

## Passing and Trespassing in Stahl and Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1934; 1959)

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In their 1934 and 1959 screen adaptations of Fanny Hurst's novel *Imitation of Life* (1933), John Stahl and Douglas Sirk both seize on the notions of passing and trespassing to toy with the tension between America's democratic dream and the dissenting voice of melodrama. As a genre, melodrama seems to operate as the nation's vernacular discourse, a "major force of moral reasoning in American mass culture."<sup>1</sup> The peculiarity of the melodramatic mode is to bring to the fore what Linda Williams refers to in *Playing the Race Card* as racial legibility. With the intermingling stories of the two single Black and White mothers fighting to raise their daughters, the spectators are forced to confront the controversial issues of women's emancipation *and* miscegenation. By staging various forms of socio-political *fatum*, Stahl and Sirk manipulate the spectatorial allegiances under the guise of romantic drama. The overly pathetic and sentimental dimension of the providential or catastrophic peripeteias of the plot which foreground the victim's viewpoint (usually a woman and/or the member of some minority) is often a pretext for presenting the characters' great moral complexity.

Under the prohibitions of the Hollywood Production Code, the central issues in these two adaptations implied controversy and the prior "crime" of sexual relationships between Blacks and Whites. The point suddenly became: how far are the characters willing to go to make their own versions of America's democratic myth come true? White stars, such as Claudette Colbert and Lana Turner and their Black and mulatto counterparts, Louise Beavers, Juanita Moore and Fredi Washington (Susan Kohner was only *pretending* to be mixed-raced in the 1959 version) replicated fragments of their off-screen existences, which made them culturally resonant with the roles of women and the troubled racial dynamics of the time. Being light-skinned enough to *pass for White* had always fascinated Americans, possibly because previous discourses and/or representations had never fully explored the diverse and deep-rooted conflicts the notion taps into. These strange filmic objects boldly capitalized on their own generic hybridity and their stars' iconic positions to confront head-on the paradigmatic

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card. Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002, xv.

obsessions of American society.

### Pushing the Boundaries of Representation

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In the novel, Fannie Hurst had already pushed the boundaries of societal norms by tackling the connections between gender, race, and consumption, and inscribing an unsettling friendship between two widows, one Black and one White. This powerful bonding added a new potentially explosive dimension to the sentimental formula Hurst had used in her previous novels. Peola, the light-skinned daughter of the Black servant Delilah, develops her own brand of "imitation of life" by simply refusing to be Black, and frantically trying to pass for White. Her painful itinerary partly replicates the social ascent of her mother's mistress, Bea Pullman/Lora Meredith in the 1934 and 1959 films. However, as Valerie Smith notes, questions of gender are also, inevitably, involved:

I locate passing within the discourse of intersectionality because although it is generally motivated by class considerations (people pass primarily in order to partake of the wider opportunities available to those in power) and constructed in racial terms (people describe the passing person as wanting to be white, not wanting to be rich), its consequences are distributed differentially on the basis of gender (women in narrative are more likely to be punished for passing than are men).<sup>2</sup>

As fascinating variations on the passing plot, Stahl and Sirk's melodramas dissect conjointly the notions of womanliness, leadership, Blackness, and Whiteness in a world which elicits masquerade in order for the characters to be able to perform beyond what heroines in women's pictures usually do.

When Stahl's 1934 version was released, it was heavily censored by the Joseph Breen Administration. Even though the plot itself features no actual instance of miscegenation between Blacks and Whites, it was condemned for alluding to the fact "in spirit, if not in fact!"<sup>3</sup> In effect, the physical presence in the cast of mixed-race actress Fredi Washington seems to have posed much more of a threat to the censors than a mere depiction of sexual relations. And, to some extent, Peola's tale of passing in that film was all the more sulfurous as it was "more destabilizing to the conventional black-and-white polarities of Hollywood representation than was [White Helen] Morgan's fictional presence in *Show Boat*".<sup>4</sup> For instance, even though Stahl toys repeatedly with the "Black mammy" clichés in his adaptation, he already goes one step further than Sirk in representing the tormented fate of the mulatto character by actualizing on screen the one-drop rule. In this sense, he materializes an invisible "discourse of blood",<sup>5</sup> while demonstrating, in an indirect if not truly subversive way, that race is neither a question of blood nor of visibility. As in the time of slavery, gifted and White-looking Peola/Washington has to follow her mother's condition (Black servant/companion Delilah, played by African-American star Louise Beavers). Somehow, the fact that Fredi Washington takes the part seems to have been more subversive than the actual inscription of the tale of passing on screen.

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<sup>2</sup> Valerie Smith, "Reading the intersection of race and gender in narratives of passing," in *Diacritics* 24 (2-3), 1994, 43.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Courtney, *Hollywood's Fantasy of Miscegenation*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Berkeley: University of California, 1997, 211.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 181.

<sup>5</sup> Eva Saks quoted in Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 182.

The passing scene at a White restaurant, after Peola has run away from her Black southern school (Stahl, 1:10:07-1:12:30) echoes the mulatta's first unsuccessful passing attempt when at school: in both cases, she is invariably found out by her mother. Stahl frames Peola's face, frozen in mute horror as she confronts her mother when trying to pass for a "White" cashier. The medium close-up and close-up (1:11:07-1:11:10) materialize the mulatta's properly unspeakable drama. For lack of the right words to formulate her plight, the daughter publicly denies her Black mother. The dialogue effectively redoubles the crucial identity problem, literally displacing the racial quandary onto a class one: "Are you talking to me? There must be some mistake. My name isn't Peola. [...] I'm sure you got me confused with someone else. [...] Do I look like her daughter? Do I look like I could be her daughter?" As Blackness is consistently associated with self-denial and pain, each crossing of the color line seems to be irremediably accompanied by some form of punishment, especially for women. Each time Delilah catches up with her, Peola is forced to quit her job.

Race is one of the conditions on which the melodramatic mode is posited. It is *because* Peola is colored that this form of maternal melodrama can unfold. John Stahl's stereotypical depiction of the Black mother as mammy caused widespread criticism but also provided the ideal backdrop for a different type of transgression. The most subversive crossing of boundaries actually became the mulatta's disowning of her mother and singlehandedly deciding to sever all blood ties with her. Legally Black, yet physically White, both Peola and Washington are living paradoxes. The light-skinned body evokes the polarization of the two categories of racial difference while, at the same time, transgressing the frontiers between the races and the sexes on which the American society is constructed.

### **"A false creation"**

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Douglas Sirk further highlights the hubristic dimension of Sarah Jane's act (Peola in the Stahl version). She wills and makes herself White, actually recreating herself in an absolute manner which defies the binarisms upon which racial identity is predicated. In the two passing scenes at Harry's Club in New York and *The Moulin Rouge* in Hollywood, her sensual body, dancing among and for Whites, is mediated through Annie's gaze. Aware that the classic Hollywood era was coming to an end, Sirk was making sure that the audience could pick up on the notion of artificiality. By having the camera focus on Sarah Jane's taunting postures (White actress, Susan Kohner), he was also making sure that he could provoke the raw physical emotions melodrama has to elicit in the audience.

The *Moulin Rouge* show in the 1959 version [1:33:30-1:35:03] marks the point of no return both in the passing process and in the mother-daughter relationship. The scene at the famed Hollywood cabaret exaggerates generic codes: stylistic sophistication reaches a peak with the debauchery of colours, flashy costumes, and synchronized movements of the dancers, temporarily borrowing the conventions of the musical. It stands in sharp contrast to the comparative plainness of Annie's clothes; she has been turned into a relatively hypoembodied Black mother (Juanita Moore), a thinner, more combative and entrepreneurial version than the 1934 hyperembodied and ever-present mammy Delilah (Louise Beavers), happy to remain an unpaid maid, straight from the plantation South. Sirk underscores the self-reflexive quality of the show-business environment in order to tailor the spectator's emotional response and explore the constructedness of ideologies of race, gender, sexuality, and performance.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Smith, 46.

In the 1950s context of heightened racial awareness, Sarah Jane's character becomes the site of a number of specific constructions, literally incarnating the deep connection between gender and racial ideology as a young, independent working woman, as a temptress toying with men's desire in the show business world, and as a mulatta abandoning her Black mother in a way which replicates Lora's abandonment of her own daughter to further her career as an actress. Sirk's treatment of the Sarah Jane figure echoes Toni Morrison's discussion of the functions of the "Africanist" persona in American literature and cultural discourse at large:

Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness *and* enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me. The result was a playground for the imagination. What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American.<sup>7</sup>

Sarah Jane-Peola not only reinforces the invention of Whiteness, but she also actualizes the type of freedom it brings her. Even if she becomes a productive site, a marker of some in-between space materializing the uneasy and shifting frontier between White affluence and Black disempowerment, the problematic of race is only a vehicle to get back to the core subject of gender relations.<sup>8</sup> Even the sympathy for the divergent characters on which melodrama capitalizes reduces her to an expendable body: the first passing scene in the New York City dive advertises Sarah Jane's body as a pleasurable object of consumption to be watched, laughed at, and used for money (1:25:58-1:28:23). The men's lewd laughter when she dances before them objectifies her and the bawdy words of her "Empty Arms" song, written by Arnold Hughes and Frederick Herbert ("Now is the time to fill all that is empty, to fill my life brimful of charm. Help me refill these empty, empty, empty arms") suggest the desperation of the lonely place she inhabits literally by herself. All these, including her humiliating instant rejection when her bosses learn she is coloured, become visible signs of the violence of the consumer society Sarah Jane both desires and fears. She too experiences "the conscious necessity for establishing difference."<sup>9</sup> Somehow, the violence of racial difference is displaced onto sexual difference in the outer, patriarchal world. In one of the most poignant scenes of the film, Sirk visually inscribes within the frame the torture of duality, or rather of some impossible in-betweenness. Back at her Hollywood motel, Sarah Jane shouts at her reflection in the mirror, "I'm White, White!", but Annie's is the only Black image registering on screen. Paradoxically confronted with her own absent image, the daughter looks at Whiteness without finding any underlying Black self (1:36:38).

Besides once again highlighting the fact that Sarah Jane's attempt at breaking free is intangible in the actual world, and nothing but "a false creation", Sirk stages this moment of Black self-loathing to return to the drama of the mother-daughter relationship and their tale of entrapment in the underclass. Hence, with this tonal shift and specific camera work, the two plots are now fully segregated and hierarchized. Annie is still represented as the incarnation of African-American folk forms, motifs, and gender roles inherited from the rural South, during her parting speech for instance, but their viability is now questioned as she can no longer be the Black, protective mother, and can only

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<sup>7</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, New York: Vintage Books, 1993, 38.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, 47.

<sup>9</sup> Morrison, 39.

offer some meagre financial protection. Sarah Jane's pursuit of cheap stardom, with her hypersexualized performance jobs, is the parodic version of Lora Meredith's brilliant career on Broadway, as played by iconic Lana Turner. Sirk ironically represents them both as perverted modes of femininity reflecting the social upheavals of postwar America. The mulatta's alternative vision of femininity will eventually be brought back into the fold, not necessarily of Black life, but at least of some kind of more "normative" family circle. Sirk's remake leads the viewer back to the territory of moral parables. Each character's will fashions the world she or he lives in, and women's struggles for economic independence bring intra-family conflicts, but most of these aspects are actually developed as social constructs left unresolved, or partly so, in the typical Sirkian system.<sup>10</sup>

### **Beyond Melodrama?**

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Fannie Hurst's 1933 narrative was a landmark in the representation of Black life and women for two apparently contradictory reasons: it did recycle troubling stereotypes (Aunt Delilah's fat, smiling face, for instance, advertising the mass production of pancake flour, modelled on the Quaker Oats Aunt Jemima figure), but also put Black characters at the centre of the filmic narrative and frame. It also refused to resolve its dilemmas through simple and satisfactory narrative strategies, as most melodramas do, once the heroine's "secret" has been exposed and solved, but still it retained some core characteristics of the women's weepies traditionally involving heightened emotionalism and sentimentality and female "victims".

Sirk, and Stahl to a lesser extent, both question the imaging practices of Hollywood cinema<sup>11</sup> and chronicle the characters' various strategies to break from racial and social conventions in the 1950s and the 1930s. Both actually exhibit the characters' cracks and contradictions, whether at a formal or a narrative level, thus deliberately undermining the films' ideological coherence. They mostly highlight the complexities of issues nearing the tragic, and, therefore, feature heroines conscious of their fates, as opposed to simple melodrama commoners who are not allowed any form of transcendent awareness.

As Laura Mulvey points out in her essay "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama": "Ideological contradiction is the overt mainspring and specific content of melodrama, not a hidden, unconscious thread to be picked up only by special critical processes."<sup>12</sup> Both directors stage the two different standpoints for melodrama that Mulvey refers to: the first, which is coloured by a female protagonist's dominating point of view, and which functions as a source of identification (Bea Pullman/Lora Meredith's), and the second, which "examines tensions in the family, between sex and generations"<sup>13</sup> where women's viewpoints are not usually analysed and do not precipitate the drama (Jessie/Susie's, Delilah/Annie's and Peola/Sarah Jane's). However, they do rework the second standpoint so that the insider's gaze and (usually silenced) voice can rise and be heard, especially in Sirk's remake of *Imitation of Life*. And, more specifically, while Stahl repeatedly focuses on the mulatta child's denials of her colour, Sirk frames Sarah Jane physically fighting her blackness, in the short sequence in which she secretly tells her boyfriend he should run away with her and is beaten up for lying about her colour

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<sup>10</sup> See Paul Willems, 'Towards an Analysis of the Sirkian system', *Screen* 13 (4), 1972-1973.

<sup>11</sup> bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators", in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Boston: South End Press 1992, 121.

<sup>12</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama,' *Movie* 25 Dec. 1977, 53.

<sup>13</sup> Mulvey, 54.

(1:14:21-1:16). Sirk expertly choreographs the scene by first filming its reflection in a dimly lit shop window. For censorship reasons, but also to grant the scene greater emotional intensity, the camera only frames Frankie from behind while he hits Sarah Jane, reducing her to the type of commodified body her mother has been turned into. Delilah-Annie is made into a public consumption image ready for use as, to a certain extent, is Bea-Lora as "the pancake queen". The extreme violence of the scene is underlined by Henry Mancini and Frank Skinner's jazz score and is staged like a 1950s musical. The stylized treatment of suggestive shadows and reflections of the savage beating already announces the racial and sexual tension of Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins' 1961 *West Side Story*.

The beating also strengthens Sarah Jane's resolve to keep on rejecting her Black racial identity and thus poses an identification problem for Black viewers: Black women would experience contradictory forces of identification and resistance when subjected to the type of Hollywood representation Laura Mulvey theorizes in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Of course, the main problem in this narrative of racial and emotional transgression is the insufferable guilt it entails, but also the equally unsettling guilty pleasure we take in identifying with the mulatta's unsettling matricidal desire: the Black mother is cast as the original sinner in this narrative of sexual trespassing. And hence, at this moment in the filmic narrative, no longer is her light-skinned body there "primarily for the pleasure of the white spectators (male or female)" as Manthia Diawara contends in "Black Spectatorship."<sup>14</sup> It seems that these scenes represent essential departures from the melodramatic mode, as the entire process of identification is then disrupted: every person is on show in *Imitation of Life*, and the limit between the star's persona and her real-life story is blurred as well. Lana Turner's Johnny Stompanato affair in which her daughter, Cheryl Lane, killed her Mafioso lover, contaminates her 1959 performance, and was actually used to advertise the film, just as Fredi Washington's mulatta condition influences her 1934 interpretation of Peola's part, as well as the critical perspective on the movie. The very construction of the spectatorial gaze is thus altered, as these peculiar images of White and Black femininity are coloured by specific life stories.

The major changes Annie's character undergoes in the Sirk remake (a woman who stays with Lora out of economic necessity and does not speak in dialect, among other aspects) contribute to making Whiteness less of a filmic norm: when Annie mentions she belongs to a church and several lodges, the camera frames Lora answering, "I didn't know!", to which Annie replies, "You never asked", thus turning her into a more pluri-dimensional Black woman than in the Stahl version. But even in the 1959 version, certain melodramatic situations and iconic figures are only partly modified. The indictment of the race situation in America in the 1950s remains a timid and indirect one. Paradoxically, Douglas Sirk's very insistence on the damages it causes brings the movie back on the melodramatic track. As Miriam Thaggert underlines: "Melodrama instead provides a safe, ready-made framework for the discussion of race in familial terms,"<sup>15</sup> as the unadulterated melodramatic ending shows.

The two ending sequences are fraught with the genre's most emblematic motifs and grammar. In Stahl's version (1:38:01-1:40:48), Peola's tearful remorse at Delilah's funeral impedes any more profound interrogation on how racial injustice is institutionalized. She is brought back into the fold of blackness, when Jessie and Bea get her to climb into the car and sit in front by the black chauffeur. In Sirk's remake (1:56:05-1:58:36), the fictional dimension of the tragic mulatta's situation is thoroughly highlighted, once again exhibited for everyone to see as the intradiegetic spectators' gaze relays and amplifies the extradiegetic one: ironically, in this ending, the Black woman does occupy a space closer

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<sup>14</sup> Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," in *Screen*, 29 (4), 1988, 71.

<sup>15</sup> Marina Heung, quoted by Miriam Thaggert, "Divided Images: Black Female Spectatorship and John Stahl's *Imitation of Life*," in *African American Review*, 32 (3), 1998, 489.

to the centre than in most other Hollywood films, but it is a place wholly reformatted by the formal devices of melodrama.

Sarah Jane is literally overwhelmed by a greater-than-life emotion given spectacular form: the tragedy is not within her, but between her and other members of the American society and has to be expressed according to the central aesthetic category of pathos underlined by Thomas Elsaesser in his 1972 "Tales of Sound and Fury". Observations on the Family Melodrama."<sup>16</sup> The stress is also conventionally laid on the *mise-en-scène*. The final inclusion of Sarah Jane within the White family circle, as she is brought back by Lora to the safe haven of the car, causes the racial, class, and sexual problems raised by her desire to pass to be elided – as if the filmic narrative eventually proved unable to explore fully these explosive cross-racial dynamics. Still, the two predetermined narrative trajectories of the prodigal mulatta daughter's return prove to be productive sites for discussions (however limited) of the way race, class, and gender ideologies intersect and are constructed and denied. As Valerie Smith notes, "not only do these bodies function as markers of sexual and racial transgression, but they signal as well the inescapable class implications of crossing these boundaries".<sup>17</sup> The viewers are led to explore issues beyond socio-racial barriers as the female characters step outside the boundaries of their own socio-racial destinies. In a similar manner, the two versions of *Imitation of Life* go beyond the borders of the generic tradition of melodrama by making a foray into the tragic territory, and by staging, with relatively bold aesthetic and formal devices, the most consummate hiding strategy and transgression. As Douglas Stern underlines, "Sarah Jane's passing for white is the original 'imitation of life' that defined the title."<sup>18</sup> Myth and American melodrama clash even further in the remake's unrewarding system of artifice and more contemporary perspective, as the racial problem is about to divide America even more in the 1960s: the explosive artificiality of the ending fully exposes the inherent fissures of the American Dream.

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury. Observations on the Family Melodrama", in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is where the Heart Is; Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, London: BFI, 1987.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, 57.

<sup>18</sup> Douglas Stern, *Douglas Sirk*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1997, 191.