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## HOLLYWOOD BE THY NAME AND THE NEW WAVE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FILM SCHOLARSHIP

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**Judith Weisenfeld.** *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929–1949.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. xiii + 341 pp. Illustrations, notes, select biography, and index. \$60.00 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

The turn of the century has witnessed a significant shift in the literature on African American film and African American representation in the cinema. Theoretically sophisticated, cross-disciplinary and historically grounded, these works have gone beyond the simplistic binary of good and bad representation that plagued African American film studies in the late twentieth century. Superlative examples of this new trend include Paula Massood's *Black City Cinema* (2003), an examination of African American urbanization and the cinematic experience, and Jacqueline Stewart's *Migrating to the Movies* (2005), a narrative of African American migration and the black relationship to the cinema.

Joining this rich body of groundbreaking scholarship is Judith Weisenfeld's *Hollywood Be Thy Name*, an examination of African American religion in American film from 1929 to 1949. This chronological period is significant for a number of reasons. First, it marked Hollywood's widespread acceptance of the sound film (and the death of the silent cinema). Studio executives were fascinated with the potential of the African American voice in film. Second, it began with the death knell of the first wave of African American produced and directed film (1913–1929), which flourished during the silent era. Third, it marked the apotheosis of the studio system where Hollywood dominated worldwide cinema and vertical integration created near oligopolistic conditions in the industry. Weisenfeld's book also occupies a unique period in African American history including pivotal events such as the impact of the Great Depression, World War II and the beginnings of the modern Civil Rights movement. The author's magic in this volume is her ability to juggle African American history, film history, and black religiosity in a manner that is highly readable. It is indeed a major accomplishment.

One of the key features of this new scholarship is the emphasis on black engagement with cinema rather than simply focusing on representation. Both

Stewart and Weisenfeld have made this a primary focus of their scholarship. Weisenfeld begins her volume with a press report on black response to an all-white feature, Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1933). It is the author's active use of multiple sources of the black press—impressive since it is very difficult to use the black press of the first half of the twentieth century as an archival source since there is virtually no indexing of such works, particularly in regard to African American newspapers, journals and magazines considerations' of movies—that make this such an engaging book.

As the author aptly demonstrates, cinematic depictions of black religion held broader ideological functions in the American landscape. Such films could include big budget, white-produced studio pictures, white-financed independent all-black productions, or black-controlled independent productions. The motivations of those individuals both behind and in front of the camera must be considered when addressing African American religion in film. Such films usually addressed black religion in conjunction with other facets (or imaginings) of African American culture including intellectual ability, sexuality, leadership, gender roles, racial division, and economics. Throughout *Hollywood Be Thy Name* the author consistently stresses the agency of African Americans involved in the cinema; be it as spectators attempting to make meaning, actors or writers involved in the creative process, or politically engaged individuals countering what they considered as destructive cinematic representation. This new wave of scholarship has combated the victim model of earlier work (particularly Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks* [2002]), which virtually gave no agency to the African American spectator, actor, or writer. Recent biographies of Canada Lee, Stepin Fetchit, and Sidney Poitier have demonstrated that African American actors were often limited in their roles but made conscious decisions in choosing how to embody themselves on the screen. The writing of bell hooks reaffirms the work of Stuart Hall by arguing that African American women often negotiated or opposed African American representation on the screen by determining their own meaning. One of the primary strengths of this volume is Weisenfeld's decision to demonstrate multiple facets of the African American relationship with the cinema. Black people are not just spectators—they are writers, choir directors, actors, directors, political activists, and ministers.

Weisenfeld's use of historical context serves well in a field that is often plagued by theory that dehistoricizes the realities of the cinema. One such example is her placement of African American cinematic religiosity within the context of white dominant Protestantism and Catholicism. During much of the period under consideration in this volume, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA) operated the Production Code Administration (PCA) that often deemed what was appropriate and inappropriate on the screen. Protestant and Catholic religious organizations had driven the MPPDA

to self-monitor what was depicted in motion pictures. It is no surprise that demeaning depictions of ministers or religiosity would often be scrutinized by the PCA. In the author's chapter on the seminal film *Hallelujah* (1929), she explains how the MPPDA was involved in contests over derogatory racial dialogue and "the representation of blackness as fundamentally connected to sexuality and religion" (p. 27). Throughout the text, Weisenfeld shows how the MPPDA was actively involved in monitoring African American religion on screen.

If there is one critique of this volume, it is the lack of emphasis on African American religious sects that were completely opposed to the cinematic medium. Within the introduction, the author aptly describes the contested notions of entertainment culture, black religion, and pleasure. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, African American religious leaders and commentators questioned the relationship between entertainment and religious life. The author argues that a widespread type of reconciliation emerged between religious groups and film entertainment culture, particularly as many black churches began using films as a form of moral uplift or as a fundraising tool. This reconciliation seems a little too pat though since a number of religious organizations continued to forbid their members to attend movie theaters. Perhaps this was outside the scope of the author's intentions, but it would serve as a wonderful supplement to her work.

The author is fully aware of the prehistory of the period under consideration, particularly the influence of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *The Jazz Singer* (1927). But her decision not to overemphasize these seminal works serves her well as the introduction of sound promised the potential for both new racial attitudes on screen and the threat of aural stereotyping. The first full chapter of this book is dedicated to *Hallelujah* (1929). It is no accident that one of the first big budget sound musicals featured African American performers. Black musical artists such as Sissle and Blake and Bessie Smith were among the first performers to be documented in sound film. The influence of black musicians in the 1920s was not to be denied, and there was much discussion in the film community on the potential for African American talent on the screen. One such influential individual who recognized this potential was director King Vidor. MGM allowed Vidor to direct a film on African Americans because as a Texan it was argued that he had the qualifications to depict authentic representations of southern black life.

*Hallelujah* was a seminal film for both Hollywood and the African American community. Weisenfeld writes, "Two aspects of the production stood out as particularly heartening for many black commentators and as indicative of film's potential to help reshape American life and culture: first that it was to be a sound picture and, second, that its story would focus on black religious life" (p. 23). The author illustrates the intense scrutiny that the black community

paid to this film within the press. The film focused on the relationship between Zeke (Daniel L. Haynes) and Chick (Nina Mae McKinney). The author accurately focused on the “nexus of religion, race, and sexuality” that constructed this complex story (p. 31). The moral character of blackness is discussed in its relationship to spirituality and sexuality. And this aspect of *Hallelujah* continues to fascinate film historians and contemporary audiences. Weisenfeld writes one of the best contextual analyses of the film available in print. The highly sexualized relationship between Zeke and Chick is spiritual, carnal, and frenzied. But the film also delivers strong religious principles, of course, interpreted through a white southern director. As the author argues, “Vidor interpreted all of these elements featured in the film—a racially compromised moral sensibility, sexualized religious expression, and emotional musical display devoid of deeper theological content—as fundamentally part of the nature of ‘the negro race’” (p. 43). Black religious notions are considered simplistic and emotional. What is perhaps surprising is the mostly positive press given to the film by the black community. But *Hallelujah* fit directly into the debate over “black folk culture” that occupied the black intelligentsia at the time. Again, this is a remarkable analysis but Weisenfeld perhaps had two missed opportunities. The Fox feature *Hearts in Dixie* (1929) was released almost at the same time and comparisons were frequently made between the two films in the black press. The film is also fascinating in its own way and incorporates notions of racial uplift, sacrifice, and black religiosity. Second, Haynes’s and McKinney’s roles and acting are so groundbreaking and remarkable one wishes that the author had spent more time on their performances.

*The Green Pastures* (1936) is the second film given in-depth treatment by the author. Again, the genesis of both the play and the film was a white writer and director, Marc Connelly. Weisenfeld argues that Connelly took a different approach from King Vidor’s claim to ethnographic authority with *Hallelujah*, [by offering] “his work as authentic African American Protestant theology, a view from the inside” (p. 53). The author emphasizes the impact of *The Green Pastures* repeatedly. It was both “authentically African American” and “reverent” according to both Connelly and much of its white audience. Connelly’s motives for writing the wildly popular play and its subsequent film are scrutinized by Weisenfeld. The author demonstrates the difficulty of addressing black religiosity in Hollywood studio productions since such depictions often went through the filter of racism and white interpretation of black religious notions.

*The Green Pastures* also introduces the problematic character of Hall Johnson. One of the most influential black choir directors in the country, Johnson’s work on the film signified that it was culturally African American. His contribution to this film, along with *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) and *Tales of Manhattan* (1942), marked him as a remarkably influential force in regard to African American

spirituality on screen. Yet Johnson later repudiated a number of these films and seemed to have special contempt for *The Green Pastures*. This draws attention to the need for an in-depth study of this influential man.

One of the most remarkable features of *The Green Pastures* was that fact that God was depicted as a black man. "De Lawd" was portrayed by Richard Berry Harrison in the stage version and by Rex Ingram in the screen version. Ingram's questionable private life made him a prime feature in the front pages of the black press since his cinematic role contrasted sharply with his "moral laxity." In a sophisticated discussion, Weisenfeld demonstrates that the controversy over this fact involved not only the depiction of God as a black man but the question over whether God should be depicted cinematically at all. She argues that white audiences reconciled this notion by concluding that De Lawd was simply the God of black people.

*Hollywood Be Thy Name* is greatly aided by the use of visual representation. The author has an extensive collection of stills, posters, and publicity materials related to African American religion in film. Her collection and those materials that she uses from the Separate Cinema Archive greatly contribute to the reader's understanding of visual symbolization. This is remarkably true in her chapters on black audience religious films. Weisenfeld gives Spencer Williams his due in her commentary on *The Blood of Jesus* (1941), *Brother Martin, Servant of Jesus* (1942), *Go Down, Death* (1944) and *Of One Blood* (1944). Perhaps more than any other artist of the period studied, Williams directly dealt with the subject of African American spiritual life on the screen. His Christian narratives of redemption spoke to both rural audiences and those who had recently migrated to the urban north. Williams also addressed the often-contentious relationship between the black religious establishment and the film industry by specifically making motion pictures for African American religious audiences. His depictions of moral transformation spoke to black audiences. These morality plays made wide use of traditional spirituals and serve as valuable cultural artifacts for contemporary musicologists.

One of the strengths of this volume is Weisenfeld lifting from obscurity many cultural productions that have long been forgotten. While many black film historians are familiar with Williams's *Blood of Jesus*, motion pictures like the Gists's *Hell Bound Train* and Arthur Drieffuss's *Paradise in Harlem* (1940) are completely unknown to many working in the field. Simultaneously, Weisenfeld demonstrates the cultural influences of religious plays like *Heaven Bound* (1937) on black film production.

As historian Thomas Cripps has pointed out in his seminal works *Slow Fade to Black* and *Making Movies Black*, World War II was a tremendous transitional period in African American representation in film. The Office of War Information's concern over racial stereotyping in American film and how that might impact the Allies and the *Pittsburgh Courier's* Double V campaign solidified

this notion. *Tales of Manhattan* (1942), which gets an in-depth analysis by the author, did not reflect this changing mentality. In fact, she argues that “the film relied heavily on conventional Hollywood interpretations of the simplicity of black religious thought and on common visual tropes that have traditionally connected religious practice to the social and political subordination of African Americans” (p. 167). This led to *Tales* star Paul Robeson eventually disavowing the film and ending his career in motion pictures. *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) continued the white vision of black theology but found a more sympathetic director with Vincente Minnelli. The extended debate over the film’s preface demonstrated the important transitional period of *Cabin* in which issues of war, patriotism, race, religion, and folklore were all interwoven to provide unity yet extend the notion of racial distinctiveness. Weisenfeld argues that *Cabin* made steps away from traditional Hollywood interpretations of African American life but these were indeed baby steps. The quasi-documentary nature of *We’ve Come a Long, Long Way* (1944) and *The Negro Soldier* (1944) illustrated the contributions of African Americans to the war effort. Weisenfeld describes the strong religious element in both motion pictures.

The final film discussed in-depth by the author is *Lost Boundaries* (1949), one of a series of provocative “message movies” that emerged in the postwar era. *Lost Boundaries* was a moderately popular and influential motion picture in the late 1940s but has largely been ignored by film historians. Weisenfeld delivers an analysis of the film that demonstrates its confusing message and illustrates how the motion picture can be read in multiple ways. “Passing” was almost an obsession in the industry in the post-World War II era. The moral complexities of the phenomenon were often blamed on those actually passing rather than by the racist white dominant culture as the author argues.

*Hollywood Be Thy Name* is a highly readable book that makes a significant contribution to film studies. Weisenfeld’s documentation includes a multitude of footnotes that are as interesting reading as the actual text. The use of publicity stills and posters illuminate many of her points. The author is both a fine film historian as well as a theoretician of film. This is a valuable contribution to the current burgeoning literature on African American film.

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