereotype of the black church woman' Joycelyn Moody

Vincente Minnelli's directorial debut with *Cabin In The Sky* exemplifies the dominant cinema's proclivity for constructing racial and gendered identities and distortions. By positioning and determining black subjectivities within white ideological frameworks, Minnelli's filmic narrative inscribes and reinforces distortions of black femininity, and at its most disparaging yet productive, creates the superwoman. Hollywood filmmakers were able to produce highly racialised configurations as evidence of the African American's cultural inferiority, together with caricatures of black women with superhuman qualities in the face of adversity. Minnelli achieves this by creating an artificial cosmos with attendant magical properties, where the majority of the action takes place within a dream sequence within which are an array of constructed racial (mis)-appropriations in their varied and disparaging formulae. In particular, Orientalist notions of the African American woman as the mythic,

exotic, unknowable Other, define her as transgressive and monstrous. Legitimised in the spectacle of performance, these misrepresentations offered appeasement to producers, audiences, and critics seeking re-affirmation of the African American's subordination and inferiority.

Also set in an all-black utopia, *Cabin In The Sky* is a faux naïf parable founded on the traditional morality tale of good versus evil, and envisages a fictive, racially homogenous rural South, where events are negotiated in religious terms and it articulates those terms by the use of sentimentalism, romanticism and the fantastic. Christian virtues are valorised in the satirical musical fantasy of the film in which conversion, religious devotion and moral conduct are conferred upon the black subject. The plot centres on the collision of conflicting worlds as the life of its protagonist, Little Joe Jackson, hangs in the balance between life and death following a gunshot wound at *Jim Henry's Paradise* nightclub whilst the destiny of his soul is being negotiated through the prayers of his devout wife, Petunia Jackson and angels and demons vie for supremacy, in a series of binary oppositional arenas. In *Cabin In The Sky*, dichotomies appear almost everywhere, Christian and secular, good and evil, faith and doubt, urban and rural, affluence and poverty, sickness and health, beauty and sexual undesirability, modernity and the nostalgic past, male and female, and though subsumed in the racial exclusivity of the text, black and white, and of course, mortality and immortality. Its protagonists, religiously devout housewife, Petunia Jackson and her philandering, gambler husband, Little Joe Jackson, are at the centre and source of these turbulent oppositions.

Migration as Social Critique:

Cabin In The Sky is a Metro Goldwyn Mayer produced screen adaptation of the successful 1940 Broadway stage musical comedy of the same name. It follows the practices of white owned studio houses including Fox, of representing an idealised African American way of life, and in particular, its engagement with a set of thematic idioms that appeared in and unified many of the all black cast movie productions that were made between the early 1930s and 1940s; these being the dangers of modernity upon rural values, due to increasing urbanisation. This denotes the geographical and cultural transformations of poverty and repression to social, financial and moral freedoms. The Great Migration of Southern blacks escaping politically sanctioned discrimination to the contrasting freer North is commonly depicted in black Hollywood.

The rural-urban, North-South binary oppositions were filmic references and cultural instances in which filmmakers were able to express racial difference and disenfranchisement in dominant cinematic terms. Thomas Cripps observes these sociological and socio-economic differences:

“More than any other group, Afro-Americans have been kept apart from the centers of American culture by means of southern law and custom, isolation from urban centers, and the absence of usable survivals from the ‘old country’ culture” (Cripps, 1980, 18).

In Minnelli's narrative, the spiritual cabin in the sky represents the pursuit of a primitive desire to avert progress in favour of a simple, African American Christian alternative. The film's protagonist, godly and self-effacing, long suffering Petunia Jackson, played by Ethel Waters provides a Christian vision of completeness and contentedness in the face of adversity, whilst her philandering, self-seeking husband, Little Joe Jackson, played by Eddie Rochester, represents the dissatisfaction of corporeal and economic restraint. John Latouche's lyrics to the title song, sung by Waters and Rochester advance the ideology of the narrative:

And that is why my heart is flyin' high, Mister

'Cause I know we'll have a cabin in the sky

There may be a cabin in the sky, Lady

Yet, I am a boy who's headed for joy below

The social setting of the nightclub as the site of black recreational activity and economic freedoms is characterised as a marker of moral transgression and the question of temptation, redemption, and the Christian experience is transposed upon a constructed African American, folkloric religious identity. This in turn gave filmmakers the opportunity of experimenting with the technical possibilities available to present, through varying devices, for example superimposition, jump cutting, slow fade, flashback and flash forward,

editing and other camera illusions, the visualisation and actualisation of the soul, the Divine, and all other supernatural manifestations that define religious experience, in ways that would not have been possible either on stage or to the struggling movie houses. Whereas Minnelli had the financial resources to produce lavish technical operations of filmmaking, Williams' by contrast relied upon poor quality celluloid, lighting and sound due to low budgets, even creating superimposition by hand drawings directly onto the film in order to establish the desired effects. Indeed, whilst Williams made use of local amateur performers Minnelli capitalised on and furnished the big names of popular entertainment at that time.

There had been a growth of interest in African American religion from the early influences of the Broadway stage in the 1920's/1930's. Religious plays within all black cast contexts were the stock of white playwrights, i.e. Bagby Stephens' *Roseanne* (1923), Em Jo Basshe's *Earth* (1927), *The Green Pastures* 1930 Broadway hit by Marc Connelly, according to Weisenfeld, "set the standard for judging every play thereafter that engaged black religion, whether written by black or white playwrights" (Weisenfeld, 2007,10). These companies, who had the resources to pursue their artistic and financial interests, were able to produce sophisticated versions of the previously black-authored and black-owned race movies. During the 1930s and 1940s, a period marking the collision of new technologies, film, sound recording and broadcasting, the spiralling costs of producing sound movies under the regime of the depression era of WWII meant that black independent production houses, already struggling to meet the financial demands placed upon them, were forced to abandon their enterprises altogether.

Produced by Arthur Freed, *Cabin In The Sky* was based on Lynn Root's musical *Play Book*, or musical play in which song and dance are fully integrated into the narrative text and dramatic structure of the film. Joseph Schrank's screenplay was placed under the direction of scenic designer, Vincente Minnelli whose appointment advanced his aesthetic values for stage and screen. Hollywood's propensity for filmic ostentation during the 1930s in epic musical works such as Earl Carroll's *Vanities* and George White's *Scandals*, for example, appealed to Minnelli's sense of extravagance and to his affiliations with grand scale projects. He would be appointed Art Director of the Radio City Music Hall in Rockefeller Center, the most enormous showplace in the world (Johnson; 1958, 22). *Cabin In The Sky*'s lavish, magical, escapist appeal caught the imaginations of audiences in need of uplift and diversion during the depression era of WWII, and Minnelli's experience in designing and directing for the Broadway stage provided a surrealist, supernatural, otherworldly inflection of the original concept. Choral arrangements provided by Hall Johnson and presented by the Hall Johnson Choir, having made their appearance in William Keighley and Marc Connelly's 1936 religious film, *The Green Pastures*, epitomized the importance to the entertainment industry of associating and establishing representations of the African American image with performance, musical expression and religious sentiment, to the extent that the Hall Johnson Choir gained popularity with film companies keen to chronicle and project authoritatively their perceptions of black life, and regarded this choral ensemble as authentic interpreters of black religious music (Weisenfeld, 2007, 5; 172).

Credits also include original music by Duke Ellington and his Orchestra, whilst Vernon Duke scored the music to Latouche's lyrics. The all-star extravaganza featured an array of radio and recording artists, stage and screen performers, and others emerging onto the mass media scene. The novelty all black cast movie line-up included Ethel Waters, recording, stage and screen star, reprising her role as the original Petunia Jackson from the original Broadway stage version of *Cabin In The Sky*. The prominent Jazz artists Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington featured showcasing their musicianship, although Armstrong's role, billed as "The Trumpeter", is very transitory in the larger scale of the production. Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, playing Little Joe, was a comic actor and radio celebrity appearing in the long running Jack and Benny series as the voice of "Pullman Porter". Lena Horne who gained a contract with MGM and who was groomed as a glamorous, black movie star played the part of the highly eroticized Georgia Brown. Rex Ingram who played "De Lawd" in *The Green Pastures*, another all black cast presentation of African religious sentiments, is here representing the underworld in the characters Lucias, the gambling associate and Lucifer Jr in the dream sequence scenes. Butterfly McQueen as the enigmatic Lily of the Jackson household appeared in Selznick's 1939 classic movie epic, *Gone With The Wind*, in which her signature 'small voice' qualified her for comic, menial roles.

The narrative functions as a folkloric theatrical fantasy which, as the prologue attests, is fictitious and mythical in its nature, involving supernatural agents such as Angels and Devils, and their collisions with the living and the dead, extravagant visionary images that include the destructive powers of tornados and by contrast, cherubim adorned stairways

ascending to the heavens. Even time itself is subject to the liminal spaces of the imagination, hallucination and psychosis. Accompanied by an angelic choir, the prologue sets the mood for the proceeding establishing shot:

“Throughout the ages, powerful and inspiring thoughts have been preserved and handed down by the medium of the legend, the fable, and the fantasy. The folklore of America has origins in all lands, all races, all colors. This story of faith and devotion springs from that source and seeks to capture those values” (*Cabin*; Prologue).

But whose legend? whose fable? whose fantasy? And whose folklore and whose value systems are judging them? According to Chireau, “Traditionally, African American folklore has manifested a spectrum of forms, embodying practical, explanatory, and narrative discourses. Didactic, biblically based tales and stories, human and animal trickster accounts, apocryphal myths, and supernatural legends have been created and relayed within, black communities as sources of wisdom, history and entertainment” (Chireau, 2000). Though ultimately Minnelli’s re-vision of a nostalgic, folksy black Southern aesthetic privileges a dominant cinematic idealism, and historically white authored, male centred, racially divisive idealism of African American life. Therefore the unequivocal prejudices and inaccuracies encoded in *Cabin In The Sky*, for all its comic and mythic premises, renders such cultural artefacts and the systems that govern them as questionable sources of representation. Representing tropes of womanhood is further problematized in phallogentric, dominant cinematic discourse. According to Kaplan, women have never really been present in film, but have only come into being in the male psyche of sexual objectification. Women in film, she argues, “do not function as signifiers for a signified (a real woman) as sociological critics

have assumed, but signifier and signified have been elided into a sign that represents something in the male unconscious” (Kaplan; 1983, 310).

The women of *Cabin In The Sky* meet the limiting criteria used to inscribe categories of black femininity that have equally been constructed in mythic spaces. The bipolarity of black female representation ranges from the Mammy figure, embodying Christian and domestic virtue in the saint-like qualities of Minnelli’s protagonist, Petunia Jackson, to the exotic manifestations of excess, temptation and sexual appetite that characterise the figure of the Tragic Mulatto and her Jezebel malefactions, personified in the character of Georgia Brown. The motif of the Tragic Mulatto in which Lena Horne was cast to embody the highly exotic eroticized amoral other, Georgia Brown, has been discussed significantly in Vidor’s *Hallelujah*. Here she is the binary opposite to the dutiful and religiously devout, puritanical and by implication, desexualised Mammy figure, Petunia Jackson performed by Ethel Waters. The Madonna-Whore dichotomies underpinned these burgeoning racist gender classifications. The plantation Mammy of the antebellum South was a familiar blackface performance caricature of nineteenth century minstrelsy entertainments. Maurice M. Manring’s survey, *Aunt Jemima Explained: The Old South, the Absent Mistress, and the Slave in a Box*, examines the evolution of the (19th Mammy to her commercialised iconic status as Aunt Jemima, the illustrated image for a range of food products, promoting a romanticised ideal of the ‘slave in a box’. The character of the minstrelised Mammy is thus described:

“She was headstrong, fat, and simple-minded, a companion of the country dullard Jim Crow and his foppish city cousin, Zip Coon. A superstitious character, she was especially alarmed and confused by any advance in technology such as the telephone (and later the automobile), and her inability to cope made her the butt of the joke for white audiences. But in the kitchen, she was an unchallenged expert, the cook for an idealized version of the Old South, a land of good food, beautiful but fragile white women, warm weather, gentility, and leisure” (Manring, 1995, 21 - Kern-Foxworth, 1990, 56-57), and Manring goes on to describe the nostalgic and social values of the mammy figure, “She soothed guilt over slavery, kept white women out of the kitchen and put hot food on the table. Like the real slave woman, she saved whites from work; but the mammy remembered in the New South saved whites from worry, too” (1995, 22).

Petunia Jackson is modelled as the paragon of domestic virtue. She evokes the nostalgic, romanticized ideal of the Southern plantation Mammy, loyal, nurturing, a superwoman, pious, masculinised, faithful and happy in servitude, flawless in the kitchen, dark skinned and overweight. When Petunia is presented with a washing machine as a birthday gift, despite the absence of electricity in the Jackson household, rendering the appliance redundant, she is emotionally overwhelmed by the gesture, exclaiming, “Ain’t nobody got no right being as happy as I am” (*Cabin*; Sc.13). The narrative suggests that Petunia’s inauguration into the modern world is a conflicted one in which progress is resisted in favour of an Old sentimentalised, simple and yearned after Southern aesthetic. However, Petunia’s naivety is undermined when she attends the nightclub scene, ostentatiously attired, loose of tongue and loose of morals. She is also framed as the overbearing matriarch who

threatens the advancement of her husband's masculinities by refuting his sexual development. Petunia not only allows her busy life of servitude to exclude the propagation of the family unit, or at least the conditions of childlessness are not made explicit to the viewer, but she understandably obstructs Little Joe's extramarital interests with the beautiful seductress, Georgia Brown, whose sexual proclivities bring about the collapse of the Jackson family home. In each instance, another negation of black womanhood is portrayed, that of the mythic and unknowable super-woman, or bogeywoman.

The plot line of *Cabin In The Sky* focuses on the night of Little Joe's conversion, having been persuaded by his devout Christian wife to renounce his sinful, gambling habits. Aware of the magnitude of his iniquitous past, Little Joe cautions the Reverend in comic fashion, "Ah, Reverend, when you call on the sinners to confess, you'd better assign me the rest of the evening" (*Cabin*; Sc. 2). However, instead of responding to the 'song of invitation', his "appointment with repentance" is been dramatically curtailed when he slips outside the sanctuary of the church, cajoled by his gambling associates to settle his gambling debts. According to fellow gambler, Lucius, this is his 'last chance to make it the easy way' (*Cabin*, Sc.3). However, events take on a tragic outcome when Little Joe is near fatally injured from a gunshot wound during a dispute with his rival, Domino Johnson, played by John "Bubbles" W. Sublett. Shot in the dream sequence of Little Joe's delirium, the subsequent scenes shift from the darkened claustrophobic interior that indicates the death chamber as Little Joe fights for his life, to what transpires as a psychological alternate universe of Little Joe's fever state, where anxieties and carnal aspirations are exorcised.

During Petunia's petitions for a redemptive outcome, supernatural agents in the form of angels and demons materialise and battle for eternal possession of Little Joe's sinful soul.

Due to Petunia's powerful prayers, Little Joe is permitted a limited time in which he must reform, specifically from his philandering and gambling vices, lest he face the horror of eternal damnation if he fails to do so. Inevitably temptation, not unlike the temptation Ras encountered when faced with the theft of a neighbour's hog for an easy meal, distracts Little Joe from his religious obligations. After all, for him, religion is a means by which carnal investments are irrevocably curtailed and financial pursuits unquestionably denied. An Irish sweepstake ticket win and his inability to resist sexual temptation with the eroticized Georgia Brown, triggers a chain of disastrous events where even devout Petunia descends into the trappings of sin. *Jim Henry's Paradise* night club, which is the locus of sexual freedom and violence, is consumed in a tornado, at which point the moral order is once more restored and after continued petitions and repentance he is granted a place with his wife in heavenly paradise. Awakening to find the entire experience was a fever dream; Little Joe renounces his gambling ways, and by implication, follows his wife's dream of embracing Christian conversion.

The opening scene deploys the clever use of a low camera angle establishing shot to create an interesting point of view at the very outset of the film. The camera fades in onto the church steeple, together with its swaying, melodic carillons, forcing the viewer to gaze

heavenwards into the clear sky backdrop of the frame, thereby privileging the spectator as though part of the action itself, from the point of view of the church congregants assembled below. Whilst this functions to naturalise religious sympathies and associations, and at the same time sets the scene and mood as a precursor to ritual and religious performance, it also points to one of a series of significant temporal and geographic locations within the film's narrative framework, redemption, damnation and temptation. Redemption and its physical association of the Church, take the form of restoration of Little Joe's relationship with Petunia. Damnation is defined by the eternal threat to Little Joe's soul for which Petunia petitions. His salvation or otherwise is determined by her prayers and the battling devil and angel militaries. Damnation is also configured in the corrupt values of *Jim Henry's Paradise* club, a metaphor of hell and the site of destruction in the closing tornado scene, and of course temptation is affirmed in the form of the Irish Sweepstake ticket and the sexual advances of Georgia Brown. The domestic sphere that defines home, security, fidelity, labour, poverty, and so on, represents the space upon which all external influences are tested.

Cabin In The Sky interacts with the concept of black femininities as magical, otherworldly phallogentric constructs, folkloric bogeywomen whose very existence can only be sanctioned in mythic, objectifying spaces. To examine their occurrences and their significance, each revelation of the bogeywomen will be discussed sequentially as they appear in the 6th, 7th and 12th scenes. Of course the construction of the bogeywoman requires an acknowledgement of her presence throughout the narrative of the film. However, it is the filmic treatment of particular manifestations of otherworldliness for visual pleasure that prompt further inspection. Firstly by Petunia, whose insightful and passionate prayers

confound the paradigms of heaven and earth and her relationship to the Divine, and simultaneously bemuse even the soldiers of the lord summoned to assess Little Joe's case,

The General: "We received a powerful prayer from Petunia here. It was the most powerful piece of prayin we's heard up there in a long time".

Lucifer Jr: "Hold on here... How come Petunia dere knows what we're talkin' about?"

The General: "I don't know. Petunia's always been in pretty close touch with the Lawd, but this is a new one on me".

Lucifer Jr; "Well it look like De Lawd is lettin' her in on somethin', and that's strictly 'gainst the rules for human beings down here". (*Cabin*; Sc. 7).

Petunia in Minnelli's narrative transcends even the understanding of supernatural agents and breaks the dynamics of the spiritual world order. The excessive demands placed upon the plantation mammy upon whom Petunia's characterisation is based, perpetuated the mythic ideal of the 'strong black woman' and anticipated its long contestations. This configuration has marked a territory of fierce black feminist debate and concern, for on the one hand, black women's survivals under the oppressive systems of racial and gender inequalities, economic disenfranchisement, sexual abuse, forced labour, disempowerment and so on, are indeed survivals to be honoured, however, survival under strength alone can in turn validate the very obstacles of oppression and presume upon the black woman the supernatural

capabilities to withstand them. In Tamara Beauboef-Lafontant's study, *Keeping Up Appearances, Getting Fed Up, The Embodiment of Strength among African American Women* (2005) in which she examines the limiting category of strength in shaping black feminine identities and its impact on black women's health, she cites Marcia Gillespie's critical concerns in her study, "*The Myth of the Strong Black Woman*", first published 1978, she asserts that these superhuman characters, "strong black women are encouraged to take pride in their capacity to endure and overcome adversity and to survive the physical, economic, and relational ravages of slavery, segregation, and persistent racism".

The Bogeywoman Construct:

A variety of online dictionary sources, including *dictionary.com* define the Bogeyman as "an imaginary evil character of supernatural powers, especially a mythical hobgoblin supposed to carry off naughty children". Therefore the counterpart bogeywoman when negotiated with Moody's definition of the bogeywoman as black churchwoman presents a complex, terrifying and ambivalent image of black womanhood, since this fictive inscription of a fearful and intimidating being, whilst a salient trope of black womanhood in Minnelli's narrative, is yet problematic to feminist discourse as it relies on an assertion of black femininity as inherently other, other-worldly. Jocelyn Moody's concept of the stereotype of the black churchwoman is also an important formulation since it deconstructs graphically one of the most popularised and racially disparaging inscriptions of black womanhood, the Mammy figure:

“What – or who – exactly do I mean by “the black churchwoman”? For me, she is a contemporary variation on the slave plantation mammy as she is imagined in twentieth-century films by actors like Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, she is Aunt Chloe, the compliant Christian wife of the novel’s most earnest preacher, Uncle Tom. The incarnation rarely falters, by whatever name she is called: she is always obese, buxom, faithful, obedient, patient, long-suffering, whole-hearted, open handed, nurturing, maternal, selfless, and sexless” (2003, 167). But hidden behind this fictionalised folkloric ideal of the antebellum mammy are histories of economic discrimination, forced separation from her family, enforced surrogacy of her slave master’s children and sexual exploitation.

The otherworldly, superhuman attributes of the bogeywoman configuration are also conferred comically upon the housemaid character, Lilly. Having been summoned to assist the grief stricken Petunia on Little Joe’s death, she enters the room which by now has become populated by unseen angels and cigar smoking devils, and yet Lilly appears susceptible to their presence by responding to the aroma of their tobacco. The character Lilly, interpreted as a bogeywoman is able to transcend the regulations that govern corporeality and spirituality, and therefore her transformation into the mythic and monstrous are made complete.

Crucially, Georgia Brown, a favourite of Lucifer Senior, is influenced throughout the narrative by the gentle manipulations of Lucifer Junior. His presence is not visible to

Georgia, though his power of persuasion is. Unlike Little Joe and Petunia who are open to the influence of both good and bad, Georgia has no ministering angels guiding her actions. Minnelli's text suggests that there is a point beyond which a woman's corruption cannot be salvaged by redemption. However, as with Chick in Vidor's *Hallelujah*, and Martha in Williams' *The Blood of Jesus*, Georgia Brown is transformed by her faith at the closing climatic scene of devastation when she prays for forgiveness and Lucifer loses his claim on his favourite. The third embodiment of the strong black superwoman is inferred rather than performed directly, but nonetheless present in the form of "Mammy", "Pappy" Lucifer's wife. Her reality is mediated through Lucifer Jr. and his associates in the ideas department scene where the audience is introduced to the ultimate bogeywoman, the she devil. Having finalised a plot to procure Little Joe's downfall, Lucifer Jr enquires informally "Pappy", "How's Mammy?... (after a pause) So's you's still in de dog house!" (*Cabin*; Sc.12). The absent 'mother devil' or 'devil mother' construct in the movie provides a comic and terrifying illusion of black femininity, not least due to her malevolent, superwoman, otherworldly capabilities, not only because her surreptitiousness empowers her, but also because she shares some of the Mammy's cantankerous, domineering qualities which normalises the threat of undermining masculine authority.

Though *Cabin In The Sky* exploits African American mythological beliefs in the supernatural, Ogunleye contests however, that "The belief that there are no clear distinctions between the natural and the supernatural is a common trait that Africans in America share with other Africans worldwide". And goes on to state that, "Just as the settings of Yoruba stories and theatrical pieces are not only staged on earth, but also in the heavens above, the

regions below the earth, and the region below the waters, African Americans also have mythological places and other worlds where much of the folklore takes place” (447). These mythological places include Zar, Ginny Gall and heaven.

Ellington’s musical arrangement of ‘*Things Ain’t What they Used To Be*’, with its slow and teasingly light piano syncopations, together with its instantly culturally recognisable bold and bawdy horn Jazz riffs above an equally provocative rhythmic drum crescendo announces the departure of old world rural simplicities and deficiencies and the inauguration of the progressive, liberal, primal and Godless new. Once the camera focuses on the social interior of *Jim Henry’s Paradise*, Ellington’s lively, swingers’ number, ‘*Going Up*’, creates a more explicit communal setting. *Jim Henry’s Paradise* is the oxymoronic location that encodes this cultural and moral shift. Corporeal and social abandon are suggested by the song and dance choices made for the urban nightlife scenes. Choreographically the emphasis of the dancers entering *Jim Henry’s Paradise* is a carefully stylised conglomeration of Jazz and Lindy Hopping entertainment that suggests a black primitivism. Naremore argues for a synthesis of urban and rural, however “the town is nonetheless an attractive place, and the real story is elsewhere – largely in the photography, the art direction, the costuming, the performances, and the musical numbers. In fact, in order to achieve a satisfying conclusion, *Cabin* finds ways to pull its two worlds into a kind of synthesis” (Naremore; 1993, 63.)

Concerns regarding outmoded and negative racial depictions of blacks on screen were being vocalised throughout the media, pressure groups and political organisations across the gender and racial divide. Hollywood screenwriter, Dalton Trumbo, an anti-fascist liberal wrote an article entitled “Blackface, Hollywood Style” in the NAACP’s *The Crisis*, in which he was moved to publish his political convictions regarding the burgeoning racist discriminations and representations of blacks in the media, “Our current crop of motion pictures, produced in a moment of national crisis when the President has made a direct appeal for racial understanding and cooperation, reveals many of the vicious old lies dressed up and paraded before us as evidence of our stern devotion to winning the war” (Dalton Trumbo, “Blackface, Hollywood Style”, *The Crisis*, December 1943, 366). And indeed the NAACP’s magazine – *The Crisis*, fired its founding editor, W.E.B. Du Bois, for his segregationist sympathies; “it will sometimes be necessary to our survival and an ultimate step toward the ultimate breaking down of barriers, to increase by voluntary action our separation from our fellowmen” (W.E.B. Du Bois, 1986).

Clarence Muse, actor and former head of the NAACP equally contributed to the outrage felt by many regarding racial encodings and misrepresentations of the dominant cinemas, “In order to clean up the matter of wrong done by characters that make the world think that the Negro group is a bunch of careless, illiterate porters, waiters, mammies and share-croppers, they should be done completely without dialect. There should be only a few Black-skinned Negroes, more browns and even more Mulattoes. The boys with their hair straightened will give a better social picture and all the pictures should have the Negro Lawyer, Doctor and Architect and, above all, don’t have them too black. This is a reaction

that is being broadcast throughout Hollywood circles since the meeting. The Actor must now refuse to play characters other than those mentioned. In other words, this business must be ‘white washed’” (Clarence Muse, “The Trial of ‘Uncle Tom’”). Muse’s convictions aimed at countering the aberrations of negative racial images by promoting black respectability, dignity and advancement in order to invoke white America’s approval, reflected the black bourgeois aesthetics of the NAACP’s growing number of middle-class members, of which Muse, an accomplished writer, director, actor, and lawyer, was a part. It is at this juncture that black sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier, had mounted his scathing indictment on the black elite in his 1957 publication *Black Bourgeois: The Rise of a New Middle Class in America*. In the author’s analysis of the black elite, he historicises the social, political and economic conditions which had been established within white ideological frameworks and how these were espoused by the black middle class in areas of business, education and social life, and how the realisation of the American Dream within that framework had been undermined by intra-class conflicts and racial disparities among the black community, a the failure of the black middle class agenda.

Cabin in The Sky was made during a period when African Americans’ participation in the war effort, as well as in mass popular culture was on the increase, and opportunities for participation and positive recognition of blacks on screen under the Washington administration were being championed and enshrined in law. Weisenfeld comments that “Throughout the war years, religion would prove central to the struggle over the morale of African Americans as well as the effort to transform Hollywood representations of black life and culture” (Weisenfeld, 2007,166). The Executive Secretary of the NAACP also appealed

for the provision of more realistic images of African Americans on screen, “the matter of treatment of the Negro in the motion pictures [is] of such importance that it takes rank over some other phases of our work” (*The Biography of Walter White*, 2003).

Minnelli’s folkloric fantasy sets up ambivalences in creating employment opportunities for black actors, whilst regulating those black identities. According to Ogunleye, the premise of folklore “contains seeds of wisdom, problem solving, and prophecy through tales of rebellion, triumph, reasoning, moralizing, and satire. All that African American people value, including the agony enslaved and freed Africans were forced to endure, as well as strategies they used to resist servitude and flee their captors, is discernible in this folk literature. African American folklore is also an historical thread that ties the cultural heritage of Africans in the diaspora and those living on the continent of Africa. The ultimate strength of folklore resides in its power to communicate the social and cultural identities of the eras” (1997, 436). However, laments its mis-use in (mis)interpreting cultural histories and identities, “Like every other aspect of African American creative art productions, folklore has also been exploited and commodified for capital and cultural gains. Walk Disney reaped millions by capitalizing on African American folklore in his movie title “Song of the South” and reinforced negative and fabricated representations such as the aunty, mammy, uncle and sambo. Pseudo African American folkloricism based on racist practises and ideals” (437). The invention and perpetuation of the mammy figure, the Jezebel, the strong black superwoman are projections of black femininities that have continued to survive in the Hollywood imagination and the moviemaking world.

CONCLUSION

The history of Hollywood filmmaking and its burgeoning, deleterious representations of the African American subject have rarely been without irony. For whilst the exploitation, commodification and consumption of black images on screen provided both a source of objectification as well as entertainment, instruction and monetary success, they have also served as a means of concretising gender, class and racial difference, eclipsing the very subjects it had purported to represent. This troubling dialectic, the thesis has shown, had emerged most notably in the way cinema had literally framed, narrativised, spoken for and brought into being an imagined black reality through a series of denigrating racial motifs, disparaging tropes of womanhood that range from the highly popularised plantation Mammy, iconized cinematically by Hattie McDaniel portraying Mammy in David O. Selznick's 1939 historical epic, *Gone With The Wind*, to the exotic Mullatain and Jezebel representations. Whilst the sexually aggressive Brute defined white notions of black masculinities in W.D. Griffith's racially controversial, 1915 civil war drama, *Birth Of A Nation*, performed by white actors in blackface, 'white Negro' performance valorised the ideals of the black subject and cemented for the spectator, the look, sound and nature of the African American as authoritative, not least in the minstrelised performances of Al Johnson in the first synchronised sound movie, *The Jazz Singer* (1927).

Re-Visioning Tropes of Womanhood has focused on the filmmaking industry's construction of and engagement with black femininity as the primary site of oppressive inscriptions, and has argued that the bogeywoman, namely the black churchwoman stereotype and her secular counterpart, particularly within the context of the contested 'strong black woman' are phallogentric articulations of black womanhood as 'other', 'other worldly' and 'unknowable'. The interesting dialectic within the discussion has been the illumination of how African American women's presence on screen has prompted her erasure within patriarchal discussions of gender representations, and equally how notions of survival, strength and overcoming rather than establish her agency, paradoxically refute it. The thesis has observed Hollywood's racial ideology in linking the African American subject inextricably with performance, musicality and religious sentiments, and associates these factors with the black female presence as the catalyst to black male deviancy. The legacies of these limiting categories flourish, sadly throughout the medias.

All three chapters of this thesis have articulated that patriarchal discourses of film have promoted the erasure and displacement of black female identifications in their varied forms and have examined historically the etymological sources, social, political and cultural, of their production. Vidor's *Hallelujah* of chapter one has explored the means of displacement of black womanhood by interrogating her configuration as a sexually transgressive agent, always at the centre and cause of male deviancy, and has emphasised through the feminist discussions of intersectionality, how black women's marginalisations are informed by multiple instances and institutions of discrimination of race, class and gender.

Yet not meeting the ideological standards of respectability, black womanhood continually falls outside of ideological standards of approval.

Spencer Williams' *The Blood of Jesus* of chapter two has argued that the transformative potential of the black churchwoman is uncertain due to her ambivalence and duplicity. It has shown that progression, in the form of modernity within the context of urbanisation, the church and society as problematics are destructively feminized in the media, as filmmakers attempt to coalesce the worlds of the church and the entertainment industries as instruments of religious instruction, whilst Minnelli's *Cabin In The Sky* of the final chapter has explored the mythic notion of the strong black woman as a corrective response to the oppressive patriarchal codes under which black women have had to struggle, but ultimately the strong black woman, supernatural, superhuman, unknowable, is transfigured beyond recognition.

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The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP New York: Free Press: 2003, 266. Ibid., 266-68; Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (1977; reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 35-64, 375-76, and *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, 35-63)

Clarence Muse, “The Trial of ‘Uncle Tom’: NAACP and William Pickens Purge As Hollywood Views It,” n.d., Afro-American Actors 2 [Motion Pictures], James Weldon Johnson Collection, *Yale Collection of American Literature*, Bienecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Filmography

A range of early black cast films are readily available from a range of web sources, including <https://archive.org>

“*Cabin In The Sky*”. Dir. Vincente Minnelli. Warner Home Video, 1943, Supplementary Material Compilation, 2006.

“*Hallelujah*”. Dir. King Vidor. MGM/UA Home Video, 1929.

“*The Blood of Jesus*”. Dir. Spencer Williams. Sack Amusement Enterprises,
1941, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3QAY5BpqRk>, Uploaded 15th December
2012, <http://www.youtube.com/user/thefilmarchive>

NOTES:

ⁱ Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in 1989 in her article, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex; A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989, 139-67. Reprinted in *The Politics of Law: A Progressive Critique* 195-217, edited by David Kairys, 2nd ed., Pantheon, 1990. She interrogates the failures of antidiscrimination law and feminist discourses in treating sex and race as distinct instances of oppression, whilst Crenshaw contends that the discrimination of black women is unique from other forms of oppression in that she faces multiple instances of subordination based on the intersections of racism and sexism.

ⁱⁱ Through a series of interviews amongst a small group of African American women, Bobo assesses their reactions to representations of themselves in literature and film including Steven Spielberg’s *The Color Purple*. "The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers". In *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, edited by E. Deidre Pribram, 90–109. New York: Verso Books, 1988

ⁱⁱⁱ Kaplan’s, “Is the gaze male?” from her book; *Women and Film: Both sides of the Camera*, Methuen: London 1983, is an expansion on Laura Mulvey’s 1973, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford UP, 1999: 833-44, in which she uses Freudian analytical frameworks to explore the male dominance of the camera and the varied ways men perceive and construct women, the object of their gaze through.

^{iv} James Naremore and Adam Knee's rural-urban binaries are discussed in *Cabin in the Sky* (Vincente Minnelli, 1943). The following all black cast movies that adopt this structure are *Hearts in Dixie* (Paul Sloane, 1929), *Green Pastures* (Marc Connelly and William Keighley, 1936), *Stormy Weather* (Andrew L. Stone, 1943), and *Carmen Jones* (Otto Preminger, 1954).