
The File on Theresa Harris, Black Star of the Archive

ABSTRACT The file on Black actor Theresa Harris includes 103 Hollywood films and TV shows for which she has screen credit, along with many that she does not, from 1929 to 1958. She was cast as an extra, a bit player, or a character actor with lines, most of the time as a maid. In this speculative history of her career, I examine a selection of her roles in films such as *Baby Face* (1933), *Jezebel* (1938), *I Married a Zombie* (1943), *Out of the Past* (1947), and *Lady from Shanghai* (1947) as if they were racial events. The act of critical viewing, of actually noticing Harris's contribution to these and other films, can arguably alter the reading of the films in important ways. My reparative readings are inspired by the theoretical work of Eve Sedgwick and Christine Goding-Doty, and the historiographical work of Saidiya Hartman and Daphne Brooks. **KEYWORDS** Black women's history, character actor, Christine Goding-Doty, cinephilia, film archive, film extra, Hollywood, speculative historiography, Theresa Harris, women's film

Rather than conceptualizing race as identity, phenotypic characteristics, or biological inheritance, my reading of race as relation suggests that race itself is an *event*. It is not just a relation, but an event of *relating*.

—Christine Goding-Doty¹

Toward the end of *Baby Face* (1933) Barbara Stanwyck's character, Lily Powers, has an abrupt change of heart just before her ship sails to France. She yells at her maid Chico (Theresa Harris) for the first time in the film, demanding that she stop singing her signature song "St. Louis Blues." Without another word, Lily bustles out of the stateroom, draped in fur with a case of bonds and jewels, and leaves Chico alone to watch her disappear. Lily has chosen to stand by her man and let go of her luxurious lifestyle, but what about Chico, who has been with her since the beginning? Lily's rise to the top is also Chico's rise in Black society, and the two have been inseparable since they escaped from Erie, Pennsylvania, for the big city. I have always wondered about Chico's fate, left alone on the boat to France. I imagine she might be happier in Paris, where her singing might be better appreciated. I imagine she

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FIGURE 1. *Baby Face* (dir. Alfred E. Green), 1933.

might be able to make a living without serving white people, and maybe becoming a performer herself. Perhaps we could imagine something similar for Theresa Harris; perhaps we can imagine her playing other roles in film history, as more than Hollywood's hardest working maid; perhaps we can imagine her as a star of the archive.

In *Baby Face*, Harris plays Lily's close companion. On Christmas Eve, Chico is going out on the town, leaving dinner in the icebox for her employer who is left alone with the wise words of Nietzsche's *Will to Power* for company.² Chico definitely seems to be having a better life at the top than Lily Powers, even if she is still only the maid. The single scene of the two of them dressed in fur is a good example of the campiness of some Hollywood maids, such as those of Mae West. Pamela Wojcik has argued that in such films camp provides a strategy to "create distance from oppressive stereotypes."³ The image of Stanwyck and Harris in furs is campy in its excess, and in the ways it pushes the limits of credibility within racist culture. While many viewers today have gained distance from the racist culture of 1930s Hollywood, we still live and watch films in a culture plagued by racial and sexual hierarchies and prejudices. In order to close the distance between now and then, and to recognize the "cruel optimism" of Theresa Harris's aspirations and achievements within studio-era cinema, we need to rethink the nature of stardom as a speculative hermeneutic.⁴ Once Harris is made visible,

and respected as a body and a living presence in the archive, everything changes all around her.

Harris's appearance in *Baby Face* was also the initial inspiration for Lynn Nottage's play *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*, featuring a central character loosely based on Harris. Nottage's play is about the production of a fictional 1933 film, which is interrupted by an academic roundtable on Vera Stark, the name of the fictional Black actress.⁵ The play, the film, and a paratextual fake documentary about the film and the star, has been described by Samantha Sheppard as a kind of "phantom cinema" that "calculates by invention."⁶ What is it about Harris that has generated such speculation? Her 103 film and TV credits pale beside those of Louise Beaver's 169; but the only other Black actress from the studio era that comes close is Hattie McDaniel with 97. Most of Harris's contemporaries, such as Hattie Noel, Libby Taylor, Butterfly McQueen, and Nina Mae McKinney, have far fewer. So Harris was indeed "hard working," in the sense that she got fairly regular work, right into the late 1950s, even if she was mostly invisible to white audiences.

It is precisely because Harris is no longer invisible that her archival traces have become valuable sources for a different kind of historiography. Black women's history has long been invested in new, imaginative, and expanded conceptions of the archive in which absences and gaps are met with speculation and interpretation.⁷ Harris's performance in *Baby Face*, like so many of her appearances, is hardly a fully developed character. Despite the wardrobe, she has few lines, and yet the role has so much potential to lead to a very different movie in which she would and should be the star, that it renders her entire archive a site of possibility, potential, and what-might-have-been. As Ashley Farmer notes: "Black women's voices are there to be found in the casual omissions, the deliberate silences, their traces left in images, court records, bodily scars, and jail cell confessions. Imagine what new histories could emerge from a commitment to doing more with less."⁸

In this essay I would like to propose a speculative history of Harris in which the archive of her film appearances provides documentary evidence of the role of the Black woman in the mid-century American imaginary, as both an "institution" of domestic service, and a potential disruption of the status quo. Through interpretation and close reading, I think we can "do more" with her frequent, but marginal, appearances in American film history. It is true that, as the "Maid of Hollywood" Harris's roles were mostly as Charlene Regester describes the role of the Black woman in studio-era cinema: "to illuminate or aggrandize the virtue, beauty, morality, sexuality, sophistication,

and other qualities embedded in the ‘whiteness’ of the white female actress and character.”⁹ The whiteness of the movie stars that Harris appeared with is only visible within what Christine Goding-Doty describes as an “affective horizon” in which race is an event. My method in this article is to enter into a relationship with these historical figures, and fill in the affective horizon of their performances by following the traces that Harris’s Black body and voice has left in the archive of studio-era cinema.

Camp is only one way of reading against the grain of historical films. Film studies includes a long history of theories and strategies for disrupting previously stable texts, by detecting “symptoms” of contradictory discourses, or “queering” their representations, “transcoding,” or practicing resistant readings.¹⁰ Eve Sedgwick has proposed strategies of “reparative reading” as more hopeful than a paranoid reading which might focus on the real marginalization and subjugation of Harris’s talent and role in American film history. A reparative approach to historical phenomena that is found in fragments, is “additive and accretive,” and can be a mode of camp, built on the real fear that the “culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture.”¹¹ As Robert F. Reid-Pharr notes about *The Watermelon Woman* (Cheryl Dunye, 1996), a “thick conception of black or American history” must begin with the “frail and ephemeral evidence that we have at our disposal.”¹²

My interpretation of Harris’s screen appearances is therefore offered in the spirit of camp, as an alternative historiography that is invested in a past where we can find the imaginative origins of different futures that have not yet arrived.¹³ Jacqueline Stewart analyzes fictional Black characters at the movies in Chicago during the 1930s to better understand how their “reconstructive spectatorship” enables them to reconstruct their lives in the city.¹⁴ This method, guided by affect rather than evidence, is critical when the archive consists mainly of performances in fiction films. Walter Benjamin has argued that some historical materials “come into legibility” when the historian is ready to read them.¹⁵ In this sense, Harris’s face and body are to be understood as images that belong to a certain time, but only become legible due to what Benjamin calls an “historical index” at their interior, which is the “now” of recognizability.

Examining Harris’s film appearances as documents of mid-twentieth-century race relations is a method inspired by Saidiya Hartman’s groundbreaking speculative approach to Black social life in the early twentieth century, which she describes as breaking open archival documents “so they might yield a richer picture.”¹⁶ Harris may not have been a transformational

figure; she wasn't nearly as exotic as her alter-ego, the fictional Vera Stark, who was a civil rights activist and performed in Vegas before her "mysterious disappearance" in 1973.¹⁷ In many ways Harris was an "ordinary" Black worker in Hollywood who hoped for a long time to have better roles, but did not have the chance before her actual, ordinary death in 1985.¹⁸ Precisely because she is *not* Josephine Baker, Harris's career might be representative of some of her compatriots working in a cinema written and directed by white men. And yet, her casting in so many important (stylish, auteur-driven) films, including *Morocco* (Joseph von Sternberg, 1930), *Jezebel* (William Wyler, 1938), *Cat People* (Jacques Tourneur, 1942), *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), and *Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1947), generated imagery that is compelling, contradictory, and rich with potential for reparative readings.

Harris is not someone who "stole the show." Her characters never speak back as such, and for the most part they keep their places in the social and racial hierarchies of Hollywood. As Miriam J. Petty has argued, the phrase "stealing the show" was "a coded articulation" of the liminality of Black actors on the screen. Their "marginality and limited screen time contained but did not erase their star power, the power to mediate the meanings of race in early twentieth-century America."¹⁹ Harris's performances are embedded within a white imaginary world, which cannot be "stolen," because it is offered to all viewers to consume, even decades after the films were produced, and should be considered as viewing events rather than property, copyright legislation aside. How can we read Harris's career as a series of events, something produced within the space of whiteness that nevertheless destabilizes that "horizon" and blurs its edges?

Unlike some of her more well-known contemporaries Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers, Harris was petite, and like Stanwyck, she had a bounce in her step, and she looked young for a very long time. Donald Bogle says she was too dark skinned to become a leading lady, but from the 1930s to the 50s Harris performed in a handful of race movies—films made with mainly Black casts for Black audiences—as well as studio productions, and became a star among Black communities nation-wide. When movies in which she had a walk-on part as a maid came to theatres in Black neighborhoods, her name was on the marquee.²⁰

Although a Paramount publicist stated in 1940 that Harris's mother was a washer woman and her sisters worked as maids, her mother was actually a school teacher and a popular "dramatic reader" in Texas.²¹ The false

narrative is evidence that speculative historiography is not a new technique in the archive of Black actors. Harris had more training than Stanwyck ever got, starting with Jefferson high school in Los Angeles, and music training at University of Southern California.²² Before getting into film, she performed with the Lafayette Players, an African American theatre troupe that originated in Harlem. She married a doctor, and by the mid-1930s Thomas Cripps claims she was a “grand dame of the ghetto,” a generous and wealthy society lady in South Central Los Angeles.²³ Beyond this handful of anecdotes, the file on Theresa Harris is exceedingly slim, with the exception of the films themselves. Nottage’s “phantom cinema” is one creative response to the excess of missing detail about Harris’s biography, and mine is offered as a complimentary accounting of the legacy of the archival star. As Sheppard puts it, “film historiography requires . . . the belief that we can write cinema histories from what we have, what we lost, and what we can imagine.”²⁴

In his account of Bess Flowers, one of the busiest white extras in Hollywood, Will Straw argues that film spaces that include the faces and bodies of extras should be considered “as cultural repositories, an archive of a sort.”²⁵ Above and beyond narrativity, media such as Hollywood cinema—particularly in its digitized, readily accessible forms, I would add—constitutes “an archive of performance styles and specific faces or bodies.”²⁶ The file on Theresa Harris indexed by IMDb and Wikipedia includes 103 films and TV shows for which she has screen credit, along with many that she does not.²⁷ The recuperation of uncredited roles on these sites by fans, scholars, and family members is an absolutely critical first move toward creating an archival presence for actors such as Harris, and my project here is to expand this archive by way of a cinephiliac production of knowledge.²⁸ For some titles Harris is hard to find. For example, she is an uncredited “camp follower” in *Morocco* (Joseph von Sternberg, 1930) but difficult to identify in the film, perhaps because she was too dark skinned to pass as Arab. I imagine she is one of the girls straggling along at the very end of the film, heading into the desert after the soldiers, pulling a stubborn goat behind her. Marlene Dietrich takes off her heels and runs to catch up. In *The File on Thelma Jordan* (Robert Siodmak, 1949) Harris receives a screen credit, but appears in only one shot with her back turned to the camera, whereas she gets no screen credit at all for her speaking part as Minnie the waitress in *Cat People* (Jacques Tourneur, 1942).

Harris’s career was followed intermittently by film reviewers in the African American press who often promoted Black bit players for their readers. We

have traces of Harris's own words in a news report for *Bargain with Bullets* (a.k.a. *Gangsters on the Loose*, Harry L. Fraser, 1937), a (now lost) race film by Million Dollar Pictures in which Harris played the female lead. She is quite outspoken about the injustices of the industry, and says that the best thing about this film was the opportunity to wear "clothes" as opposed to a maid's uniform.²⁹ She hoped that the gangster film, despite its compromised production values, would showcase the acting talent of an all-Black company, and inspire more variety in the roles offered to colored actors. Curiously, despite the fact that she had been described in the *Chicago Defender* as a "charming little brown thrush," who had set "a new style of colored girls in pictures" with her role of Chico, Harris describes herself as not "hot" enough to be cast in roles other than maids. She aspired to be an actress, not a singer, because "hundreds of girls could sing."³⁰ In the audiovisual archive of her performances it is evident that Theresa Harris had an astonishing versatility, that she was indeed "hot," and that she could use her body, her voice, and her eyes to highly expressive effect, frequently providing important notes of pathos and energy to otherwise static productions.

THE LIMINAL ZONE OF THE HOLLYWOOD MAID

One of Harris's uncredited roles before *Baby Face* was Vera in *Professional Sweetheart* (1933), maid to a popular radio singing star played by Ginger Rogers. Rogers' character Glory is a corporate construction, and the plot follows the ups and downs of her manipulation by managers and sponsors who are dedicated to keeping her image clean and unadorned. In Glory's bedroom though, Vera teaches her the latest dance step from Harlem. When Glory runs off to marry a country boy, Vera is abruptly asked to fill in on the radio show, having shown the men a sample of her shimmy. Harris's sexy voice threatens Glory just enough for the reluctant star to hurry back to the microphone. Harris is only briefly on camera shimmying in sequins when her voice breaks through, but she represents Harlem and its pleasures—which the managers and sponsors are ultimately unable to resist. Her performance points to a world of entertainment just outside the boundaries of the corrupt culture of the film, a world that threatens and entices. Many of Harris's roles involve this hesitant transgression of the colour line, weakening its hold even while leaving it firmly in place.

The Black maid inhabits a liminal zone between two worlds, acting as confidante for white women like Lily and Glory who are otherwise stranded



FIGURE 2. *Professional Sweetheart* (dir. William A. Seiter), 1933.

in worlds made by men. In most of Harris's films, including *Horse Feathers* (Norman McLeod, 1932) *Miracle on 34th Street* (George Seaton), *Smooth as Silk* (Charles Barton, 1946), *The Big Clock* (John Farrow, 1948), *Here Come the Girls* (Claude Binyon, 1953), Barbara Eden's TV show *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1957), and Loretta Young's self-titled TV series in 1954, Harris's maid characters serve to underline the white woman's wealth and privilege, her freedom from housework, and her availability to "play" with men. But the maid is more than a prop: she opens doors for guests, she delivers messages, she answers phones. Scenes open and close on her movements, as she enters or exits a frame or a room, while the white lady lounges. Limited to the domestic spaces of bedrooms, bathrooms, and kitchens, she rarely leaves the house, unless her employer is an actress, which they often are, and she can be found backstage where, as Desirée J. Garcia argues, the Black maid "highlights the transformational and liberatory qualities of whiteness with her own lack of social mobility."³¹ Paula Rabinowitz has pointed out that the persistence of maids in film noir recasts a "symbol of antebellum racial hierarchies into an urbanized form of labor," and we could say the same of all the dramas, musicals, and women's films that Harris appeared in through to the mid-1950s.³²



FIGURE 3. *The Flame of New Orleans* (dir. René Clair), 1941.

Harris not only allows the white woman to shine, she also often provides energy and affect to listless performances. Her character Clementine in *The Flame of New Orleans* (René Claire, 1941) is probably the non-race film where she gets the most screen time and dialogue. Set in nineteenth-century New Orleans, she actively helps her mistress played by Marlene Dietrich snag rich men using various dirty tricks. Over the course of the film, Clementine sets up opportunities for Dietrich to seduce two men at the same time by using a disguise; Clementine also develops her own romance with the valet played by Clarence Muse. Dietrich's performance consists mainly of elegant poses, while Harris fills out a fully expressive, active, and responsive character, animating an otherwise routine film.

Harris's roles inevitably convey the predictable prejudice, humiliation, and demeaning stereotypes of studio-era race relations, but her gaze and her performing body also construct alternative horizons of affect. Perhaps Harris's most important role as an entertainer in her own right was as Josephine in two Jack Benny movies, *Buck Benny Rides Again* (1940) and *Love thy Neighbour* (1940). She plays a maid in these films, but she is also the girlfriend of Benny's sidekick Rochester (Eddie Anderson), one of the most prominent Black actors of the era. Rochester was a regular character in Benny's movies, Benny's radio program that ran from 1937 to 1965, and his TV show that ran from 1950 to 1965. The Rochester-Josephine relationship serves to parallel Benny's romantic relationships, highlighting their privilege, while ostensibly symbolizing the white characters' benevolence. In *Buck Benny Rides Again*, Harris and Anderson share an extended musical number, dancing and singing together. In *Love thy Neighbour*, Josephine cons Rochester with loaded dice, and plays a pivotal role in a convoluted plot. She also has the opportunity to wear several smart outfits, plus a Juliet costume (she and Anderson do a Romeo-and-Juliet routine), in addition to the tired maid's costume.

Black actors as "doubles" of white actors might have once been described as "shadows" but a speculative reading can also invert the gaze to see them as the main attraction, and the white characters as diversions, just as Black audiences may have done at the time. In the Benny movies, the performance style of Rochester and Harris has more wit, more energy, and more rapport than any of the other characters' scenes. They are unpredictable and joyful, while most of the scenes in these films, including those of Benny and Rochester together, tend toward condescension, mock-anger and torrents of put-downs, misunderstandings, and threats. Rochester's character was clearly modeled on stereotypes of Black minstrelsy and, especially in the prewar incarnations, Anderson's dialect perpetuated a degrading image of Black servitude and backwardness.³³ As Josephine, however, Harris does not speak in Southern dialect, and she has far more scenes with Anderson than with her female employers, with whom she is barely seen (in both cases they are Benny's love interest). At the end of *Love thy Neighbour*, she passes Mary Martin's character—her former employer—in the park, both of them pushing baby carriages. If this were the beginning of another movie, it would be one in which the two women are friends and equals. Josephine is smartly dressed and I imagine looks more like Harris herself might have looked off-screen in 1940.



FIGURE 4. *Buck Benny Rides Again* (dir. Mark Sandrich), 1940; and *Love thy Neighbour* (dir. Mark Sandrich), 1940.

SPECTACLE AND SPACE

Harris was by no means always cast as a maid, and her first screen role as a cabaret singer was later remembered in the Black press as the “first coloured girl to sing in the talkies.”³⁴ In Joseph von Sternberg’s *Thunderbolt* (1929) she appears onstage in the Black Cat Café, a nightclub frequented by Black patrons as well as white. Her voice is overheard first as background music, as Sternberg recorded all the sound live on the sound stage. Then she appears on screen, wearing a sparkling dress. As she sings “Daddy Won’t You Please

Come Home,” backed up by the band known as Mosby’s Blues Blowers, George Bancroft, who plays a gangster named Thunderbolt, sneaks a peek at her through the door before he leaves with his girlfriend. The film and the café audiences get a slightly longer look at her owning the stage and the screen. The white man’s gaze was transgressive for the period, and the performance launched her as a kind of Black Diva. Like so much of Harris’s career, this moment points to alternative realities, alternative scenarios that might have played out quite differently.

Harris also sang and danced toward the end of her career, noticeably so in *The French Line* (Lloyd Bacon, 1953) with Jane Russell. The two women strut about Mary’s (Russell) boudoir and bathroom singing “I’ll be Switched” while Mary undresses, takes a bath, and changes from her outdoorsy cowboy clothes to “something slinky,” attended by her maid Clara (Harris). Using a series of screens, mirrors, towels, and of course bubbles, Mary’s body is hidden from the viewer, but Clara gets several eyefuls. Given that later in the film Russell performs a dance so risqué that it was censored, this early scene sets up the film’s tease of Russell’s unclothed body. As a scene of whiteness it confuses that transgression with another: mixed-race lesbianism, which might up the ante on the film’s misogynist fantasy, but nevertheless inscribes the image and the pleasure of such a relationship within the film. Harris’s presence in this scene points to an alternative screen erotics.

Harris’s seminal appearance in *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947) was an opportunity, however brief, for Harris’s character to own her own space, dressed up for a night on the town. She plays Eunice, out with her date in a Black jazz club. She wears white flowers in her hair just like Billie Holliday and is enjoying a drink when Robert Mitchum slouches in looking for Eunice’s employer Kathie (Jane Greer). Eunice lies to him, saying she quit her job because Kathie packed up, got a vaccination, and went to Florida. In the next scene, Mitchum is flying to Mexico because “no one gets a vaccination to go to Florida.” At least Eunice tried. James Naremore describes this scene as being played “without condescension,” and that Mitchum’s character Jeff is anointed with the “cool” vibe of the jazz club.³⁵ What does it mean for Eunice though? She is being bothered on her personal time, and her former employer’s transgressions are rubbing off on her, but by lying, she enters the world of distrustful noir characters: men and women who have things to hide. Jeff’s “bravery” is Eunice’s chance for deceit and to assume Kathie’s agency. He is slumming; she is bluffing to protect Kathie, siding with the woman. For Harris it meant a “starring” role, at least for the Black



FIGURE 5. Clockwise from top left: *Thunderbolt* (dir. Joseph von Sternberg), 1929; *Out of the Past* (dir. Jacques Tourneur), 1947; *The French Line* (dir. Loyd Bacon), 1953; *Tell No Tales* (dir. Leslie Fenton), 1939.

community who read in the *Chicago Defender* that the all-coloured sequence was “built around her as an important factor in a murder mystery.”³⁶

Curiously, *The Chicago Defender* does not mention Harris’s far more dramatic role in *Tell No Tales* (Leslie Fenton, 1939). Again, she is a maid out of uniform, but this time she is at home mourning her dead husband Jim Alley (of the Alley Cat Café). Melvyn Douglas, playing a newspaperman investigating a crime, comes looking for Jim as a link in a long series of clues involving a counterfeit hundred-dollar bill. When Douglas walks into the dark apartment, Harris, as Ruby the widow, is arguing vehemently with the dead man’s relatives who are weeping loudly in her home, begging them to shut up. Douglas follows her into a bedroom where she is crying miserably on the bed. Then she explains that the C-note passed on by her dead husband came from her, and she got it from a man visiting her employer, a caustic cold-faced lady (Florence George), who got it from a pawn-shop owner, etc. It is a meandering story that takes Douglas all over town. Ruby is only one link in the chain, but she provides all the film’s emotion, pathos, and truth-telling, as her husband is the only real casualty in an otherwise pedantic thriller.



FIGURE 6. *Lady from Shanghai* (dir. Orson Welles), 1947.

In the film noir archive we can find at least one more instance of Harris owning the space, although this time she is no more than an extra. In *Lady From Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1947) Harris sits right behind Rita Hayworth in the courtroom scene in which Michael O'Hara (Welles) is on trial. Hayworth positively glows as high-key lighting illuminates her blonde hair and light-colored hat, coat, and veil. In the tight close-ups on Hayworth, Harris's face fills the screen behind her. Their eyes move together in a series of eight close-ups, and in the last one, as Elsa (Hayworth) rises to

take the stand, Harris's eyes move to the right, watching her rise and walk away. Harris is the only Black person in a courtroom predominantly filled with a rowdy white crowd. Several cutaways showcase other spectators, including two Asian women chatting in unsubtitled Chinese. Closeups of O'Hara sitting at the defendant's table in the middle of the room frame him against a wall panel, with no spectators behind him. Welles clearly shot these close-ups separately as inserts, tracking the two protagonists looking at each other and responding to the blustering antics of Bannister (Elsa's husband and O'Hara's employer, played by Everett Sloane) as he cross-examines himself. Most strangely, Harris disappears from the long shots of the courtroom in which we can still see Hayworth seated in the audience, and then rising to take the stand. Harris is there, and not there, in the blink of an eye.

Extras in movies typically "fill in" the space of crowds in public spaces, creating an atmosphere of busyness through costume, gesture, and movement. But in this instance, Harris's face clearly serves to fill in the space of the frame to set off the glow of the white woman. In the context of the narrative, the dark face may have signified the "dark side" of Elsa's personality, which is soon after revealed to be duplicitous.³⁷ We could also say, though, that the blatant continuity error of Harris's erasure opens up a critical crack in the text, inviting alternative, invested readings.³⁸ As a static ice-cold figure, Hayworth as Elsa is hard to read,³⁹ and thus the duplication of her face, complete with eye movements, with that of Theresa Harris, briefly renders her a little more human and vulnerable. Harris is the angel on Elsa's shoulder, an angel who holds a power that she bestows on Elsa to act against the men who have repeatedly betrayed her.

For Rabinowitz, Eunice in *Out of the Past* "hovers behind the femme fatale in this and many film noirs."⁴⁰ She is the disruptive force beside or within the femme fatale, but is this simply because Harris/Eunice is "dark" or is it because the actor is able to hold the gaze firmly, and own it? Harris had a beautifully inviting stare that is frequently disruptive, and in *Tell No Tales*, it is defiant and passionate. Whether in the Black spaces of the jazz club and the family, or the white spaces of the boudoir and the court, Harris's close-ups are powerful indices of a thinking and desiring being. Whether she is the spectacle or the spectator, the film historian can now recognize Harris's presence and how she "might have wanted to be seen in the archive."⁴¹ She takes up space; she occupies space. We can see her looking out from the trenches of the industry and see the stars in her eyes.

BLACK POWER

The unnamed and uncredited Black woman in the San Francisco courthouse in *Lady from Shanghai* might have been a maid, or she might have been an actor, a housewife, or a waitress spending a free afternoon. This is how I imagine Harris herself might have spent her time, if she remained married to a doctor through these decades. She might even have had her own maid at home. In *Cat People* Harris has a bit part as a waitress, another of her few non-maid parts. In this third canonical example of film noir, she plays Minnie in a café where Oliver (Kent Smith) and Alice (Jane Randolph) meet to talk. It is the only “normal” space in the film, uninterrupted by cats or crooked doctors, or Oliver’s deranged feline wife Irena (Simone Simon). Minnie’s cheery, familiar demeanor, along with the bright, flat lighting, is a critical space of sanity. Or is it? We could note that “normalcy” in 1942 included the construction of racial hierarchies, such that Minnie in her waitress uniform offsets the threat of feline chaos and instability in the rest of the film.

In E. Ann Kaplan’s reading of the racial anxieties of *Cat People*, Minnie the waitress is tacitly linked to Irena in their mutual darkness, but Irena and Minnie never cross paths, and are in fact dynamically opposed in terms of the spaces they occupy: an overlit café vs. dark, gothic, underlit streets and interiors.⁴² Kaplan argues that Minnie’s appearance in the film suggests that Irene represents white guilt about racial hierarchies. The usual reading of the psychodrama of *Cat People* sees it as a terror of intimacy, a drama of repressed sexuality. Once the discourse of race is made legible, however, it is clearly also race that haunts the unstable scene of whiteness. Minnie’s cheerfulness, otherness, and entrapment matches the power of the caged panther, so she is better aligned with the caged animal than the white woman. Kaplan notes that the danger posed by Irena, coded as sexually and racially Other, “anticipates the white culture’s fantasies of . . . the young black of post 60s America, ready to kill.”⁴³

The Black power associated with several of Harris’s screen roles is not an activist power, but a power of pathos and expressivity emerging from a Black community of bodies and voices. The threat of Black power and the co-extensive representation of Black community within racialized spaces of studio-era Hollywood is particularly palpable in *Jezebel* (William Wyler, 1938). Richard Dyer has argued that, as Julie’s (Bette Davis) maid, Zette (Harris) expresses what the white Plantation princess cannot, and he goes



FIGURE 7. *Cat People* (dir. Jacques Tourneur), 1942.

so far as to situate Zette as a continuation of the expressivity of Black people throughout the film.⁴⁴ In his analysis, Julie's failure is her inability to follow the rules of whiteness, most explicitly dramatized by her insistence on wearing a bright red dress to a society ball. This is clearly a rebellious gesture on her part, designed to garner attention, and to provoke her sweetheart into defending her honour. Before donning the dress, Julie says to Zette that she can have it when she's finished, assigning to the Black maid all the antisocial contestation embedded in the provocative garment, including its association with wanton sexuality. What will Zette do with such a dress, which in the visual scope of the film is not red, but black? Maybe she could open a brothel in New Orleans and become a wealthy woman. For her it is capital, a privilege that Julie has squandered out of selfish pride.

In Harris's few scenes with Davis, the women display a surprising intimacy. Each time Zette leaves to do Julie's bidding, the white woman reaches out to briefly hold her maid's hand, almost as a caress, before letting her go. Many of Harris's maid characters are agents and accessories of women's worlds, often in women's films where the female lead is being deceived or gaslit by the male characters, but here it's as if Jezebel wants to have some of Zette's body for herself, to have some of her blackness. Zette's capacity for



FIGURE 8. *Jezebel* (dir. William Wyler), 1938.

expression through movement and action in *Jezebel* is implicitly linked to the plantation Blacks whose spiritual singing Julie also attempts to “appropriate” for her own Southern Lost Cause sorrow. Dyer argues that Julie deserves her punishment (she is shipped off to the leper colony where Yellow Fever victims go to die), while Davis’s heroic stardom remains intact; but the deep ambivalence of the film might be tipped toward the resilience of Zette/Harris, as star of the archive, left behind in the mansion with the luxurious dress.

Harris’s biggest role as conduit between the world of the whites and the Black world that supports and sustains them is in *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943), set in the fictional Caribbean island of St. Sebastian. She plays a maid named Alma, dressed in Caribbean fabrics and a turban rather than a conventional maid’s outfit, and she is a vital source of information for her white employers about the voodoo culture of the island’s Black community. As Gwenda Young has argued, *I Walked with a Zombie* is respectful of voodoo rituals and beliefs, and leaves them more or less intact.⁴⁵ Alma’s explanation of voodoo beliefs links them explicitly to the Island’s legacy of slavery, and Alma is the one who shows Jessica the zombie-wife (Christine Gordon) and her nurse Betsey (Frances Dee) the way to the



FIGURE 9. *I Walked with a Zombie* (dir. Jacques Tourneur), 1943.

voudon temple. She shows them the way in order to save Jessica from her perpetual zombie state.

For Young, *I Walked with a Zombie* is “one of the first Hollywood films to recognize *and* celebrate black difference.”⁴⁶ The Black people on the island are depicted as a separate community with a viable religion, so as the film’s only Black conduit between these worlds, Alma occupies a privileged position. As Jessica’s personal attendant, she is the only one who can pass through to the world of the living dead. Her subtle resistance to colonial culture lies not in speaking back, but in her knowledge of the Black world and her willingness and ability to share it. The women’s intimacy transcends the mysterious and spiritual drama of interracial tension overseen by a decommissioned bowsprit of Ti Misery, an African St. Sebastian pierced with spears that has become a lawn ornament at the Rand family home. The zombified Jessica is a casualty of white colonial society, and her death is laid at their feet.

If we can call *I Walked with a Zombie* a proto-Black power film—which I think we can, given the Black solidarity in facing the legacy of slavery, and the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist Caribbean foundations of the American Civil Rights movement—then we can track Harris through several other such gatherings of Black communities.⁴⁷ In *Black Moon* (Roy William Neill, 1934) Harris plays a girl sacrificed to the Voudon gods on another island named St. Sebastien. She is pulled out of the crowd of Black extras for a close-up, perhaps because she would have been a “parts actor” rather than an extra,

or perhaps just because of her petite size.⁴⁸ During the ceremony involving a huge crowd of Black islanders chanting and dancing, a white man (played by Jack Holt) shoots the High Priest, but in the (bizarre) course of events, his wife (Dorothy Burgess) “goes native” and tries to sacrifice her own daughter, so he has to kill her to save his daughter. The surviving whites escape by sailboat, with “Lunch” (Clarence Muse) at the wheel, who is the father of Harris’s unnamed character. The dead women are testimony to the patriarchal colonialism wielded against the Islander-slaves, or at least that’s the way I would like to read it.



FIGURE 10. *Banjo on My Knee* (dir. John Cromwell), 1936.

Harris has a slightly bigger role in yet another expression of anti-colonial solidarity in *Banjo on My Knee* (John Cromwell, 1936) in a musical number that is awkwardly inserted into a film about working-class Mississippi riverboat whites. In New Orleans, Pearl (Barbara Stanwyck) is missing her man who is AWOL for most of the movie, and when she sits on the warf by the river she seems to see Harris and the Hall Johnson choir perform “St. Louis Blues” in a full-on musical number with choreographed Black ladies doing laundry and men hauling cotton off barges while Harris, in the middle of a Plantation-style set, sings out her troubles.⁴⁹ As in *Baby Face*, “St. Louis Blues” articulates the psychodrama of loving and losing much more

passionately than the script itself does, only this time, when it is turned into a spiritual, it more directly references the struggle of African Americans. Stanwyck never shares the frame with any of the singers, and they are linked only through montage, so the song at once exaggerates and trivializes Pearl's own sorrows. This is an explicit example of Harris providing the expressive affect for the white woman. New Orleans is otherwise depicted as a segregated city, and the inclusion of Harris's musical number underscores that segregation and its attendant violence. Pearl may share some kind of emotional pain with Harris and the chorus, but their historical misery effectively belittles her rather pathetic heartache.

A different kind of Black spiritual power is inscribed in *Hold Your Man* (Sam Wood, 1933) in which Harris plays a prisoner alongside Jean Harlow as Ruby. Harris's character Mae Crippen is in jail for something to do with her preacher-father's collection plate. Harlow is in because of a mix-up involving a murder in her apartment involving a con man named Eddie (Clark Gable). Eddie goes straight, Ruby is pregnant, and Mae arranges for her father to marry them in the reformatory chapel. Harris runs about with three white girls to make the arrangements and keep the cops at bay for as long as possible. Her father, played by George Reed, is not charged by the police in the end. However, IMDb credits Henry B. Walthall, a white actor, as the clergyman in an alternate version. The scenes of an integrated institution and the spiritual authority of a Black man to marry two whites, was very likely too transgressive for white Southern audiences because in the Reed version, the Black family, associated with the church, has the emotional power needed to right all the film's wrongs. Harris, as the Black star, even in a bit part, mediates between white and Black worlds; and in a surprising number of films, she is linked to a powerful community of Black folks, for whom she is the emissary.

Only one of Harris's appearances with an all-Black cast has survived, in the form of one 1955 episode of the *Adventures of Kingfish* TV show.⁵⁰ In her single scene, Harris as Gloretta hosts a party, and while the women gossip about her around the buffet table, she flirts with "Kingfish" (Tim Moore) in the kitchen. His wife Sapphire (Ernestine Wade) barges in with her mother, catching the couple in a suggestive pose. Harris has a rare opportunity in this brief scene to look and act sexy, and at the age of forty-nine, she really does, and she snaps out the wisecracks as snappily as the other TV pros. She clearly could have had a TV show of her own, if only she didn't look so "hot." She would have been far more threatening than the "mammy" figure of Beulah,



FIGURE 11. *Hold Your Man* (dir. Sam Wood), 1933.

the central figure in a TV show of the same name in the early 50s played alternately by Hattie McDaniel, Ethel Waters, and Louise Beavers.

THE EVENT OF RACE

When Christine Goding-Doty speaks of an affective horizon that is produced by the event of race, she points to the “[m]alleable instantiation of boundedness itself, that is both imposed upon and engulfs bodies . . . within the purview of modern power.”⁵¹ Goding-Doty’s innovative approach to critical race studies is not necessarily designed as an historical method, or as a hermeneutic strategy, but as a means of “catalyzing the emergence and reemergence of race in modern encounters”—and I am proposing that critical textual analysis might be an instance of such an encounter. She writes:

Race is the event within which the instantiation of the affective horizon is executed . . . [T]he “execution” of affective boundedness is . . . an exercise in modulation, an iterated, iterative, simultaneous broadening of certain potentials and diminishing of others.⁵²

In the case of Black bodies in Hollywood, Harris’s intersectionality as a singing-and-dancing Black woman playing ladies’ maids points to the emergent body

that is produced within a certain “atmosphere” that extends well beyond her actual performances. Her career cannot be said to “trouble” any limits or boundaries as she remained hidden to the mainstream white world, and mostly uncast in lead roles, and yet the “event” of rereading and recuperating, of bringing the background forward and seeing the Black woman not as a shadow but as an affective horizon, may help to understand how the whiteness of Hollywood was constructed.

The racial events of Harris’s film appearances can be continually modified, modulated, and reframed as we learn how to read the relations that those performances can produce. Studio-era films are all racial events in which whiteness is constructed over and over again. Black and Brown characters circulate on the edges of every single film, onscreen and off, marking the lost possibility of a different cinema, one in which whiteness recedes into the background. Tracing Harris’s career through thirty years of studio production moves through the highs and lows of the industry, and especially through the women’s films, from *Professional Sweetheart* (1933) to *The French Line* (1953) and the *How to Marry a Millionaire* TV series (1958). It’s as if all these women had the same maid, taking care of their needs, listening to their troubles, taking their messages, opening their doors. She is an accessory perhaps, but also an extension of their entrapment, their vulnerability, and their pathos, amplifying it and giving it bodily expression.

In Harris’s last (uncredited) film appearance, in *The Gift of Love* (Jean Negulesco, 1958), she appears at a party hosted by the Becks (Lauren Bacall and Robert Stack), a predictably dysfunctional couple, more or less reprised from *Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956). Harris introduces herself to their little adopted girl Hettie, who the party is for, as Dora, Sam’s wife (Sam is the gardener). The Black couple mix easily with the four white adult guests, singing together as if everything were perfectly normal, but of course everything is not okay, including the fact that no children come to the child’s party. Bill Beck (Stack) abruptly leaves, ending the festivities and the scene. The racialized scene is arguably staged as a “normalizing” event, even if it becomes a trigger for Bill’s unpredictable, narcissistic, and irrational behavior. Harris’s last role is thus one in which she participates in a fully integrated social space that the white man flees in terror.

Harris imagined another life for herself in Europe, where she hoped to have more opportunities to play African and “Oriental” types in “colonial” pictures, for which she was testing in 1938.⁵³ She may not have made it to Europe as Chico did in *Baby Face*, but her desire and ambition is testimony



FIGURE 12. Clockwise from top left: *Smooth as Silk* (dir. Charles Barton), 1946; *The Big Clock* (dir. John Farrow), 1948; “Loco the Heiress,” *How to Marry a Millionaire* Episode 1.8 (1957); *Here Come the Girls*, (dir. Claude Binyon), 1953; *The Women* (dir. George Cukor), 1939; *Miracle on 34th Street*, (dir. George Seaton), 1947.

to all the roles she might have had in a different kind of world. The file on Theresa Harris is an incomplete archive, not only because the fleeting screen appearances that I have looked at here constitute only a fragment of her on-screen life. We need to write her into a larger picture of contract negotiations, agency and management, studio relations, and pay scales, alongside all the roles that might have been.⁵⁴ After the release of *The Toy Wife* (Richard Thorpe, 1938)—in which Harris plays a stereotyped young maid called “Pick” to Louise Rainer’s antebellum bad-girl—Earl J. Morris opined in *The Pittsburgh Courier* that if the writer, director, and cinematographer had tried

just a little harder, Harris's performance would have shined. He felt certain, as he put it, that "the scenes and sequences which I have spoken of were cut out."⁵⁵

Evidently, speculative film criticism was required and exercised even in 1938 in order to allow the star appropriate recognition in the Black Press. As Daphne E. Brooks has argued of the elusive 1930s blues recording stars Geeshi and Elvie, Black women artists' work "converses with the crises of archival neglect, invisibility, and disappearance while making forceful aesthetic statements about the ways that counterhistory both speaks back to and is shaped by obscurity, opacity, and the threat of failure."⁵⁶ Theresa Harris stars in an archive of marginalization, servitude and uncredited low-wage labour, but it is also an epic record of the racial events that take place every time she reappears with her quick spark, familiar face, and compelling gaze. ■

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NOTES

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1. Christine Goding-Doty, "White Event Horizon," *Monday Journal* vol. 4. <https://monday-journal.com/white-event-horizon/>.

2. In the "original theatrical release" of *Baby Face*, all references to Nietzsche have been deleted, but in the "pre-release version" it is clear that Lily's mentor Cragg has sent her Nietzsche's *Will to Power*. The different versions are labeled thus on the TCM Vault Collection (Film Foundation Restoration. Sony Picture Classics, 2017), DVD.

3. Pamela Robertson Wojcik, "Mae West's Maids: Race 'Authenticity,' and the Discourse of Camp," *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasure of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 287–299.

4. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

5. Lynn Nottage, *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc. 2013). The published play includes Url's for two websites: <http://>

meetverastark.com/ and <https://www.findingverastark.com/>, of which only the first remains functional in April 2022.

6. Samantha Sheppard, "Changing the Subject: Lynn Nottage's *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* and the Making of Black Women's Film History," *Feminist Media Histories* 8, no. 2 (2022): 14–42.

7. A plethora of works using speculative methods to analyze Black women's history include Daphne Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021); Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2019); Ashley D. Farmer, "In Search of the Black Women's History Archive," *Modern American History* (2018), 1: 289–293; Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera As Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 5–16; Allyson Nadia Field, *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Black Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015). The films *Watermelon Woman* (Cheryl Dunnye, 1996) and *Illusions* (Julie Dash, 1982) are also important contributions to speculative historiography of Black women in film. On Lynn Nottage's play specifically, see Soyica Diggs Colbert, "Playing the Help, Playing the Slave: Disrupting Racial Fantasies in Lynn Nottage's *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*," *Modern Drama* 50, no. 4 (2016): 413–414.

8. Farmer, "In Search of the Black Women's History Archive," 293.

9. Harris was labeled the "Maid of Hollywood" on the September 1952 cover of *Jet* Magazine; Charlene B. Regester, *African American Actresses: The Struggle for Visibility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.

10. The originary text in this respect is Jean-Luc Comolli and Paul Narboni, "Cinema, Ideology, Criticism," *Screen* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1971), and it has undergone many adaptations by feminist, queer, and critical race scholars over the decades.

11. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 149.

12. Robert F. Redi-Pharr, "Makes me Feel Mighty Real: *The Watermelon Woman* and the Critique of Black Visuality," in *F is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing*, edited by Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2006), 139.

13. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 149.

14. Jacqueline Stewart, "Negroes Laughing at Themselves? Black Spectatorship and the Performance of Urban Modernity," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 4 (2003): 669. More specifically, Stewart draws on *Native Son* by Richard Wright and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, for speculative accounts of Black spectatorship.

15. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1936] 1999), 462.

16. Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, xiv.

17. Details about the fictional Vera Stark are included in the fake documentary “A Leading Lady in a Maid’s Uniform: A Closer Look at *The Belle of New Orleans*” by the fictional character Herb Grey on the website *Rediscovering Vera Stark* at <http://meetverastark.com/>.

18. The date of death is courtesy of IMDb, which states only that Harris died in Inglewood, CA.

19. Miriam Petty, *Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 23.

20. Bogle Donald, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* Updated and expanded 5th ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 81; “10 Things You Should Know About Theresa Harris,” *YouTube*, Cladrite Radio. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_W1c7qrzjc.

21. Earl J. Morris, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 27 January 1940, p.20. As Morris puts it, the Paramount publicity department took a page out of *The Grapes of Wrath*, and “painted it black” to come up with a story of Harris’s background.

22. Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 102.

23. Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 109.

24. Sheppard, 37.

25. Will Straw, “Scales of Presence: Bess Flowers and the Hollywood Extra,” *Screen* 52, no. 1 (2011): 121. Bess Flowers and Theresa Harris are credited together in sixteen different films, although they may never have been in the same scene, given that Flowers is usually in public spaces and Harris is usually in private, domestic spaces.

26. Straw, 122.

27. The IMDb list includes 95 movies and 8 TV episodes for Harris; Wikipedia lists 93 film roles that don’t entirely match those on IMDb.

28. Catherine Russell, *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 145; see also Thomas Elsaesser, “Cinephilia, Or The Uses Of Disenchantment,” in *Cinephilia: Movies, Love And Memory*, edited by Marijke De Valck and Malte Hagener (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 32–33.

29. Fay M. Jackson, “Dainty Theresa in Gang Film,” *The Afro American*, Aug. 28, 1937.

30. Harry Levette, “Coast Codgings: What, No more Scandal?” *The Chicago Defender* (national edition), June 1, 1935, 7; Fay M. Jackson, “Dainty Theresa in Gang Film,” *The Afro American*, Aug. 28, 1937.

31. Desirée J. Garcia, “Dressing the Part: Black Maids, White Stars in the Dressing Room,” in *Media Crossroads: Intersections of Space and Identity in Screen Cultures*, edited by Angel Daniel Matos, Paula J Massood, and Pamela Robertson Wojcik (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 194.

32. Paula Rabinowitz, *Black & White & Noir: America’s Pulp Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press), 2002, 63.

33. Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting 1922–1952* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 196.

34. Anon, "Theresa Harris Hits Film Peak," *The Chicago Defender*, Jan. 18, 1947, 10.
35. James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 240. Two other critics who have discussed this scene are Krin Gabbard, "The Vanishing Love Song in Film Noir," in *Kiss the Blood off my Hands: On Classic Film Noir*, edited by Robert Miklitsch (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 66–67; and Paula Rabinowitz, *Black & White & Noir*, 62.
36. Anon. "Theresa Harris Hits Film Peak," *The Chicago Defender*, Jan. 18, 1947, 10.
37. See Kaplan's discussion of *Lady from Shanghai* in which the discourse of whiteness and blackness is allegorized as morality. E. Ann Kaplan, "The Dark Continent of Film Noir: Race, Displacement and Metaphor in Tourneur's *Cat People* (1942) and Welles's *The Lady From Shanghai* (1948)," in *Women in Film Noir*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan, revised and expanded edition (London: BFI, 1998), 193–198.
38. D.A. Miller, *Hidden Hitchcock* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
39. Adrienne McLean observes that in *Lady from Shanghai* Welles has stripped Hayworth of all her vitality and energy, the source of her dynamic charisma. Adrienne L. McLean, *Being Rita Hayworth: Labor, Identity, and Hollywood Stardom* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 161–162.
40. Rabinowitz, 61
41. Farmer, 292.
42. Kaplan, "The Dark Continent of Film Noir," 192.
43. Kaplan, "The Dark Continent of Film Noir," 191.
44. Richard Dyer, "White," *Screen* 29, no. 4 (1988): 58.
45. Gwenda Young, "The Cinema of Difference: Jacques Tourneur, Race and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943)," *Irish Journal of American Studies* 7 (1998): 114.
46. Young, "The Cinema of Difference," 108.
47. Nico Slate, "Introduction: The Borders of Black Power," in *Black Power Beyond Borders*, edited by Nico Slate (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
48. Charlene Regester makes a distinction between "parts actors" who were hired on contract in the 20s and 30s, and extras who were hired through the Central Casting Bureau. Given Harris's many speaking parts, she would most likely have been considered part of the former group, even if some of her roles do not have any lines. Charlene Regester, "African American Extras in Hollywood during the 1920s and 1930s," *Film History* 9 (1997): 95–115.
49. Peter Stanfield has analyzed the use of "St-Louis Blues" in 1930s Hollywood as a recurring instance of what he calls the "the urban primitive," an imaginary affective trope of difference in "An Excursion into the Lower Depths: Hollywood, Urban Primitivism, and 'St. Louis Blues,' 1929–1937," *Cinema Journal* 41, no.2 (Winter 2002). In *Banjo on My Knee*, the song about a woman's man-problems is transformed into a spiritual.
50. The Episode of *The Adventures of Kingfish* is called "The Girl at the Station," Season Four Episode 7 (1955). This was one of a handful of episodes that were released after the *Amos 'n Andy Show* ceased production in 1953.
51. Christine Goding-Doty, "White Event Horizon," *Monday Journal* Vol. 4. <https://monday-journal.com/white-event-horizon/>, np. Goding-Doty's full argument

is put forward in her dissertation, *Virtually White: The Crisis of Whiteness, Racial Rule, and Affect in the Digital Age* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 2008).

52. Goding-Doty, "White Event Horizon."

53. Anon. "Theresa Harris Looks at Her Future; Sepia Film Star Believes Change in Type Helps," *California Eagle*, May 12, 1938, 14.

54. Harris's first agent may have been Oscar Smith, the Black actor who ran a shoe-shine stand outside the gates at Paramount in the 1920s, and became an agent for other actors by trading gossip between studio staff and aspirants. Nick Paumgarten makes this claim in his commentary on the Kino-Lorber release of *Thunderbolt* (2020).

55. Earl J. Morris, "Review of *The Toy Wife*," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 11, 1938, 20.

56. Daphne E. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 315.