UMMA, Volume 12 (2), 2025: 21–43

Images of Black Women in John Stahl's *Imitation of Life*

Kayode Ogunfolabi
Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife
kogunfol@oauife.edu.ng

Abstract

This article explores John M. Stahl's film, *Imitation of Life*, for its representations of black women, specifically the images of the mammy and tragic mulatto. It situates the film within filmic techniques of minstrelsy humour and cinematic representation. Stahl's version has been deliberately selected because its portrayal of black women challenges the dominant industry practice and undermines spectatorship expectations during the period of the Great Depression. With a focus on close reading and compositional techniques, it analyses the portrayal of black women and the complex relationships among the major female characters. It emphasises how race, gender, and class intersect to exacerbate black women's oppression, unlike white women, who are unaffected by discrimination on the grounds of race. Despite centralising black women in dynamic roles, modifying images of the mammy, casting an actual biracial woman, John Stahl's *Imitation of Life* presents an ambiguous narrative that simultaneously questions and maintains prejudicial racial sentiments that characterised the United States of the early twentieth century.

Keywords:
Mulatto, Race, Minstrelsy, Comedy, Passing, Hollywood

https://dx.doi.org/10.56279/ummaj.v12i2.2

Introduction

One major factor that accounts for the success of John M. Stahl's (1934) *Imitation of Life* (an adaptation of Fannie Hurst's 1933 novel of the same title) is the courage to explore the tension that characterised race relations in the United States around the period of the Great Depression. This aspect of the film self-consciously deviates from the more popular blackface minstrelsy, which depended on stereotypical and derogatory representations of black people (Bogle 1973, pp. 57-67). Consequently, Stahl's (1934) film ruptures the conventions of blackface humour. By daring to humanise black women by casting them in dynamic

roles that depict affection, love, and pain, Stahl's (1934) film redefines representations of race in American cinema of the early twenty-first century. It is noteworthy that this innovative casting of black women is not without its challenges. Precisely because the film inadvertently installs and maintains the prevailing hegemonic hierarchical social order, it presents an ambiguous outlook that threatens and simultaneously reinforces the binary episteme that has influenced American white supremacist cultural imagination about the races.

There is no doubt that Stahl's (1934) *Imitation of Life* deploys stereotypes about black women, specifically the mammy, tragic mulatto, and others that project the subordinate status forced upon black people generally and black women specifically. However, these stereotypes and other negative projections of black women are neither necessarily gratuitous nor completely unproblematic. Despite appropriating these negative images, *Imitation of Life* (1934) thematises the prejudices that dehumanise the black population and, at the same time, underscores the pain and suffering that result from such bigoted perceptions. The appearance of Louise Beavers (as Delilah) and Fredi Washington (as Peola) in the film is a landmark event in the history of American cinema because racial tension had previously limited black performers' career prospects in Hollywood. This trend changed only in the early part of the twentieth century (Reid 1993, p. 15). Their acclaimed performance in *Imitation of Life* (1934) enhances the visibility of black women, though this visibility does not automatically translate to full citizenship and empowerment.

Since race, class, and gender impact the status of the two women of colour in the film, it is necessary to consider what Kimberlé Crenshaw (2006, p. 8) describes as intersectionality. Crenshaw asserts that intersectionality denotes "the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's . . . lives." She claims that the intersection of racism and sexism impacts black women's lives in such ways that cannot be accounted for by looking at women, race, and gender separately (2006, p 8). This observation implies that separate discourses of race, class, or gender may address specific problems. Still, as long as they exist as independent fields of inquiry, they will inadvertently marginalise black women's interests (2006, p 8). Therefore, Delilah's and Peola's experiences may have been ostensibly shaped by existing racist practices of the period; however, in most cases, they work in tandem with "preexisting

vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment" (2006, p. 8).

Objectives

This article explores how black women are portrayed in John Stahl's *Imitation of Life* (1934), especially within the context of blackface minstrelsy, emphasising how it had been deployed in racist discourse and also how it has been subverted in Stahl's film. In addition to this, the study examines how cinema's representational techniques function as a mechanism that perpetuates negative stereotypes about black women. Therefore, it scrutinises how Delilah both upholds and destabilises the image of the mammy, departing from the more conventional view of mammies in American popular culture. Finally, the study critiques the portrayal of the "tragic mulatto," a personage that questions existing pathologisation of blackness, embodies racial transgression, and suffers exclusion and alienation.

Methodology

Stahl's *Imitation of Life* (1934) is purposively selected because it self-consciously departs from blackface humour by casting actual African American women, a choice that was revolutionary at the time in the development of American cinema culture. Stahl's film differs from Douglas Sirk's 1959 remake, which casts Susan Kohner, an actress of Jewish and Hispanic heritage, as Peola (now Sarah Jane). The analysis follows a close reading to highlight the film's representational strategy that centralises black characters but undermines them by inadvertently upholding the racial prejudice of the period. period. It emphasises the film's compositional strategies and other filmic techniques that help convey its signification in specific scenes. The characters' intersectional experiences of discrimination are discussed to demonstrate that multiple sites of power intertwine to maintain white supremacist hegemony.

Review of Literature

Some critical commentaries address the impact of race on spectatorship culture. One of such is Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris's (2024) article entitled "Passing and Trespassing in Stahl and Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1934; 1959),"

in which she claims that Stahl deploys the image of the "Black mammy" and projects "the tormented face of the mulatto character by actualising on screen the one-drop rule," raising awareness about the "discourse of blood" and at the same time asserts that "race is neither a question of blood nor of visibility" (Paquet-Deyris 2024).

Kirsten M. Lew's (2018) "From Social Problem to Maternal Melodrama: The Lost Lynching Scene in John M. Stahl's *Imitation of Life*" goes "behind the scenes" to explore further the race issues raised by Paquet-Deyris (2004) above. Lew's (2018, p. 110) argument hinges on 'the lost lynching scene', which was allegedly cut off from the final version of the film ostensibly to pacify white audiences. She argues that the scene was removed at the last minute and replaced with Peola's return to her mother's funeral, both of which are absent from Hurst's novel (Lew 2018). She further contends that "the reconfiguration of the violent lynching scene into a scene of grief between women helps us to see the *absence* of systematic racism and its ideological motivations in the funeral scene" (Lew 2018). She claims that characters who pass as white depend upon "the association of blackness with self-denial," which is why "tragic mulatto figures . . . like Peola, whose existence challenges binary notions of race . . . either die or experience some other sort of mortification that reaffirms a single-race status" (Lew 2018, p. 110). It is against the backdrop of this position that Ambrose says that the basic message to black people in the film is "know your place and don't act too uppity, or you will suffer" (Ambrose 2009). Peola's agony at the end of the film affirms this claim.

Miriam Thaggert's (1998, p. 489) "Divided Images: Black Female Spectatorship and John Stahl's *Imitation of Life*" seizes on Lew's analysis of the ending of the film with Peola's return, arguing that the ending avoids the racial problems that must have served as catalysts for Peola's desire to pass. She also observes that the representation of Louise Beavers as Delilah is inconsistent with the mammy image, which was reproduced to appropriate "Aunt Jemima," the archetype of mammy stereotypes in American popular culture (p. 489). According to Thaggert (1998, p. 489), "the antebellum figure of an old, dark, overweight, nurturing black woman was a fabrication... of the Southern imagination." Patricia Turner evinces this argument by stating that images of black women as mammies are inaccurate because historically those who worked as mammies were more

likely to be light-skinned and also because house chores were performed by mixed-race women (qtd. in Thaggert 1998, p. 489).

Miriam J. Petty (2023, p. 6) concludes in "*Imitation of Life: On Passing Between*" that the racial issues generated by the film were to be expected in 1934 when Hollywood rarely featured "Black characters with plotlines consisting of their own affairs, much less featured topics that even indirectly referenced white racism or anti-blackness." She claims that major studios usually submitted to pressure from "southern box office," which implies that studio executives received pretexts for stereotyped and marginal depictions of black characters (2023, p. 6). She goes so far as to assert that assumptions about race in *Imitation of Life* are one-dimensional and uncritical, as evidenced by other mainstream films from the same period (2023, pp. 6-7).

These responses to Stahl's *Imitation of Life* (1934) have emphasised an important point: the film changed American cinema with its bold step to cast a black woman and an actual mixed-race woman. This is an audacious step, especially when Stahl's film is compared with Sirk's 1959 remake. While the character of the tragic mulatta was portrayed by Fredi Washington, an actual biracial actress, in Sirk's (1959) film, it was portrayed by Susan Kohner, an actress of Jewish and Hispanic heritage (Schudson, n.d.). It seems that Susan Kohner was only pretending to be mixed-race. Therefore, the articles' views on Stahl's film emphasise its impact in marking a watershed moment for African American casting in Hollywood (Schudson n.d.). Despite being released around the period of Civil Rights agitations, Sirk's (1959) film seems to have been a "glossier" version when compared to Stahl's 1934 release (Petty 2023), making Stahl's film a defiant challenge to race relations at a time that African American casting was limited to stock and flatly scripted roles (Ambrose 2009, p. 3). At the same time, it is worth noting that these articles have highlighted the film's shortcomings, namely its failure to fully engage with the problems of race, particularly in relation to interracial romance (2018, p. 110). The problem with the representational discourse of film is compounded by the audience's anticipation of some measure of historical accuracy. It is precisely because of this dialectic between history and representation that Edward Said emphasises the colonial refraction of the "other" in *Orientalism*

(1978). Filmic texts are sometimes inadvertently complicit with the dominant power's imperialist agenda. The same logic is evident in *Imitation of Life* (1934).

It is necessary at this point to focus on how *Imitation of Life* (1934) functions as a discourse that challenges the dominant racial prejudice of its time and, at the same time, reinscribes the same bigotry. The remaining section of the article is divided into four parts: the first contextualises *Imitation of Life* (1934) within the tropes of Blackface minstrelsy, while the second part addresses the influence of representational techniques on cinematic images of black women. The third part foregrounds the mammy stereotype, while the last part engages the precarious topic of the tragic mulatto.

Stahl's *Imitation of Life* v. Blackface minstrel humour

Stahl's (1934) *Imitation of Life* had inherited Plessy v. Ferguson, the 1896 law that legitimised the segregation of the races, popularly referred to as Jim Crow laws. Although the caption of the law was "separate but equal," the discrimination that characterised the separation undermined racial equality. *Plessy v. Ferguson* established and enforced the state policy of discrimination and segregation, which was often exacerbated by lynchings carried out by the mob and the much-dreaded Ku Klux Klan, founded in December 1865 (Guerrero 1993, p.12). By the time Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959) was made, *Plessy v. Ferguson* had been repealed in the landmark judgment known as *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. While this judgment repealed *Plessy v. Ferguson*, it did not entirely put an end to segregation and lynchings. *Imitation of Life* (1934) has to be seen against the backdrop of the Jim Crow laws, which were still very much in force by the time the film was made. The fact that Stahl places a black woman and a white woman in the same domestic space and strives to construct their relationship as horizontal rather than hierarchical underscores the film's subversive purpose.

Although *Imitation of Life (*1934) is approaching its centenary, it continues to resonate with contemporary political climate in the United States and with the lives of African Americans. For example, the gruesome murder of George Floyd by a police officer named Derek Chauvin on May 25, 2020, in

Minnesota launched the United States race relations back to the period of Jim Crow laws and lynchings (Olorunnipa 2025). According to Olorunnipa, George Floyd had been a victim of "insidious force of systemic racism" (Olorunnipa 2025); however, the circumstances in which he died demonstrate that the violence and lynchings of the Jim Crow era have managed to erupt in the twenty-first century. Therefore, *Imitation of Life* (1934) becomes a screen through which to scrutinise contemporary race relations and to question the extent to which advancements have been made in the treatment and representation of people of colour.

In engaging *Imitation of Life* (1934), it is necessary to acknowledge the film's "use" and "abuse" of the tropes of blackface minstrelsy. To understand the film's deployment of this strategy, a detour to Mark A. Reid's (1993) *Redefining Black Film* is necessary. Reid categorises black films into three important phases. The first is blackface minstrelsy, in which the performers act out derogatory stereotypes about black people (Reid 1993, pp. 19-23). It is usually performed by white people who not only apply make-up to look black, but also speak, using supposed African American vernacular, which is why Reid (1993, p. 19) argues that "The minstrel comics objectified African American oral traditions, physiognomy, dress, dance, and song." Reid (1993, p. 20) also maintains that to gain popularity, the films "used minstrel caricatures and avoided any portrayal of the socioeconomic effects of unemployment, segregated housing, and inadequate health care in African American communities." These films, according to Reid (1993, p. 20), were targeted to a white audience who took pleasure in consuming images of stereotyped black people. One important film at this stage is D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915).

The second phase is the hybrid minstrelsy. Reid (1993, p. 15) contends that, although the vehement criticism of *The Birth of Nation* (1915) both by National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and concerned whites led to gradual decline of the blackface performance, by the late 1920s there was a general decline in the output of black independent filmmakers who devoted themselves to negating the prejudicial representation of black people by Hollywood. He further states that the introduction of the talkies also created significant financial difficulties for independent filmmakers, who had to merge their

investments with dominant film industries and sometimes had to work in Hollywood (1993, p. 15). Many black performers, such as Evelyn Preer, Clarence Brooks, and Paul Robeson, began their careers with black independent filmmakers but could not resist the allure of Hollywood, especially since black independent films were almost non-existent by the late 1920s (1993, p. 15). However, their presence within mainstream film production allowed them to mediate the negative representation that had been normativised by dominant film corporations (1993, p. 23). They performed the hybrid minstrelsy in which the same old, derogatory image of black people filled the screen, except that the actions were performed by black people who were forced into the mainstream industry to continue their careers (1993, p. 23).

Although black entertainers were criticised for their participation in this hybrid minstrelsy because such stereotypical images implied "acquiescence of the objectified racial other," Reid (1993, p. 24) states that such criticisms are misguided because black actors "had little power over the production of hybrid minstrel works and their presence in these films does not reflect racial self-hatred. Rather, critical analysis should examine how socioeconomic forces determine where and when blacks participate in American popular culture." The danger with this kind of performance is that an audience that is prejudiced might infer that these black actors were "performing themselves" (1993, p. 24); but a more critical interpretation of such films would also show that once the actors' personal and cultural philosophy does not align with such works, the goal of the performance becomes undermined because of the ironic dimension that destabilizes "intended" humour of the work.

The last one is the satiric hybrid minstrelsy, and it became popular during the Civil Rights Movement with African American comedians such as Jackie "Moms" Mabley, Dick Gregory, Godfrey Cambridge, and Flip Wilson (1993, p. 34). Reid (1993, p. 34) describes satiric hybrid minstrelsy as follows:

> [l]ike hybrid minstrelsy, this satiric component appealed to a white audience. But, unlike hybrid minstrelsy, satiric hybrid minstrelsy also appealed to a black audience who negotiated the contents and laughed with, and sometimes at, themselves as well as white Americans. Both

> whites and blacks tended to be entertained by the same jokes, which ridiculed contemporary racial and social iniquities.

Satiric hybrid minstrelsy also utilises what Reid (1993, p. 35) calls "the racially tendentious structure of blackface minstrelsy" (1993, p. 35), which allows either or both blacks and whites to become targets of the humour, with the tendency to deconstruct the prejudiced blackface minstrelsy. However, the fact that two of the minstrel comic forms mediate the tendentious power of blackface minstrelsy does not imply its subversion; rather, they have also participated in the maintenance of its authority (1993, p. 43). Reid (1993, p. 43) notes that films such as *Which Way Up?* (1977) and *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987) employ elements of the coon stereotype that evoke minstrel humour. It is crucial to note that blackface minstrelsy has been resilient precisely because tendentious films do not reveal the representational technologies that are characteristic of all art forms, which is why the audience, more often than not, assumes that the images displayed on the screen are "real." Even though these derogatory images of black people are social constructions, they tend to be perceived as "real" by sections of the audience whose "way of seeing" is consistent with the dominant imagination about hierarchies of the races. For *Imitation of Life* (1934), it is important to explore the power of representation as ideological, the effect of which interpellates the audience to "see" film images through a lens already mediated by racial prejudice (Butler 1997, pp. 381-382). This step is necessary to challenge the realist mode, which naturalises its narrative, especially in a society and film industry characterised by inequitable access to political and economic power.

The power of representation in film

It cannot be overemphasised that representation is an act and art of construction (Belsey, 1980, p. 44). The meaning conveyed by images in cinema is neither neutral nor transparent. They have been arranged to convey specific meanings through the mise-en-scène techniques employed. The narrative mode by which cinema lures the audience into its truth is most often realism. In defining realism, Dudley Andrew (1984, p. 48) states:

> [R]ealism in cinema is driven by the desire to make the audience ignore the process of signification and to grasp the film's plot or intrigue; for most film viewers, the plot is precisely and fully what a film represents. In this way, realism stabilises the temporal dimension of the film, turning the flow of pictures into a single large picture whose process of coming into being has been hidden behind the effect of its plot.

The images are normalised and must have required little persuasion for the majority white audience of the early 20th century to the late 1950s to accept such representation of African Americans as "real." Andrew (1984, p. 43) further argues that certain preconditions reinforce such representational realism: "the darkened auditorium; analogical indices such that the image of an object shares actual visible property with its referent; the psychological imitation which cinematic flow provides of actual flow of reality, the lure of sound." With these parameters in place, the audience inevitably finds it difficult to distinguish lived experience from the cinematic representational world. This condition leads them to perceive the film's fictional world as "real." This mode of "seeing" is effective precisely because it does not identify itself as representational. That is, it does not demonstrate to its audience that it is first and foremost a construct. Therefore, Andrew (1984, p. 52) says that "[t]rue representation drives a second intentional wedge between what we see and what it means." True representation identifies itself as such, revealing its status as imaginatively arranged to produce a realist perception in the audience.

The dominant realist mode of *Imitation of Life* (1934) is reinforced by the director's incorporation of melodrama, for which Stahl had been known as a specialist, with its "excessive appeal to the emotions of the audience" that keeps the audience thrilled by the arousal of strong "feelings of pity, horror, or joy" (Holman and Harmon, 1992, p. 285). Another characteristic that shapes the film's perception is poetic justice, which is usually "superficially secured" (1992, p. 285). As will be shown below, this idea of poetic justice functions specifically to preserve racial hierarchies so that by depriving blacks of the opportunity for upward mobility, they are confined to the lower class. The significance of this is the perpetuation of the purported inferiority of people of colour. Meanwhile, by deconstructing cinematic

images, it becomes possible to acknowledge and subvert the normative and ideological world of realism. The implication is that the audience can appreciate the intersection of realism and melodrama as an ideological function that reinforces a binary logic in the perception of racial groups. One of such images is that of the black woman whose representation as mammy had historically inundated American popular culture. Probably one of the most celebrated performances of the mammy was Hattie McDaniel's role as Ruth, the house servant in Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Despite her stellar performance, the mammy remains a popular and yet marginal archetype on the American silver screen.

The mammy

Imitation of Life (1934) has to do with the story of Delilah, played by Louise Beavers, a black woman seeking employment and Beatrice Pullman, played by Claudette Colbert. In exchange for accommodation, Delilah and her mixed-race daughter, Peola (Fredi Washington), assist Bea with house duties. duties. Once Bea tastes the pancake that Delilah makes from a family recipe, she starts a business that becomes so successful that the two women transcend their poverty and become wealthy. However, Peola is so light-skinned that she desperately wants to pass as white. After a few unsuccessful attempts at passing, she decides to leave, leaving her mother heartbroken. Peola returns to her mother's funeral, apologising for having rejected her for being black. At the end of the film, she returns to an all-black school that she had previously abandoned. Meanwhile, the portrayal of Delilah has its roots in D. W. Griffith's 1915 film, *The Birth of a Nation*, which portrays enslaved Black people as contented and subservient. In addition to this type of image is that of the *mammy*. In *Framing blackness*, Ed Guerrero (1993, pp. 15-16) theorises the mammy as a central figure in D. W. Griffith's film as follows:

> *Birth* [*of a Nation*] also features such staples of antebellum mythology as devoted house servants who prefer slavery to freedom and a strong loyal mammy who knocks down two Yankee guards to help her white master escape Reconstruction justice. And as she did in romantic fiction and commercial advertising, the cinematic mammy was to endure, becoming a stock figure in the majority of . . . dramas produced in Hollywood. Working her way into all genres, the

> mammy became a dominant, if not *the* dominant, representation of black womanhood on the screen.

Precisely because the *Birth of a Nation* depended on blackface minstrelsy, it simply portrayed stereotypical and one-dimensional "black" characters. For example, Delilah makes a seamless transition into domestic roles that serve the needs of a white mistress (Guerrero, 1993, pp. 15-16). However, her independence, strength, and confidence destabilise the stock, bold, and obsequious mammy, due to the friendship that develops between her and Bea on the one hand, and because the filmic archetypal image of the mammy was a fabrication (Guerrero, 1993, pp. 15-16). Despite their friendship, friendship, Delilah does not experience upward mobility in the way that Bea does, who becomes an overnight celebrity. This difference in the status of the two women emphasises how Delilah is a victim of intersectional oppression.

Although Donald Bogle (1973, p. 9) describes Aunt Jemima as "mammies who wedge themselves into the dominant white culture", Delilah hardly fits this model except for marketing the pancake mix with her image, just like Aunt Jemima's on boxes of food products. Delilah's apparent integration into mainstream American society is likely due to her 20 per cent stake in the pancake business. However, once the business succeeds and Bea proposes that Delilah should own a home to achieve independence, Delilah refuses and becomes anxious that Bea intends to evict her. This reaction is one of the stereotypes of the mammy that Bogle (1973, p. 9) describes. Delilah complains: "My own house? You gonna send me away, Miss Bea? I can't live with you? Oh, honey chile, please don't send me away . . . . How I gonna take care of you and Miss Jessie if I ain't here . . . I'se your cook. And I want to stay your cook" (37:10 – 37:45). When Delilah refuses the opportunity to own her own home, Elmer Smith, Bea's manager, mocks her by saying, "Once a pancake, always a pancake" (38:19-38:22), evoking and reinforcing the stereotype of the contented and docile house slave (Bogle, 1973, p. 57). Although there exists no discernible racial tension between the two women, there is an unmistakable class distinction between them. The film depicts a mammy who self-consciously inhabits the subaltern position and whose image is commercialised on pancake boxes and billboards.

Also, although it is Bea's idea to commercialise Delilah's pancakes, it is the white male's (Elmer's) idea to expand the business by packaging the flour.

Throughout the film, it becomes clear that the continued success of the business is determined in part by white males who control the industry. When Bea decides to accept the proposal to transform the business into a public company, her decision is informed by her inability to manage her emotional and business responsibilities. This development highlights the difference between the oppression of the black and white women in that the success of the business does not provide Delilah the privilege to be free from her domestic labour.

Mohanty (1991, pp. 53-54) elaborates this dynamic of oppression by emphasising the dimension of race in understanding the oppression of women, stating that women are not a homogeneous group and that women's suffering should not be generalised. She says that "An analysis of 'sexual difference' in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogenous notion of what I call the 'third world difference'—that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries" (Mohanty, 1991, pp. 53-54). Mohanty's argument demonstrates that generalising about women's oppression effaces the difference in their experiences and suffering. Bea may have been a subject of white male power; the intersectionality of race, class, and gender still makes Delilah become subordinated to Bea, whose white identity shields her from the former's racial experience.

This hierarchical relationship between white women and women of color prompts bell hooks (2000, p. 3) to assert that "Racism abounds in the writings of white feminists, reinforcing white supremacy and negating the possibility that women will bond politically across ethnic boundaries. . . . it is only by analysing racism and its function in capitalist society that a thorough understanding of class relationships can emerge". For example, Delilah seeks Bea's perspective on Peola's predicament. In doing this, the camera focuses on her as she emerges from the basement of the mansion (53:34). After consoling Delilah, suggesting that Peola should attend black colleges down south, the camera focuses on the golden staircase, and the audience sees Bea as she climbs upstairs while Delilah descends to the basement (57:58 – 58:00; Aliventi 2021). This shot depicts the class hierarchy between the two women, which is possible precisely because of the racism that was contemporaneous to that period of American history. Delilah's and Peola's exclusion from Bea's world is reinforced on the tenth anniversary of

Aunt Delilah Pancake Flour when Delilah and Peola are shown to be outside while the party lasts inside. The asymmetrical composition of mother and daughter signifies the tension between them, reinforced by Peola's morose countenance (40:00 – 40:01). Their exclusion is signalled by a long shot of Peola leaning against the wall. At the same time, Delilah looks up at the revellers on the upper floor of the house.

This race-induced classism calls into question Bea's magnanimity toward Delilah. On the one hand, Bea genuinely takes Delilah not only as a partner, but also as family; on the other hand, Delilah self-consciously embraces the subaltern position into which people of colour were forced. Regardless of either woman's agency or lack of it, the film paradoxically re-inscribes the "black code" into their affairs, the effect of which perpetuates the hierarchy of the races. The household might have achieved upward mobility, as can be seen in Bea's improved lifestyle and her social circle, Delilah and her daughter could not ascend the social ladder despite Delilah's substantial share in the household's wealth. She continues to perform the culturally assigned duties of a mammy. In fact, Bogle (1973, p. 57) suggests that Delilah's "submissiveness merely justifies Bea's exploitation". Delilah is also shown as the one who has internalised the Christian doctrine of docile acceptance of fate, through which she coaxes her daughter to accept the "inevitability" of the infamous "one drop of Negra blood" rule (Bogle 1973, p. 59). The film also portrays Delilah as "more self-effacing than ever and even more resolutely resigned to accepting . . . her fate of inferiority" (Bogle 1973, p.59).

Delilah's "acceptance" and "resignation" reveal to the audience that while Bea and Delilah might have been struggling with challenges of motherhood, Delilah also has to bear the burden of intersectional oppression of race, gender, and class (Mohanty 1991, pp. 53-54; Hooks 2000, p. 3; Crenshaw 2006, p. 8). For example, Bea's daughter, Jessie, is troubled because the life of luxury her mother provides has blinded her to the value of education, which is why her primary goal is a romantic achievement. Conversely, Delilah is aware of the "one-drop rule" and its implications for her daughter's access to full citizenship. For example, Jessie cannot understand why Young Peola is devastated when she calls her "black"; Delilah has to console her inconsolable daughter, who turns to her saying, "You, it's 'cause you're black. You made me black. I won't! I won't! I won't be black!" (27:44 – 27:52). The extent of Peola's sorrow is captured in the shot in which Delilah holds her on her lap in a near-ftal position, telling her,

"Calm yourself, baby. You've got to learn to take it" (27:16 – 28:13). Later in the film, Delilah again tries to convince her daughter to accept the status quo: "[o]pen up and say, 'Lord, I bows my head.' He made you black, honey. Don't be telling him his business. Accept it, honey. Do that for your mama" (58:25 – 59:57).

There is no doubt that Delilah wants to make her daughter happy and imagines that she would be only if she accepts her "blackness." Delilah's acquiescence consolidates white supremacist ideology, which is internalised to ensure her daughter's survival. Bogle's (1973) comment about her is worth examining. He says, "the irony of this stoicism was that it made the Negro character more self-effacing than ever and even more resolutely resigned to accepting his fate of inferiority" (1973, p. 59). Despite the exhausting weight of racism, Delilah remains less threatening, unlike her daughter Peola, who signifies transgression, both in her racial identity and action (Stoler, 1995, p. 177). Peola's character evokes that inchoate fear of unregulated sexual desire that white supremacy constructed as symptomatic of blackness, but which ironically suggests the untamed and simultaneously repressed desire for the white "other" body (Stoler, 1995, p. 177). In confronting Peola, the mainstream audience inevitably admits to not only its irrepressible desire for the black body but also to the futility of its discourse of moral self-regulation. This discourse is now superimposed on Peola, who embodies miscegenation, which is both interdicted and desired. Therefore, Peola is the pharmakos, the silenced, visible, and invisible body, who lacks agency simply because she has been socially excluded on grounds coterminous with colonial doctrines of contamination and degeneracy (Stoler, 2002, p. 63). The focus now turns to Peola, the tragic mulatto.

The tragic mulatto

Mixed-race identities, interdiction of miscegenation, and the fear of degeneracy are all effects of the anxiety of white supremacy (Stoler 2002, pp. 63-63). In other words, the performance of the mixed-race character of *Imitation of Life* (1934) crystallises into an iconic image in Hollywood precisely because of the prejudiced perception of blacks as inferior stock, and because of mainstream America's fantasy about racial purity. The film might have affirmed black people's talent and entry into Hollywood, but the consequences of such visibility are more ambiguous than celebratory. In addition to challenging whiteness by her mere presence, Peola

simultaneously participates in the process of normalising whiteness through the idea of "passing." Because the filmmaker has normativised whiteness through Peola's efforts to be white, she becomes an object of ridicule to a white audience. Her marginalisation, just like that of her mother, is shaped by discrimination that is produced by interconnectedness of racism, gender bias, and sexism. Peola's trauma represents the transgression of the miscegenation laws. The agony that she experiences may have elicited the audience's pathos, but the film also operates on the logic of "crime and punishment." That is, Peola is deserving of her punishment, since she epitomises transgressive racial identity. Although Peola is powerless in determining her own race(s), white supremacist and Jim Crow laws are indifferent to such sentiments.

Meanwhile, foregrounding Peola in *Imitation of Life* (1934) might have brought her visibility in a social and cultural context that tried to efface her Identity; that visibility simultaneously constitutes her as transgression. She has been effaced from the primal scene of desire that made her birth possible; this displacement works in two important ways: first, it isolates Peola and "omits" the very act that made her existence possible. Second, it obscures the operations of power that make her the victim of white bourgeois interests, which is consistent with the social contexts in which the repressive effects of power seem to be invisible. Foucault's (1978, p. 86) analysis of power becomes instructive at this point. He states that "power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms". Therefore, overdramatising Peola's racial trauma results from the effacement of interracial love, which ironically overcompensates for white desire for the body of the interdicted other.

The American colonial library is replete with pseudo-scientific claims about the inferiority of people of colour, emphasising the unsuitability of miscegenation and social integration of the races (Stoler 2002, p. 63). Stoler (2002, p. 62) makes a similar observation, arguing that "Middle-class morality, manliness, and motherhood were seen as endangered by the related fears of 'degeneration' and miscegenation in scientifically construed racist beliefs." Peola's on-screen anguish has implications that transgress the screen into the American society in which racial segregation and class stratification were maintained and enforced by both repressive and

ideological mechanisms. For the society of that period, Peola's suffering functions as one of the most formidable technologies for enforcing the boundaries of classes and races, in addition to juridical power.

The enforcement of Jim Crow and anti-miscegenation laws is predicated on the fallacy that the law is capable of preventing desire. Foucault (1978, pp. 81-82) rightly observes that "one should not think that desire is repressed, for the simple reason that the law is what constitutes both desire and the lack on which it is predicated. Where there is desire, the power relation is already present: an illusion . . . but vanity as well, to go questing after a desire that is beyond the reach of power". Therefore, desire is never opposed to the law but is produced by law because dominant powers not only "recorded inappropriate desire but created spaces for it as they struggled to define what was racially distinctive about bourgeois sexuality itself" (Stoler 1995, p. 177). This sexual prohibition of the black body, and even more the biracial body, is premised on the narcissistic notion of the superiority of the white body and inferiority of the black body, which has to be prevented from initiating the ultimate dissolution of the white "race" through degeneration (Stoler 2002, p. 62). It is an argument that rests not only on the assumption of the purity of the white race, but also on the notion of its superiority. Peola's inability to gain access to whiteness through passing and her reluctance to accept blackness constitute the dilemma that serves as the basis of her tragedy. The one-drop rule that deprives her access to whiteness and bourgeois class privilege arises from the pathologisation of blackness (Gilman 1985, pp. 109-110).

Apart from just being on the screen, Peola's representation in *Imitation of Life* (1934) has been grossly derogatory. Except for a few scenes after the first encounter with Bea, all other scenes in which Peola appears are marked by the trauma of her biracial identity, her desire for a better economic status, and the frustrations she experiences. From a poststructuralist perspective, Peola's on-screen presence already ruptures the grand narrative of racial separatism (Derrida 1973, p. 130), but this rupture does not translate into material power. Being biracial in and of itself carries with it discursive agency that potentially destabilises the basis of racial chauvinism. However, this discursive power does not equal subjective agency. Peola

cannot navigate the multiple oppressions of the racial "heart of darkness" in which she finds herself.

Peola's anguish is exacerbated by the conflict between her "phenomenology" and "ontology," although she embraces her appearance as white rather than the one-drop rule. This conflict between whiteness and blackness constitutes Peola's dominant persona in the film, so that her humanity becomes subordinated to devalued blackness. The rule becomes crucial not because of the mere presence of black blood in Peola, but also because she experiences it as contamination of her whiteness. Peola's frustration is evident in the scene described above regarding the Pancake business anniversary party. Of course, Delilah again asks, "What my baby want?" In response, Peola walks to the mirror and says instead, "I wanna be white, like I look. Look at me, am I not white? Isn't *that* a white girl? . . . You won't understand, would you?" (41:52 – 42:18; my emphasis). In this scene, as in Lacan's famous mirror stage, Peola identifies with the "ideal" mirror image. This image, which Lacan (1966, p. 76) refers to as primordial form, becomes Peola's "alienating destination," since it undermines the signifying mechanism of racism's symbolic order.

On the one hand, Peola functions as the archetypal ego, the one who identifies itself in the mirror image, but which ironically is the ideal signified from which the ego is eternally alienated. On the other hand, the tension between Peola and the fantasy image in the mirror is ineluctably mediated by racial politics, whose rules of engagement are ambiguous: whiteness depends on visual perception as such, but at the same time depends on the invisibility of blackness, regardless of, or because of, its presence. For example, other pupils in Peola's class confirm this view in the exchange: Pupil One: "I didn't know she was coloured"; Pupil Two: "Neither did I" (30:48 – 30:50). At the mirror, Peola struggles with this dialectic of appearance: she understands that she possesses the one-drop, which is why she really wants to be white. This tension also emerges when Peola refers to her reflection, her signified, as "that" when she asks, "Isn't *that* a white girl?" The word "that," though, is meant to align with herself, ultimately becomes the alienating "demonstrative" that ruptures the alignment between signifying Peola and signified Peola. The only other

thing left for her is to seek the elusive whiteness through an exilic adventure through which she plans to evade the haunting presence of blackness. To that American society, one drop of black blood is sufficient to determine her as black, regardless of how far she runs.

Moreover, the film is in part complicit with this racial politics, which is why the final funeral scene demonstrates that Peola cannot outrun her "black ancestry," irrespective of her appearance. Her embodiment of miscegenation and the funeral scene that signifies the film's climactic "crime and punishment" logic not only constitute a caveat for interracial romance but also suggest a gratifying, contented, and indulgent valorisation of, and desire for, whiteness. The film refuses to destabilise the racial prejudice that it questions through casting fully. Instead, it maintains white supremacy, depicting whiteness as the ultimate identification that Peola cannot claim for herself. The ending of the film restores the racial and class separatism, obliterating much of the advantage that casting people of colour in Hollywood represents. Guererro (1973, p.70) argues:

> It is true that mainstream commercial cinema's representation of African Americans changed significantly in response to these pressures, with older stereotypes and subordination of blacks jettisoned in favour of more assertive and multidimensional black characters, as well as black-focused themes and narratives; but throughout the Blaxploitation period, Hollywood developed more subtle and masked forms of devaluing African Americans on the screen.

Stahl's *Imitation of Life* (1934), in part, falls into this category. Images of the mammy and the tragic mulatto might have been attenuated, but the stereotypes persist and are deployed in ways that reinforce the audience's imaginaries about class and race. As stated earlier, Delilah departs from the quintessential mammy, and the taboo against miscegenation is broken by casting an actual mixed-race actress (Fredi Washington) in the role of the mulatta. Ironically, her role more or less reinforces the hegemony of racialistic prejudice. Jessie, as a white lady, is burdened only by the challenges of romance, unlike Peola, who, in addition to being a lady, has to contend with racial and class disempowerment, which evinces

Crenshaw's claim that antiracist discourse has to be expanded to accommodate multiple domains of power that subjugate black women.

Conclusion

Breaking into Hollywood was a monumental achievement for people of colour in the early twentieth century. Still, it was an achievement that was secured at a great cost: persistent negative images of people of colour, whether overt or covert. It was an experience that placed black actors in a dilemma, requiring them to choose between career success and reforming negative images of black people within a weakening independent cinema. Particularly because of the extreme living conditions that characterised the reconstruction era, the choice had already been made for them. *Imitation of Life* (1934) is a film representative of the crises that structured the postbellum United States. Casting Louise Beavers as Delilah and Fredi Washington as Peola epitomises the mood of the period. The film foregrounds the gradual liberalisation of Hollywood, which is why racial prejudice persists despite the efforts to assign dynamic roles to women of colour. The film resonates so well with biracial Fredi Washington, for whom the margins that distinguish "imitation of life" in the film industry and "imitation of life" of a mixed-race woman can be quite blurry.

Aliventi, P. (2021), Movie review: *Imitation of life* double feature: Two distinct takes on the same story, *Thoughts from the mountain top: Opinions, ideas, thoughts,* and *reviews*, [online] Available at: https://thoughtsfromthemountaintop.com/2021/09/30/movie-review-imitation-of-life-double-feature-two-distinct-takes-on-the-same-story/ (Accessed: 12 July 2024).

Ambrose, D. (2009), *Imitation of life*, from pulp fiction to American myth. *Blog at worfPress.com*. [online] Available at: https://dominicambrose.wordpress.com/2009/06/06/imitation-of-life-american-myth/. (Accessed: 12 July, 2024).

Andrew, D. 1984, *Concepts in film theory,* Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Belsey, C. 1980, *Critical practice*, Routledge, London.

Birth of a Nation. 1915, Directed by D. W. Griffith [Film]. Epoch producing company.

Bogle, D. 1973, *Toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies, and bucks: An interpretive history of blacks in American films*, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York.

Butler, J. B. 1987, *Imitation of Life* (John Stahl, 1934. Douglas Sirk, 1959: Style and the domestic Melodrama, *Jump cut: A review of contemporary melodrama*, 32. [online] Available at: https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlineessays/JC32folder/ImitationLifex2.html. (Accessed: 12 July 2024).

Butler, J. B. 1997, Gender is burning: Questions of appropriation and subversion," McClintock, A., Mufti, A. and Shohat, E. (eds.), *Dangerous liaisons: Gender, nation and postcolonial perspectives,* pp. 381-395, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Crenshaw, K. W. 2006, Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics and violence against women of colour, *Kvinder, køn & forskning*, no. 2-3, pp. 7-20.

Derrida, J. 1973, *Speech and phenomenon and other essays on Husserl's theory of signs*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston.

Foucault, M. 1978, *The history of sexuality: An introduction*, Hurley, R (trans.), Pantheon Books, New York.

Gilman, S. L. 1985, *Difference and pathology: Stereotypes of sexuality, race, and madness*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

Gone with the wind. 1939, directed by V. Fleming [Film], Selznick International Pictures.

Guerrero, E. 1993, *Framing blackness: The African American image in film*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA.

Holman, C. H. & Harmon, W. 1992, *A Handbook to Literature*, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York.

Hollywood shuffle. (1987), Directed by R. Townsend [Film], Conquering unicorn

Hooks, B. 2000, *Feminist theory: From margin to centre*, Southend Press, Cambridge, MA.

Hurst, F. 1933, *Imitation of Life*, Harper and Brothers, New York, NY. *Imitation of life*. (1934) Directed by J. Stahl [Film]. Universal Studios.

Lacan, J. 1966, *Écrits*. B. Fink (trans.), W. W. Norton & Company, New York.

Lew, K. M. 2018, From social problem to maternal melodrama: The lost lynching scene in John M. Stahl's *Imitation of Life*, *Film History*, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 107-126. [online] https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/filmhistory.30.4.05 Accessed: 12 July, 2024.

Mohanty, C. T. (1991), Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses." *Third World women and the politics of feminism,* C. T. Mohanty et al. (eds), pp. 51-80, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.

Olorunnipa, T. 2025, George Floyd: Victim of police brutality, *Britannica*. [online] https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-Floyd Accessed: 17 November, 2025.

Paquet-Deyris, A. 2021, Passing and Trespassing in Stahl and Sirk's *Imitation of Life*, *Film Journal*, 7. DOI: 10.4000/filmj.298. Accessed: 12 July, 2024.

Petty, M. J. 2023, *Imitation of life:* On passing between, *Current: The criterion collection*, Vol. 10, pp. 1-27. [online] https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/8038-imitation-of-life-on-passing-between Accessed: 17 Sept. 2024

Reid, M. A. 1993, *Redefining black film*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Said, E. 1979, *Orientalism*, Vintage Press, New York, NY.

Schudson, A. 2024, "Imitation of Life," *Library of Congress*. https://www.loc.gov Accessed: 17 Sept.

Stoler, A. L. 2002, *Carnal knowledge and imperial power: Race and the intimate in colonial Rule*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Stoler, A. L. 1995, *Race and the education of desire: Foucault's history of sexuality and the colonial order of things,* Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

Thaggert, M. (1998), Divided images: Black female spectatorship and John Stahl's *Imitation of Life*, *African American Review*, vol. 32, no. 3, pp. 481-491. [online]https://www.jstor.org/stable/3042248 Accessed: 12 July, 2024.

U. S. Supreme Court (1896). Plessy v. Ferguson U. S. 537.

Which way up? (1977) Directed by M. Schultz [Film]. Universal Studios.