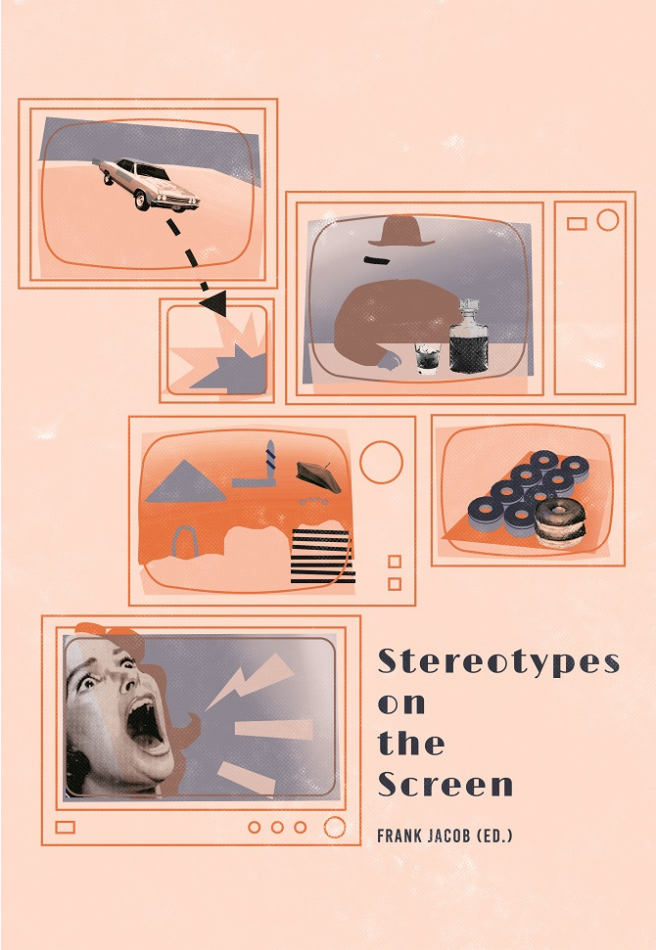
Entertainment - Journal of Media and Movie Studies

Vol 1 (2016)

Stereotypes on the Screen



'I want to be white, like I look': The case of the Imitation of Life and the Motion Picture Production Code during the mid-1930s

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To cite this article:

Stankiewicz, K. (2016). 'I want to be white, like I look': The case of the Imitation of Life and the Motion Picture Production Code during the mid-1930s. *Entertainment - Journal of Media and Movie Studies*, *1*, 5–23. Retrieved from https://ejournals.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/entertainment/article/view/15957

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"'I want to be white, like I look': The case of the *Imitation of Life* and the Motion Picture Production Code during the mid-1930s"

Kathleen STANKIEWICZ

Introduction

The 1934 film, *Imitation of Life,* examined the contentious relationship between two African American women, Delilah and her daughter Peola, played by Louise Beavers (1902-1962) and Fredi Washington (1903-1994) respectively. The drama between mother and daughter revolved around Peola's light skin color and her attempts to pass as a white woman much to her mother's dismay. This racial conflict culminated in a scene where Delilah and Peola directly addressed Peola's desire and rationale to pass as a white woman. In this particular scene, a jazz band played jovially for the white guests upstairs, while Delilah, the quintessential aunt jemima-figure of old Hollywood, followed her troubled daughter, Peola, to their basement quarters. Throughout her life, Peola struggled with her skin color. Though she was African American, Peola's skin was light, and she often "passed" as white in school. In a loving tone, Delilah asked, "What's my baby want?" While gazing into a mirror, Peola heatedly responded, "I want to be white, like I look!" Although this bitter conflict had been ongoing, the flabbergasted Delilah could only utter Peola's name in response. While still looking in the mirror, Peola replied, "Look at me. Am I not white? Isn't that a white girl?" After a brief pause, but still in her sweet tone, Delilah asked Peola, "Oh's, honey. We's has this out so many times. Can't you get it out of your head?" Without hesitation, Peola morosely retorted, "No, I can't! You wouldn't understand that, would you? Oh, what is there for me anyway?!"[1]

[1] *Imitation of Life,* directed by John Stahl (Universal Studios, 1934). DVD.

Not only did this scene encapsulate the struggle between mother and daughter, but it also captured the broader struggle of African Americans' racial status in Hollywood. During these early decades of the silver screen, films reflected and reinforced white perceptions of African American through the use of stereotypes, which bolstered Hollywood's racial hierarchy. Peola represented the trope of the tragic mulatto. Her light skin tone and straight hair put her in racial limbo - where she felt too light to be black, but not accepted by white society.[2] Delilah embodied the physical and mental traits of the aunt jemima - figure due to her darker skin tone combined with her rotund nature and childlike disposition.[3] While these two characters personified the stereotypical African American roles in the movie, the characters of Peola and Delilah also challenged the newly imposed Motion Picture Production Code. Beginning in 1934, with the authority to evaluate and censor films, the Production Code Administration (PCA) upheld the standards of the Motion Picture Production Code (the Code), which regulated the entire film-making process. Even with the censors' approval, the film incited varying local reactions over the portrayals of African American stereotypes and miscegenation. Contemporary critics, viewers, and subsequent scholars had two distinct views of the film - that it bolstered African Americans and challenged Hollywood stereotypes or that it reaffirmed African Americans negative and secondary roles in film.[4] While the movie reflected some

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[2] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films,* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 9-10, 60.

[3] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, and Bucks*, 62-63.

[4] For Bogle, the *Imitation of Life* "humanized the role of the Negro servant."[4] In particular, he connects the 1930s new dynamic nature for black roles to the impact of the New Deal, which Bogle sees, as a force for a more egalitarian American society. Though Bogle attempts to situate the film in a broader context, he does not bring in its complications with the PCA or how audiences viewed it in the 1930s. See also: Ryan Jay Friedman, *Hollywood's African American Films: the Transition to Sound*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 187. Ryan Friedman adopts a similar approach to Bogle in *Fire and Desire*. Although Friedman's work

progress for African Americans in Hollywood by pushing against the racial stereotypes, it did so within the specific framework of the Code and Hollywood's notions of racial hierarchy. Films such as *Imitation of Life* utilized stereotypes to reinforce the white racial dominance over African Americans, especially through the relationship between the two female leads of Bea and Delilah and the use of stereotypes of the aunt jemima and mulatto.

Applying the Code

Hollywood adopted the Code in 1934 as a way to stave off the impact of the Depression by appeasing critics and luring Americans back into the theater. While some Hollywood tycoons and elite actors, writers, and directors still made outlandish salaries, many people within the industry found themselves unemployed. In general, the film industry cut down the number of films they produced and struggled to get Americans into the movie theater.[5] Hollywood occupied a cryptic space during this time of economic downturn, political realignment, and cultural change. Despite carrying the label as a "liberal" space, the movie industry during the 1930s, similar

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concentrates on mixed-race relationships in the silent era (1920s), he does mention the *Imitation of Life* in his conclusion. For Friedman, although he describes the film as "socially conscious," overall he finds that films of the 1930s placed African Americans firmly in a negative servant role. Both Bogle and Friedman's works highlight the complicated nature of the *Imitation of Life*. Although Delilah and Peola fulfilled typically negative black stereotypes in 1930s film, both Bogle and Friedman overlook these subordinate positions in favor of the complex social issues that the film addressed. For feminist critiques of the film see: Marina Heung, "What's the Matter with Sara Jane?": Daughters and Mothers in Douglas Sirk's 'Imitation of Life,'" *Cinema Journal* (Spring, 1987): 23-24; Miriam Thaggert, "Divided Images: Black Female Spectatorship and John Stahl's *Imitation of Life*, *African American Review* (1998): 482. For information on the film's distribution: Matthew Bernstein and Dana F. White, "*Imitation of Life* in a segregated Atlanta: its promotion, distribution, and reception," *Film History: An International Journal* (2007): 153.

[5] Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen & the Production Code Administration*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 36.

to the rest of the United States, was abuzz with conflicting political ideologies and interpretations of the impact of the Great Depression on everyday life. Hollywood was a hotbed for liberal ideas of socialism and communism, but many of the studio heads and their administrations became more entrenched in political conservatism.[6] During this moment of dynamic change within the film industry, Universal decided to adapt Fannie Hurst's (1885-1968) 1933 novel *Imitation of Life* for the screen. Due to the book's popular following, Universal took on the challenge of turning this social commentary on race into a successful film.

The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) agreed to adopt the Code as a way to prevent boycotts and quell complaints over films. Since the Progressive Era, moral reformers had targeted movies (both the theaters and the content of film) as part of their reform movement.[7] These reformers argued that films promoted

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[6] For more on Hollywood liberalism see, Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). For more on Hollywood conservatism see, Donald Critchlow's controversial work *When Hollywood Was Right: How Movie Stars, Studio Moguls, and Big Business Remade American Politics,* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Two recent works examine the development of Hollywood's connections to both the Democratic and Republican parties. See: Steven J. Ross, *Hollywood Left and Right: How Movie Stars Shaped American Politics,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) and Kathryn Cramer Brownell, *Showbiz Politics: Hollywood in American Political Life*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

[7] The earliest works on reform movements during the Progressive era tended to focus on the role of Anthony Comstock, the YMCA, and the need to reform print materials, such as pamphlets, brochures, and novels that were considered lewd. See, Paul Boyer, *Purity in Print: Book Censorship in America from the Gilded Age to the Computer Age*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002); Nicola Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). There is a rich history of the moral reformers and anti-obscenity movements of the Progressive Era. See: Andrea Friedman, *Prurient Interests: Gender, Democracy, and Obscenity in New York City, 1909-1945*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Allison M. Parker*, Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-Censorship Activism, 1873 -1933,*

obscene material, which featured scandalous topics such as white slavery, salacious plotlines, gangster violence, excessive alcohol consumption, drug use, and the like. Due to the 1915 Supreme Court ruling in *Mutual Film Corporation v. Ohio*, First Amendment protections were not extended to the film industry. As such, these reform groups began advocating for federal censorship in addition to the emergent censorship boards at the local and state levels in order to stymie the myriad of problems they saw with films. In response to the ever-increasing calls for reform, the motion picture industry went through a string of different self-regulation mechanisms during the 1920s. While the hiring of former postmaster general Will Hays (1879-1954) in 1922 and his subsequent film reform efforts helped to curb some of the reform calls, by the early 1930s, the reform movement moved beyond women's groups and progressive reformers, and attracted the attention of bigger organizations such as the Catholic Church, which threatened mass boycotts.[8] In order to thwart further calls for federal censorship of motion pictures, the film industry officially implemented a system of self-regulation and adopted the Motion Picture Production Code and created the Production Code Administration, placing Catholic layman Joseph Breen (1888-1965) in charge to interpret and enforce the Code.

Beginning in 1934, the PCA began its task of regulating the film industry. Even though *Imitation of Life* was only in pre-

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(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Leigh Ann Wheeler, *Against Obscenity: Reform and the Politics of Womanhood in America, 1873-1935*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

[8] For more on the history of the Motion Picture Production Code see: Gregory Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Leonard J. Leff and Jerold Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code,* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

production in early-1934, the PCA was already dissecting the script. While Universal described the film as a melodrama that centered on the travails of a white mother and her daughter, the PCA recognized the substantial impact of the secondary plot of the film that focused on the characters of Delilah and Peola: "Fanny Hurst's novel dealing with a partly colored girl who wants to pass as white. We have advised the studio that in our opinion it violates the Code clause covering miscegenation, in spirit, if not in fact."[9] Since it was the early days of the organization, PCA officials often over-scrutinized issues that violated the Code, but also any instances that could create public backlash and potentially harm profits. Although miscegenation was a clear concern for the PCA, the character, Peola, was never removed from the film. In a letter to PCA head Joseph Breen from Maurice McKenzie, who worked in administrative MPPDA offices in New York, McKenzie outlined a detailed list of issues he foresaw with the film. He articulated that miscegenation was "not the true issue because it is so far removed."[10] He emphasized different problems that the film presented, including varying uses of profane statements ("Lawd"), references to corporations, and the use of "nigger" even when said by a "colored person."[11] These two documents seem to suggest that the PCA was more concerned with issues of racial characterization than miscegenation in the film. The Code, through the PCA's enforcement, wanted to portray a particular moral view to Americans, and McKenzie's comments reflect how Hollywood viewed African Americans both in reality and on film.

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[9] Production Code Administration Files, April 2, 1934, "History of Cinema and the Production Code," reel 9. (Microfilm), Margaret Herrick Special Collections Library, Beverly Hills, California.

[10] Maurice McKenzie Letter to Joseph Breen, April 3, 1934, "History of Cinema and the Production Code," reel 9. (Microfilm), Margaret Herrick Special Collections Library, Beverly Hills, California.

[11] Ibid.

While this particular letter pushed aside the issue of miscegenation, McKenzie still stressed that the picture could present certain problems for audiences as it dealt with the controversial racial topics. He advocated that the "picturization of this subject matter would be fraught with the gravest danger."[12] In particular, he worried over people's reaction to the film in certain geographic regions in the U.S. such as the South and the Border States, but he also mentioned England and Australia.[13] The implicit and explicit references to Peola's character throughout much of the PCA correspondence illustrates that her character and the subplot surrounding her prompted the censors to deeply dissect the dual nature of their office. The PCA's main goal was to enforce the policies of the Code, but this particular instance demonstrates that this was only part of their purpose. In addition to enforcing the rules, they also thought critically about the reception and possible backlash of a film in different domestic and international settings. While the PCA did not directly profit off the films they censored, enough public outcry, especially in the midst of the Depression, could alter the system. Ultimately, McKenzie ended his letter with an "earnest hope that you will be able to persuade the company to abandon its plans for production."[14] Although Universal still carried on with the production of *Imitation of Life*, the pre-production correspondence echoed Hollywood worries to lure Americans back to the movies without causing increased calls for reform.

By late June 1934, the PCA and Universal had been in close contact over the film's treatment of race. While there was still mention of the indirect topic of miscegenation in the movie, the PCA understood that it was not the main plot of the film. "It portrays a light colored negro girl who desires to go white. This, however, is not the main theme of the story. It

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[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.

appears to be a matter of policy more than of Code."[15] Although James Wingate (PCA censor) underscored that the studio was working closely with the PCA to confine the racial discussions within the film, there seems to be some negotiation at play. From April to June 1934, the PCA did not take the option to reject the film outright. In fact, Universal often accepted the PCA's suggestions and adjusted the script. In the correspondence from Universal executive Robert H. Cochrane to Breen, this tepid negotiation is ever-present. Although Cochrane was a fervent supporter of the PCA, his letter reflects the problematic nature of film studios relations with it. While studios were willing to acquiesce to some of the PCA's demands, studios did not always appreciate the rigor to which the PCA enforced Code principles: "But now I want to sound a very quiet note of warning to you. It is natural, under the circumstances, for you to lean over backward in your endeavor to live up to the new responsibilities imposed upon you, and it is also natural for you to lean so far backward that you will break not only your back but ours."[16] While Cochrane supported the idea of self-censorship as a way to increase movie profitability during the Depression, he was not willing to relinquish creative license. He defended the use of profanity in the film by stating that "Everybody knows that the colored people say 'Mah Lo'dy' and 'De Lawd hab mercy' and 'Ah, Gawd."[17] Rather than fear that the potential audience offense to such sayings, Cochrane mused that everybody understood that it was common, understandable vernacular. Yet, what is perhaps most striking about Cochrane's rebuttal to the profane language was how he understood it as a "natural" part of African American life and culture or at least

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[15] James Wingate Letter to Maurice McKenzie, June 26, 1934, "History of Cinema and the Production Code," reel 9. (Microfilm), Margaret Herrick Special Collections Library, Beverly Hills, California.

[16] R.H. Cochrane Letter to Joseph Breen, July 27, 1934, "History of Cinema and the Production Code," reel 9. (Microfilm), Margaret Herrick Special Collections Library, Beverly Hills, California.

[17] Ibid.

"natural" to the white audience whom the movie industry depended on. In concluding his letter, Cochrane asked Breen to "not make it utterly impossible for the studios to make pictures which reflect life."[18]

This larger debate between the PCA and Universal studios, although representative of the initial struggle between the two organizations to produce wholesome movies, also suggests deeper issues of how to create more realistic films. Although the main plot of *Imitation of Life* follows the white characters in more depth, the PCA rooted out the possible Code complications concerning the subplot that consisted of African American characters. Both Universal and the PCA were preoccupied with how the audience would react to the racial interactions on the screen. Universal specifically crafted the character of Delilah as the Aunt Jemima, who were either "toms blessed with religion or mammies who wedge themselves into the dominant white culture." [19] Although Delilah pushed the boundaries of the Aunt Jemima by having a stake in a profitable company and a somewhat equal relationship and deep friendship with her white employer Bea, her qualities still rested in the trope - she was good natured, somewhat childlike, and unable to survive without the help and generosity of her white benefactress. By mid-November, the PCA approved *Imitation of Life*.

Delilah, Flapjacks, and Aunt Jemima

Imitation of Life followed the main storylines between the white and black mothers and their daughters, and connecting these two plots was the relationship between Bea, played by Claudette Colbert (1903-1996), and Louise Beaver's Delilah.[20] Although there was a distinct friendship filled with

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, and Bucks*, 9.

[20] Ibid., 46. In Bogle's section on Louise Beavers' career during the 1930s, he examines how she was able to push the aunt jemima stereotype in new and different ways. He argues that Beavers was able to take a one-dimensional stereotype and give the character depth and significance.

compassion and deep attachment between these two women, throughout the film Bea was the clear, dominating force. Central to Bea's and Delilah's success was Bea's decision to first create a restaurant that served Delilah's flapjacks and then to box and sell a mix of the flapjack dry ingredients. Although the success of this business endeavor rested on Delilah's knowledge of her family flapjack recipe, Delilah's image on the box, and her willingness to share the recipe and care for both her and Bea's daughters, Delilah received only a 25% share of the profits.[21] Even with the eventual success of this venture, Delilah still remained with Bea as a companion and also the main caretaker of the children and the home she shared with her. While Bea enjoyed the comforts of the upper-levels of the home, Delilah and Peola's suites occupied the basement quarters.

Even the PCA recognized this power dynamic between white and black in its initial readings of the script. In a PCA inter-office memo to Breen from Jack Lewis, Lewis commented on the nature of the relationship between Delilah and Bea: "At no time does Bea, the white woman, and her daughter give proper credit to the fortune which they have made on the negro mother's recipe for flapjacks."[22] Lewis's comment demonstrates that the PCA could interpret the basic plot devices of the film. While Lewis's comment grasped the superficial issue, he further argued that "the two negroes continue to appear somewhat downtrodden throughout the plot. It may have been the author's intent to show that the negroes were happiest as servants in the house but this is not clearly brought out."[23] The second portion of the memo suggests the deeper issue within the film - how the film presented African Americans and their acceptance of their roles within the film. Lewis clearly indicated that the white

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[21] *Imitation of Life.*

[22] PCA inter-office memo from J.B. Lewis to Joseph Breen, March 10, 1934, "History of Cinema and the Production Code," reel 9. (Microfilm), Margaret Herrick Special Collections Library, Beverly Hills, California.

[23] Ibid.

characters benefitted at the expense of the black characters. Even so, his pointed critique does not necessarily suggest that the PCA found the white-black dynamics of the film objectionable, but was unclear in how the audience might react to it.

Other PCA censors also criticized the relationship between Delilah and Bea. While Lewis focused on the relationship dynamics between the two women, some censors commented on how other aspects of the film might overshadow the relationship. In a PCA memo to Breen on the film, Alice Field explained that the relationship between Delilah and Bea, at that stage, would not be the main focus for the audience:

> The only really gripping and dramatic thread in the story is that of Peola's anguish and her old mother's heartbreak over the whole miserable, unsolvable situation. With this element of the story removed the rest would become colorless – and yet it is difficult to see how such a theme can be acceptable presented on the screen. It is all embedded in such deep-lying emotional feeling, colored by race hatred and race sympathy that it would seem to me to offer quite a serious problem.[24]

Even though Field suggested that the film ultimately handled the topic with "kindness," she recommended that the best approach would be to avoid the topic as much as possible.[25] In fact, Field argued that it would be best to avoid Peola's character development (a major part of the plot for the novel as well as the script) in order to avoid censoring the film or any potential popular backlash. At the end of the memo Field directly challenged Breen to reconsider this part of the film script.

> Is it possible that the other part of the story could be more strongly built up – letting Peola die or sumpin' early in the

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[24] Memo on IMITATION OF LIFE from Alice Field to Joseph Breen, "History of Cinema and the Production Code," reel 9. (Microfilm), Margaret Herrick Special Collections Library, Beverly Hills, California.
[25] Ibid.

> struggle? The wisdom and comedy and of old Delilah, the friendship and success of the two women and a number of things about it are interesting and might be made entertaining as a down to earth human interest drama. As written, however, the dark thread of Peola's tragedy seems to dwarf everything else.[26]

The memos from Lewis and Field to Breen demonstrate that the subplot of the film that focused on Delilah and Peola would be substantive enough to distract audiences from the main white plot as well as Delilah and Bea's friendship. Both Lewis and Field's suggestions in altering the script to remove the possible implications of miscegenation demonstrate how the newly-created PCA began to navigate its duties of enforcing the Code. The Code itself was not just a tool for promoting clean films; it also presented Americans with a specific vision for society at large. While Bea and Delilah's relationship, though unequal, represented the coming together of black and white Americans, Peola as the mulatto posed a potential challenge to how Americans saw and understood their society.

Peola, Passing, and the Tragic Mulatto

In April 1934, McKenzie's letter to Breen argued that miscegenation was not a major issue in terms of the Code, but the interoffice memos of the PCA and letters between the PCA and Universal suggest otherwise. PCA censors Field and Lewis's memos to Breen reveal that the racial dynamics of the film were increasingly pressing issues that the PCA would have to deal with and justify should the film continue into production. In fact, from spring through summer 1934, most of the communication about the film focused on the issue of Peola's light skin tone, the possible implications of miscegenation, and potential backlash throughout the southern states. Historian Donald Bogle has characterized Peola as the "single subversive element" in the film and

[26] Ibid.

articulated that her character moved beyond the stereotype of the mulatto. Peola's potentially troublesome racial make-up occupied the PCA throughout its examination of *Imitation of Life*, it carefully read the script and informed Universal of the potential problems that Peola's wanting to pass as white could cause. Although the film inserted dialogue to clearly state that Peola simply had a lighter skin tone despite both of her parents being African American, this racial dynamic forced the newly established PCA to carefully navigate the racial implications of the film and deal with the potential negative consequences from the American public.

In March 1934, Breen sent a letter to Harry Zehner of Universal after reading the blue script (typically the second revision of a script) of the film. In the letter, Breen's main criticisms of the film indeed focus on Peola's racial predicament. "Its major theme presents the embarrassments, trials, tribulations and humiliations suffered by the white child of a colored mother who, because of the negro blood in her veins, is compelled to be classed as and associate with the negroes, although she has all the hopes, desires and inclinations to pass as a white person."[27] Although Breen understood that Peola's storyline was part of the subplot, and approved of the basic main plot of the film, he nonetheless found Peola's story compelling enough that it violated the miscegenation clause of the Code. Breen articulated to Zehner that "the main theme is founded upon the results of sex association between the white and black race (miscegenation), and, as such, in our opinion, it not only violates the Production Code but is very dangerous from the standpoint both of industry and public policy."[28] By this stage, Breen ended the letter stating that according to the script, the PCA

[27] Letter from Joseph I. Breen to Harry Zehner, March 9, 1935, "History of Cinema and the Production Code," reel 9. (Microfilm), Margaret Herrick Special Collections Library, Beverly Hills, California.
[28] Ibid.

would reject the film and not provide it with a seal of approval.

This letter to Zehner was not an isolated instance, and Breen conveyed similar sentiments in a PCA interoffice memo concerning the film: "With Dr. Wingate and Mr. Auster, had conference with Mr. Henigson of Universal regrading IMITATION OF LIFE, which is based upon the very serious social problem which comes as the result of miscegenation. We are gravely concerned about it and did not succeed in persuading the company to accept our viewpoint of its danger."[29] The "danger" again referred to Peola's attempts to pass as white and the possible audience inference of miscegenation. In a memorandum for the files, Breen similarly discussed the issue of miscegenation within the film.

> We emphasized the dangers involved in treating this story as regards to the possibilities having to do with negroes. It was our contention that this part of the plot – the action of the negro girl appearing as white – has a definite connection with the problem of miscegenation. We pointed out that not only from the picture point of view of the producer himself, but also from the point of view of the industry as a whole, this was an extremely dangerous subject and surely to prove troublesome, not only in the south, where it would be universally condemned, but everywhere else.[30]

Here, Breen fully articulated the problematic nature of the film. Not only was miscegenation against the Code, but the PCA also had to consider how Americans might react to the film. As the film industry had been under increasing scrutiny from moral reformers who advocated for federal censorship, negative reactions to films could potentially threaten the autonomy and existence of the film industry. Thus, the PCA, in order to protect itself as well as the major studios it

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[29] PCA interoffice memo, March 9, 1934, "History of Cinema and the Production Code," reel 9. (Microfilm), Margaret Herrick Special Collections Library, Beverly Hills, California.

[30] PCA memorandum for the files, March 9, 1934, "History of Cinema and the Production Code," reel 9. (Microfilm), Margaret Herrick Special Collections Library, Beverly Hills, California.

represented, had to consider the consequences of allowing such a film a seal of approval. In this case, Breen's memo conveys the extreme duress that a potentially mixed-race character might cause an American audience—in the North or South. Ultimately, "The producer suggested that to avoid the inference that the leading character was a descendant of a white ancestor, they would definitely establish that her white skin was due to a rare but scientific fact that such a child might come of a line of definitely negro strain."[31] Even with this attempt to quell PCA fears of miscegenation in the film, it still closely monitored the progress of the film.

After Universal's decision to clearly indicate that Peola was a child of two African American parents, the internal communications of the PCA still commented on the issue of miscegenation in the film. In another inter-office memo from Lewis to Breen, Lewis commented on the basic nature of the film. "This script is based wholly on the suggested intermingling of blacks and whites and, although it has no actual case in point, the entire plot evolves on miscegenation which is outlawed under the code."[32] Still, Peola's attempts at passing as white struck a chord with the censors. As Lewis, Breen, and others had suggested, even the most careful of directions could not alter the basic storyline of a black woman wanting to be white, and the potential consequences of this sort of story. In addition, Lewis also articulated another key issue concerning Peola's ambiguous racial status: "All through this story, the unhappy plight of the negro is graphically described and the half-white, half-black girl's desire to mix with whites constantly brings into sharp relief the prejudice against the black race."[33] Lewis's statement hints at the reality of American society - being white offered opportunities, opportunities not offered to black Americans. Peola's

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[31] Ibid.

[32] PCA inter-office memo from J.B. Lewis to Joseph Breen, March 10, 1934, "History of Cinema and the Production Code," reel 9. (Microfilm), Margaret Herrick Special Collections Library, Beverly Hills, California.

[33] Ibid.

appearance directly criticized the racial hierarchy within America. Although Peola articulated that she wanted to be white like she looked, it was not simple to be white in racial terms, but to gain the benefits that came to being white in America during the 1930s.[34]

In dealing with the predicament of miscegenation in *Imitation of Life,* Breen sought out any forms of precedent from earlier committees that had monitored film content prior to the PCA. While most organizations and attempts at self-regulation of the film industry had failed during the 1920s and early 1930s, there were some bureaucratic ways in which the film industry attempted to reform movies. Most of these cases dealt with themes such as gangster violence or overt sexuality. In the case of the miscegenation, *Imitation of Life* presented the PCA with a complicated case with little past cases to study. In a PCA memorandum for Breen from censor Islin Auster, the latter specifically addressed the issues concerning miscegenation in the film. The purpose of the memorandum was to inform Breen of the different ways in which past PCA-like committees had dealt with miscegenation, to which Auster stated there was very little documentation on the issue in films: "In February, 1928, the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae refused to recommend the picture, THE LOVE MART, produced by First National. The objectionable part of this story was based on the fact that, though the female lead was white, she was at one time thot [sic] to have negro blood in her and as a result was imprisoned with negroes and auctioned off as an octoroon on the slave block."[35] The memorandum mentioned two other films, *Lulu Belle* and *Jungle Rose*, both of which dealt with themes of miscegenation and were ultimately blocked from being produced. Subsequently, Auster ended the memorandum by

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[34] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, and Bucks*, 60.

[35] Memorandum for Mr. Breen by I. Auster, March 13, 1934, "History of Cinema and the Production Code," reel 9. (Microfilm), Margaret Herrick Special Collections Library, Beverly Hills, California.

stating that miscegenation "has always been taboo, and that there has been no opportunity to collect evidence referring to it."[36]

The topic of miscegenation was so troubling to Breen and the PCA, that Breen not only sought out information on past film cases, but he informed his boss, Will Hays, the head of the MPPDA of *Imitation of Life* and the potential issues of miscegenation.[37] By mid-May 1934, Hays sent a letter to Robert Cochrane of Universal Pictures in which he discussed his lament and "considerable worry" concerning the film.[38] In addition to attaching Breen's March 9, 1934 letter to Universal discussing the problematic nature of the film, Hays expressed his own wariness of the film. Whereas the PCA letters to Universal often expressed issue with miscegenation (and a lynching scene, which was ultimately deleted), Hays attempted to appeal to Universal's business acumen. Hays conveyed the issues of miscegenation, but further argued that the subject matter of the film could cause potential backlash and censorship:

> …it deals with persons and situations (lynching scene, pretending to be white when black, etc.) which would cause criticism or prevent exhibition in southern states and possibly some of the border states, as well as many English colonies. The prohibition would also extend to large northern cities which have a substantial percentage of negro population. It is believed the story could not be accepted by southerners and is sure to draw fire there.[39]

Hays echoed the similar issues that Breen and other PCA censors had expressed in their reviews of the film script. The film posed a potential threat to widespread boycott, not just in

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Letter from Will Hays to Joseph Breen, March 20, 1934, "History of Cinema and the Production Code," reel 9. (Microfilm), Margaret Herrick Special Collections Library, Beverly Hills, California.

[38] Letter from Will Hays to Robert Cochrane, May 18, 1934, "History of Cinema and the Production Code," reel 9. (Microfilm), Margaret Herrick Special Collections Library, Beverly Hills, California.

[39] Ibid.

the South or southern Border States, but in major northern cities, which were typically segregated through different housing laws. Ultimately, Hays concluded the letter with a strong suggestion that the film not be made: "Altogether the picture seems a very unfortunate possibility and Mr. Breen is confronted with a very real worry. It may develop into a case very near the borderline so that he will be confronted on the on hand with an anxiety not to be unfair to Universal and on the other hand with his sense of duty to Universal and the other companies, to the industry and to Society. In a case like this, of course, it would be hoped that the picture be no made."[40] Hays's conclusion suggests a major worry for the newly-created PCA. The film not only posed a challenge to the Code, but clearly showed the careful balancing act that the organization would have to engage with when it came to film production. Breen and his PCA had to find out how to allow film companies such as Universal to create compelling films that would bolster the film industry, especially during the midst of the Great Depression, but they were beholden to American audiences and had to navigate to ever-outspoken moral reform groups. While Hays hoped that Universal would not make the motion picture, he and others did not fully outlaw the film.

Conclusion

By late July 1934, the PCA still considered *Imitation of Life* a "dangerous" film.[41] The PCA felt that the film ultimately challenged the clause against depictions of miscegenation in films, and although the film did not depict it, the subject matter alone could be grounds to not approve the film. The PCA further warned Universal, but did not outright reject the

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[40] Ibid.

[41] Letter from Joseph Breen to Harry Zehner, July 20, 1934, "History of Cinema and the Production Code," reel 9. (Microfilm), Margaret Herrick Special Collections Library, Beverly Hills, California.

film and agreed to still view and base its judgment on the final product,

> After reading this script, we still feel that this story is a definitely dangerous one. It is our conviction that any picture which raises and elaborates such an inflammable racial question as that raised by this picture, is fraught with grave danger to the industry, and hence is one which we, in the dispensation of our responsibilities under the Resolution for Uniform Interpretation of the Production Code, may be obliged to reject.[42]

Despite the PCA's warning to Universal about the film, it ultimately passed the censors and earned a seal of approval. Many historians and film scholars point to the tragic ending of the film to the reason why it ultimately passed the censors. At the end of the film, Peola returns to attend her mother's lavish funeral (Delilah's final wish). In this emotional ending, Peola comes to realize her mother's devotion and loyalty to her too late. Historian Donald Bogle contends that Peola "weeping by her mother's casket was Hollywood's slick way of finally humiliating her, its way of finally making the character who had run away with herself, conform to the remorseful mulatto type."[43] It was in Peola's final acceptance of her mother and her blackness that gave the PCA the ability to pass the film. It was not enough that the film's screenwriters added in specific dialogue that explicitly informed the audience of Peola's black parents. Peola had to suffer for her attempts to pass as white. In accepting her blackness, only too late for her mother to see, the character of Peola fully embraced the trope of the tragic mulatto.

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, and Bucks*, 60.