



# Kent Academic Repository

**Stanfield, Peter (2002) 'An Excursion into the Lower Depths: Hollywood, St. Louis Blues, and Urban Primitivism.'** *Cinema Journal*, 41 (2). pp. 84-108. ISSN 0009-7101.

## Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/2732/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

## The version of record is available from

## This document version

Publisher pdf

## DOI for this version

## Licence for this version

UNSPECIFIED

## Additional information

## Versions of research works

### Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

### Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in *Title of Journal*, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

## Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact [ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk](mailto:ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

# An Excursion into the Lower Depths: Hollywood, Urban Primitivism, and *St. Louis Blues*, 1929–1937

by Peter Stanfield

*This essay considers how Hollywood presented the song St. Louis Blues in a number of movies during the early to mid-1930s. It argues that the tune's history and accumulated use in films enabled Hollywood to employ it in an increasingly complex manner to evoke essential questions about female sexuality, class, and race.*

Recent critical writing on American cinema has focused attention on the structures of racial coding of gender and on the ways in which moral transgressions are routinely characterized as “black.” As Eric Lott points out in his analysis of race and film noir: “Raced metaphors in popular life are as indispensable and invisible as the colored bodies who give rise to and move in the shadows of those usages.” Lott aims to “enlarge the frame” of work conducted by Toni Morrison and Kenneth Warren on how “racial tropes and the presence of African Americans have shaped the sense and structure of American cultural products that seem to have nothing to do with race.”<sup>1</sup> Specifically, Lott builds on Manthia Diawara’s argument that “film is noir if it puts into play light and dark in order to exhibit a people who become ‘black’ because of their ‘shady’ moral behaviour.”<sup>2</sup> E. Ann Kaplan further suggests that the racial dynamics of film noir can be productively explored by examining the links between the “dark continent” of the “female psyche” and the genre’s “displaced reference to racial darkness.”<sup>3</sup>

This essay extends this critical analysis of film noir to argue that such racial tropes are limited neither to film noir nor to the 1940s but are operative within and across film genres of earlier periods. Moreover, whereas Lott and Kaplan focus on the visual staging of racial difference, this essay concentrates on the soundtrack and, in particular, the mobilization of popular songs to code race, class, and gender.<sup>4</sup> The concern here is with how the Hollywood cinema used W. C. Handy’s song *St. Louis Blues* as a means to articulate racial instability in the characterization of women who represented problems in terms of their sexuality, their morality, and their (lower) class status.

King Vidor’s version of *Stella Dallas* (1937) provides a good example of the complex ideological work that was often performed by the song.<sup>5</sup> Working-class Stella (Barbara Stanwyck) marries a man of upper-class bearing, Stephen Dallas, whom she hopes will teach her about the better things in life, but, following the birth of their daughter, the marriage disintegrates and they drift apart. Thereafter,

Peter Stanfield is a senior lecturer in Media with Cultural Studies at Southampton Institute (U.K.). He is the author of *Hollywood, Westerns, and the 1930s: The Lost Trail* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001) and *Horse Opera: The Strange History of the Singing Cowboy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

© 2002 by the University of Texas Press, P.O. Box 7819, Austin, TX 78713-7819



Figure 1. Barbara Stanwyck represents the height of sartorial vulgarity in *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937). Courtesy BFI.

Stella devotes herself to raising her daughter, Laurel, who grows up to embody all the social graces her mother cannot or will not adopt. Although she defers material and sexual desire in nurturing Laurel, Stella eventually sacrifices her role as a mother so that Laurel can gain entrance to her father's world. To ensure that Laurel can make a guiltless shift into the domain of the patriarch, Stella must successfully cut the ties that bind her to her daughter. To achieve this, she must *appear* to transgress the role of the loving mother. Against the evidence mustered earlier in the film that suggests she is a paragon of the self-sacrificing mother, Stella has to give the appearance of embodying that which ultimately threatens the maternal.

After Laurel refuses to leave her, Stella is forced to act out the role of a sexual woman. To counter the image of her as a good mother while retaining the audience's sympathy, Stella *enacts* a sexual persona. She announces that she is going to marry Ed Munn, a kind-hearted man but an incorrigible gambler and lush for whom she has no sexual desire: "There isn't a man alive who could get me going anymore." Consequently, her heavily marked acts of sartorial and public vulgarity do not signal her sexual availability but instead confirm her low-class origins. Given the opportunity, Stella dresses and behaves in public with all the subtlety of a streetwalker. Her transition from "mother" to "sexualized" woman is fully effected in the scene that finds her indolently lying on a sofa smoking a cigarette, reading a trashy romance magazine, and playing *St. Louis Blues* on her phonograph. Supported by the soundtrack of *St. Louis Blues*, this masquerade finally rends asunder Laurel's resolve and she leaves.

Why is *this* particular song played here?<sup>6</sup> This essay considers this question in the context of a number of Hollywood films from the early to mid-1930s. Chronologically, *Stella Dallas* is the most recent film examined here. By 1937, the song had accreted sufficient symbolic power for Stella's abrupt character transformation to be credible. By examining its musical and filmic formulations, it should become clear that the symbolic power of *St. Louis Blues* is formed through three key discourses that overdetermine Hollywood's deployment of the song: "transgressive" female sexuality, the "blackening" of white identity, and "urban primitivism." Through the history of the cultural interchanges that take place around the song, it becomes possible to see how *St. Louis Blues* is used as a sophisticated instantiation of wider American social and cultural discourses of race, gender, class, and sexuality. As in the noir films analyzed by Lott and Kaplan, a film such as *Stella Dallas* evinces a "racialized interior" or "racial unconscious."<sup>7</sup>

The organization of discourses of sexuality, race, and gender inflected through *St. Louis Blues* is historically specific and needs to be understood as part of the anxieties brought about by the economic and social transformations that accompanied American modernization. For it is in the processes of historical transformation that the symbolic category of the "urban primitive" is formed. Chip Rhodes has observed that race and gender become "identical *as constructs*, transhistorical signs for the embodiment of a potency that the capitalist production process vitiates. In this sense, blacks in general, and black women in particular, serve the same end." Excluded from the mainstream of modern America, "they are clearly not excluded from the world of social desire." Rhodes argues that "blacks" proved useful in representations of "primitive" desires because (at least before the Great Migration) "they were largely excluded from the alienating production process that both modernism and consumerism promise to counteract."<sup>8</sup> White espousal of black blues is underwritten by a desire for a primitivism—a primitivism formed not in the agrarian past of the plantation but in a black urban vernacular constructed as unencumbered by the constraints of modernization—but, paradoxically, this desire is relayed through the modern technology of phonograph recordings and Hollywood films.

First popularized in vaudeville and in the emerging nightclub scene of the teens and early twenties, by the end of the thirties *St. Louis Blues* had become the most recorded of all blues songs.<sup>9</sup> Copyrighted by its author, W. C. Handy, in 1914, *St. Louis Blues* was first featured in black vaudeville circa 1916 by Charles Anderson, whom blues singer Ethel Waters described as "a very good female impersonator." It was from Anderson that Waters first learned the song; at seventeen, she performed it in her vaudeville debut, becoming the first female African American to feature *St. Louis Blues* in her act.<sup>10</sup> The first phonograph recording of the song took place in London, where it was performed by Ciro's Coon Club Orchestra in 1916. The song's next commercial release was in 1919 by Lt. Jim Europe's 369<sup>th</sup> ("Hell Fighters") Infantry Band, a seminal group in the development of jazz. In 1921, the white Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB), an act held responsible for helping turn the verb "jazz" into a noun, recorded its version. On this occasion, their line-up was augmented by the white blackface singer Al Bernard—billed by himself as "The Boy

from Dixie,” who had already recorded a version of the song two years earlier.<sup>11</sup> *St. Louis Blues* would become a staple of blackface performances, spawning a subgenre of minstrel parodies and pastiches, notably Emmett Miller’s *The Ghost of St. Louis Blues* (1929) and the Cotton Picker’s *St. Louis Gal* (1929).<sup>12</sup> From these low and vulgar beginnings, the song entered the public imagination.

*St. Louis Blues* was recorded in almost every conceivable pre-World War II style: rural and vaudeville blues, jazz, hillbilly, Hawaiian, croon, swing, ragtime, and symphonic and by artists as diverse as Bessie Smith (1925), Paul Whiteman and His Orchestra (1926), Weaver & Beasley (1927), LeRoy Smith and His Orchestra (1928), Louis Armstrong (1929, 1933, 1934), Cab Calloway (1930), Jim Jackson (1930), the Callahan Brothers (1931), Bing Crosby with Duke Ellington (1932), Jim & Bob—The Genial Hawaiians (1933), the Dorsey Brothers Orchestra (1934), the Sons of the Pioneers (1934), the Quintet of the Hot Club of France (1935), the Lew Stone Dance Orchestra (1935), Paul Robeson (1936), and Benny Goodman (1936).<sup>13</sup> Without overstating the case, musicologist David Schiff writes that *St. Louis Blues* “changed the landscape of American music.”<sup>14</sup> Scholars of jazz and blues would eventually consider the versions by Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith as exemplifying the merits of these musical genres as well as Armstrong and Smith’s artistic achievements.<sup>15</sup> For my purposes, however, the plenitude of instrumental and vocal recordings of *St. Louis Blues* gives weight to the argument that the song was instantly recognizable to a wide cross-section of cinema patrons during the period from 1929 to 1937.

For Negrophiliacs like the “anthropologist” Carl Van Vechten, author of *Nigger Heaven* (1926) and tour guide to “primitive” Harlem nightlife for slumming whites, *St. Louis Blues* became the soundtrack to the 1920s even as its novelty for musicians palled. Taking William Faulkner on a tour around Harlem, Van Vechten recalled mild embarrassment at “Faulkner’s persistent request of the musicians to play the *St. Louis Blues* when that song was out of fashion.”<sup>16</sup> However, the song’s form meant that it could be readily rearranged and hence reinvigorated by introducing an element of novelty to wrap around a series of easily identifiable refrains, an idea brilliantly signified in the versions recorded by Louis Armstrong and in the plethora of boogie-woogie versions produced from the late 1930s to the early 1940s.<sup>17</sup>

The song begins with a woman’s lament for the end of the day: “I hate to see de evenin’ sun go down.”<sup>18</sup> Her man has left her for another woman, whose powder, paint, and “store-bought hair” have proved to be a temptation too great for him to ignore. The song plays on the listener’s recognition of two female archetypes—the abandoned lovelorn woman and the sexual temptress—who are competing with each other for the attention of a feckless male. Hollywood’s use of the song recognized this scenario. In *Rain* (Lewis Milestone, 1932), for example, it suggests ambivalence about whether a character is sexually exploitative or exploited, while in films such as *Red Headed Woman* (Jack Conway, 1932), it helps to underpin a character’s duplicitous use of sex and, in *Banjo on My Knee* (John Cromwell, 1936), a woman’s destitute and loveless status. A contemporary audience would have responded to the song not only because it recorded the plight of these female archetypes but also because of its play with representations of a black urban underclass.

**Urban Primitivism and Blackface Minstrelsy.** On the basis of the song's popularity, Handy has been called "The Father of the Blues" and rather less generously by Ian Whitcomb as the "stenographer of the blues."<sup>19</sup> Jelly Roll Morton simply branded Handy the most "dastardly impostor in the history of music."<sup>20</sup> The truth lies somewhere in between. In a manner analogous to that of the artists of the Harlem Renaissance, Handy reworked his folk material.<sup>21</sup> By retaining ties to older forms, for example, folk blues and spirituals, Handy's modern (but not modernist) articulation and commercial exploitation of these musical styles suggested an evolving continuity between the old world of the southern plantation and the new world of the northern city. This is certainly implicit in Handy's own account of composing *St. Louis Blues*. But above all else, Handy considered himself an *American* composer, which is to say that he worked with indigenous black musical forms—the only truly distinct sounds of American music.<sup>22</sup> With *St. Louis Blues*, his aim, he explained, was to

combine ragtime syncopation with a real melody in the spiritual tradition. There was something from the tango I wanted too. . . . This would figure in my introduction, as well as in the middle strain.

In the lyric I decided to use Negro phraseology and dialect. I felt then, as I feel now, that this often implies more than well-chosen English can briefly express. My plot centered around the wail of a lovesick woman for her lost man, but in the telling of it I resorted to the humorous spirit of the bygone coon songs. I used the folk blues' three-line stanza that created the twelve-measure strain.<sup>23</sup>

The central theme to emerge from this characterization of the song is its rootedness within traditions of representing blackness (hence its appeal for blackface minstrels). But further reflections on the composition of the song suggest that it addresses the experience not of the rural-plantation South but of modernity in the milieu of the black habitués of the urban demi-monde. Remembering the incidents in his life that influenced the composition of *St. Louis Blues*, Handy writes in his autobiography:

I have tried to forget that first sojourn in St. Louis, but I wouldn't want to forget Targee Street as it was then, I don't think I'd want to forget the high-roller Stetson hats of the men or the diamonds the girls wore in their ears. Then there were those who sat for company in little plush parlors under gaslights. The prettiest woman I've ever seen I saw while I was down and out in St. Louis. But mostly my trip was an excursion into the lower depths.

Still I have always felt that the misery of those days bore fruit in song. I have always imagined that a good bit of that hardship went into the making of the *St. Louis Blues* when, much later, the whole song seemed to spring so easily out of nowhere, the work of a single evening at the piano. I like to think the song reflects a life filled with hard times as well as good times.<sup>24</sup>

To Handy, the more immediate inspiration for the lovelorn protagonist of the song derived from an impression he gained on Beale Street in Memphis, which offered a similar urban experience to St. Louis's Targee Street: "Scores of powerfully built roustabouts from the river boats sauntered along the pavement,

elbowing fashionable browns in beautiful gowns. Pimps in boxback coats and undented Stetsons came out to get a breath of early evening air and to welcome the night." A drunken woman passes him by on the street, muttering, "Ma man's got a heart like a rock cast in the sea." He asks another passing woman what the lush meant. She replies, "Lawd, man, it's hard and gone so far from her she can't reach it." "Her language," he explains, "was the same down-home medium that conveyed the laughable woe of lamp-blackened lovers in hundreds of frothy songs, but her plight was much too real to provoke laughter. My song was taking shape. I had now settled upon the mood."<sup>25</sup>

The song's mood drew upon the ambience of black urban nightlife but not as its unmediated document. Rather, the portrayal was filtered through earlier types of songs, in particular ragtime numbers such as *Frankie and Johnny* and less specifically religious spirituals and the profoundly secular "coon" song tradition, which dealt with a similar subject. Finally, giving the whole a contemporary edge, elements from the latest dance fad—the tango—were included.

This hybrid of styles and traditions, which left "spaces for vocal or instrumental improvised breaks," partly explains the song's popularity with such a wide range of performers. Its roots in the past (coon songs) along with its embracing of the contemporary (the tango) made the song both comfortingly familiar and excitingly new. Recalling the ODJB's recording of *St. Louis Blues*, its trombonist, Eddie Edwards, remembers the modernist expression of clarinetist Larry Shield's performance:

A ribald gross denial. Larry hated New York City. . . . This annoyance is carried on to the fourth measure, is followed by a wavering of indecision and inertia, helpless in its efforts to rise above it. On into the blue notes, characteristic of the . . . moods, lights, colors, and shadows of his urban dislikes and indecision. Noises at times, exuberant and pathetic, and lonely. Chaos is all about. It is dismal and gruesome. This is the first strain of twelve measures. The second chorus of [the] strain follows with screaming hate.<sup>26</sup>

Although Eddie Edwards made this observation in the 1950s (as part of a wider project on behalf of the surviving band members to assign historical importance to their role in the development of a jazz idiom), the rendition is remarkably faithful to the band's iconoclastic intent. In a 1920 interview, ODJB leader Nick LaRocca stated that

jazz is the assassination, the murdering, the slaying of syncopation. In fact, it is a revolution in this kind of music. . . . I even go so far as to confess we are musical anarchists. . . . Our prodigious outbursts are seldom consistent, every number played by us eclipsing in originality and effect our previous performance.<sup>27</sup>

Yet the band's 1921 recording of *St. Louis Blues* (among other songs) also features the atavistic blackface vocals of Al Bernard. Produced five years before *Billboard* first alluded to the "'jazzing up' and modernization of minstrelsy,"<sup>28</sup> this relatively archaic performance of blackface in the context of a jazz recording, while not wholly vitiating a modernist interpretation, suggests that not all is chaos and uncertainty. Early in his career, Al Bernard specialized in recording Handy's blues and also

published a number of songs with Handy's company. Handy notes, on the one hand, that at the time "Negro musicians simply played the hits of the day" while white performers "were on the alert for novelties. They were therefore the ones most ready to introduce our numbers." On the other hand, "Negro vaudeville" artists wanted songs that would not conflict with "the white acts on the bill. The result was these performers [such as Ethel Waters and Charles Anderson] became our most effective pluggers."<sup>29</sup> No doubt this was how Bernard first heard *St. Louis Blues*. In any case, he recorded the song five times between 1919 and 1928, including one version as a blackface monologue.<sup>30</sup> But what does it mean for a white man in blackface to sing a song from a woman's point of view?

Bernard and the other blackface minstrels who performed *St. Louis Blues* were the heirs to a nearly century-old tradition of white men crossing the line not only between races but also between genders. As Annemarie Bean and Eric Lott have argued, in the figures of the pantomime or burlesque "wench" and the "highly stylized and costumed near-white woman" of the "prima donna,"<sup>31</sup> minstrelsy continued its common project of feminizing blackness.<sup>32</sup> David Roediger and Michael Rogin argue that the blackface mask is a device of assimilation that enabled marginalized groups, such as Jewish and Irish immigrants, to claim both a symbolic and a literal whiteness defined against the black "other" of minstrelsy and the black bodies minstrelsy purported to represent.<sup>33</sup> But, as Dale Cockrell suggests, minstrelsy's play with fluid identities subverted "'knowing' gained through image—the eye is drawn to representation, which might not be the real—just as a Western mask is not really as it appears: it conceals and promises reordering."<sup>34</sup>

While blackface female impersonation, in either the figure of the wench or the prima donna, carries its "inevitable quotient of demeaning attributes" and its "opposing urge to authenticity" (as W. T. Lhamon, Jr., claims for minstrel performance as a whole), in its "radical portion" it highlights "contamination, literal overlap, and identification with [the] muddier process" of self-generating identities.<sup>35</sup> By arguing that the mask of blackface minstrelsy does not fix identity but instead puts it into continuous play so that liminality is its defining characteristic, Cockrell and Lhamon challenge the argument put forward by Rogin and Roediger that the blackness of minstrelsy is about "eager replacement of ethnicity or Jewishness with whiteness."<sup>36</sup> Rather, as Lhamon claims, blackface stages "continual transactions of assimilation."<sup>37</sup>

On phonograph recordings, such as that by Al Bernard and the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, neither the mask nor the performance can be seen; the connotations of racial and gender transgression must be carried by sound. Nevertheless, as Cockrell argues, the "noise—the ear—that which always accompanies ritual representations of blackness, is a much richer indicator of the presence of inversion rituals than mere blackface."<sup>38</sup> Within this context, it becomes possible to argue further that the Original Dixieland Jazz Band's cacophonous recording of *St. Louis Blues* is less "modernistic"—an elitist artistic response to modernity—than "urban primitive"—its sense of "chaos" and "anarchy," both in the music and in the blackface play with persona, functioning as a lowbrow populist rebuke to the dehumanizing subjugation of modernity.



The particular narrative and musical strategies described by Handy with respect to his composing of *St. Louis Blues* suggest that the song could operate as a signifier of both the traditional and the modern—symbolized in the play with blackness implied in the vocal characteristics of Al Bernard and his usurpation of a female subjectivity. In the context of a jazz recording, Bernard's appropriation of a black female subjectivity suggests both a world outside modernity—the southern plantation evoked through minstrelsy and the invocation of female sexuality—and confinement within modernity—the technologically disembodied voice of the phonograph recording that addressed an urban audience.

Bing Crosby, who appeared in blackface in at least two films—*Holiday Inn* (1942) and *Dixie* (1943)—and who flirted with blackface persona in songs such as *Mississippi Mud* (1928), later featured in the Paul Whiteman film *King of Jazz* (1930) and *Black Moonlight* (1933), featured in *Too Much Harmony* (1933), forsook both the female point of view, as implied in Handy's original lyrics, and blackface ventriloquism for his version of *St. Louis Blues*. Despite this apparent refusal to cross racial and gender lines, Crosby retains an authenticity for the recorded performance through the accompaniment of Duke Ellington and His Orchestra.<sup>39</sup>

Crosby's association with Ellington—who, as Krin Gabbard suggests, strove to present an "uptown," "sophisticated" image—worked to mitigate the vulgarity that was central to Handy's copyrighted version and to Al Bernard's performance. Nevertheless, because of Ellington's association with the Cotton Club, their collaboration maintains a sense of the song's roots in a black urban vernacular.<sup>40</sup> The recording has a three-part structure. Ellington's orchestra introduces the musical themes of the song with an arrangement that suggests the slow, powerful, rhythmic pull of a locomotive train. The tone then changes to incorporate Crosby's trademark crooning, which scans across, rather than emphasizes, the blue notes. The final section attempts to harmonize Ellington's and Crosby's distinct styles by returning to the opening arrangement, with Crosby scat-crooning to the recording's end. In the middle section, Crosby shuns an alignment with the song's female point of view by changing the lyrics so that it is a man who has been abandoned by a woman rather than the other way around. This inversion severely deforms the song's logic, because the woman, who has "done lef dis town" and left the singer feeling so blue, has done so for another woman—the temptress in "powder" and "store-bought hair."

The song was recorded by a large number of male vocalists, some of whom refrained from inverting the song's female point of view. Leaving the gendered structure of address intact was consistent with acts of vocal transvestism that were legitimized by the long tradition of blackface cross-dressing—an example of Cockrell's idea that minstrelsy "conceals and promises reordering." The performance of blackface coterminously sanctioned the white male singer's reordering and reinscription of racial and gender boundaries; however, few versions, regardless of the singer's gender, ever got beyond the first three stanzas and therefore few singers attempt the passages that are particularly marked by female desire: "Blacker than midnight, teeth like flags of truce/Blackest man in de whole St. Louis/Blacker de berry, sweeter am de juice."<sup>41</sup> In just over half the films

analyzed, *St. Louis Blues* appears as a phonograph recording without a vocal, but, as I shall show, this does not mitigate the song's play on female desire. Furthermore, with only one exception, in the other films analyzed *St. Louis Blues* is sung by African American women, confirming the song's and these films' invocation of black female desire.

Al Bernard's appropriation, and Crosby's dissembling, of a female subjectivity is a cultural equivalent of the economic "theft of the body" of black females and males under American slavery. The white male's performance of gender and racial crossings has an effect similar to that which Hortense J. Spillers has argued occurs under slavery: "The captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality" that in "stunning contradiction" objectifies the body, reducing it to a "thing." This, in turn, produces a lack of "subject position"; the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of "otherness," which then "translates into the potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general 'powerlessness.'"<sup>42</sup> This project of "othering" is continued in Hollywood's more general representation of blackness and in the "darkening" of white women through their proximity to, or use of, recordings and performances of *St. Louis Blues* in particular.

**Hollywood and *St. Louis Blues*.** When Ethel Waters used *St. Louis Blues* in her vaudeville routine, it began with her slumped in a chair as her lover, acting disgusted, tells her, "I'm going off to see my other chick." "Don't leave me, sugar," she pleads. "Please don't leave me." After her lover departs, she sits on the stage, "rocking sadly and slowly": "When I see how my man treats me, I'd moan, 'I get the *St. Louis Blues*.' Then I would sing *St. Louis Blues*, but very softly. . . . That first time, when I finished singing *St. Louis Blues*, the money fell like rain on the stage."<sup>43</sup>

W. C. Handy helped produce the Bessie Smith short *St. Louis Blues* (1929), which was also, Gabbard suggests, partly scripted by Carl van Vechten. The short film format enhanced the audience's understanding of the song through its filmic rather than its purely aural representation.<sup>44</sup> The film opens in the hallway of a run-down rooming house where a group of black men in shirtsleeves are playing craps. Things liven up when Jimmy, Bessie's lover, appears with a young woman on his arm. Discovering Jimmy and the girl, Bessie first fights with the girl and then alternatively threatens and pleads with Jimmy. He walks out. Later, in a crowded bar, a dejected and downbeat Bessie sings *St. Louis Blues*. Jimmy enters and her mood lightens, they dance together, and Jimmy surreptitiously takes her roll of money. Leaving race and class aside for the moment, the performance of Waters and Smith makes clear that the song addresses a female sexuality habituated to exploitation by men. Bessie Smith's performance resonates from the explicit display and invocation of active female sexual desire. But it is a form of desire that, if viewed in terms of Spillers's argument, is reduced to an "irresistible, destructive sensuality."<sup>45</sup>

Gabbard has argued in discussing her role in the film that Bessie Smith, the blues singer, "does not 'play' a blues singer. Rather she is entirely contained within a narrative of unrequited love and its spontaneous, unmediated expression in

song.”<sup>46</sup> The idea that the film denies artistic agency is further developed by Angela Y. Davis. Discussing the blues of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, Davis notes, “They are far more than compliant, for they begin to articulate a consciousness that takes into account social conditions of class exploitation, racism, and male dominance as seen through the lenses of the complex emotional responses of black female subjects.”<sup>47</sup> Davis also notes that

*St. Louis Blues* [the 1929 film] deserves criticism not only for its exploitation of racist stereotypes but for its violation of the spirit of the blues. Its direct translation of blues images into a visual and linear narrative violates blues discourse, which is always complicated, contextualized, and informed by that which is unspoken as well as by that which is named. *St. Louis Blues*, the film, flagrantly disregards the spirit of women’s blues by leaving the victimized woman with no recourse. In the film the response is amputated from the call. . . . It is precisely the presence of an imagined community of supportive women that rescues them from the existential agony that Smith portrays at the end of *St. Louis Blues*.<sup>48</sup>

Rather than the consciousness raising that Davis believes is present in female blues performances, Hollywood used blues songs stereotypically as soundtracks for displays of urban primitivism. In much the same fashion as was done with blackface minstrel recordings, the presentation of *St. Louis Blues* in Hollywood films reduced the song’s potential for meaning to that of an existential play with surfaces—a smearing of blackness on a world otherwise imagined as white.

One of the earliest uses of the song by Hollywood was in King Vidor’s *Hallelujah* (1929), the first talkie made with a cast composed entirely of African American actors. The film is set in the Deep South and concerns the trials and tribulations of a cotton sharecropper, Zeke, and his amorous relationship with a streetwise hussy whose pimp, Hot Shot, gets her to help con the naive hero of his money and dignity in a barroom crap game. In the violent argument that follows, Zeke’s younger brother is killed. Zeke returns home a chastened and (one hopes) wiser man and commits himself to the Lord. He becomes a successful preacher, but his missionary work brings him back into contact with the girl and with Hot Shot. Zeke once again cannot resist the girl’s temptations and gives up his calling, marries the girl, and finds work in a lumber mill. Hot Shot finally tracks them down and lures Zeke’s wife away. However, as they make their plans, Zeke returns from work and Hot Shot makes a hasty retreat out the back door. To underscore the girl’s duplicity, she sings *St. Louis Blues*.

Zeke’s geographical move from the plantation to the town is paralleled by a shift in musical idiom from the rural to the urban—from folk to jazz. Until Zeke first comes to town to sell his cotton crop, the musical soundtrack consists of a mix of spirituals and ersatz “Negro” folk tunes. However, Zeke’s seduction is accompanied by the rough-house music of a jazz band. The girl—with her high-heeled shoes; short satin dress, emblazoned on her right chest with two patches representing dice; hoop earrings; and sassy sexual deportment—appears as a natural habitué of urban hostleries, later underscored by her singing *St. Louis Blues*.

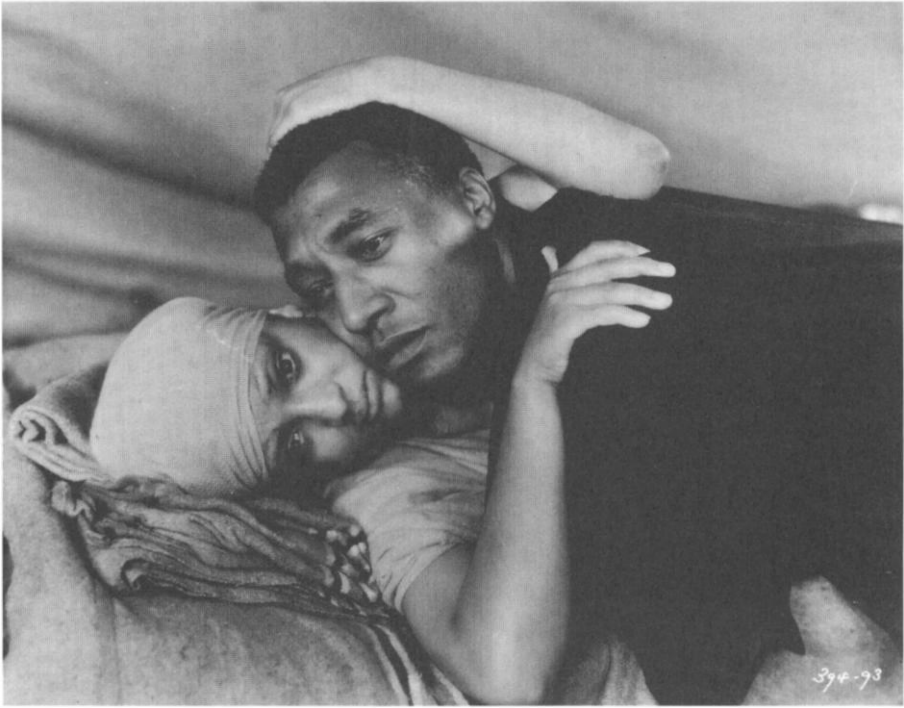


Figure 2. After Zeke (Daniel Haynes) becomes a preacher, Chick (Nina Mae McKinney) seduces him again in *Hallelujah!* (King Vidor, 1929). Courtesy BFI.

As both James Naremore and Adam Knee argue in two separate essays on *Cabin in the Sky* (Vincente Minnelli, 1943), the binary opposition between the city and the country that structures *Hallelujah!* was also present in the other all-black-cast films produced in Hollywood between 1927 and 1954: *Hearts in Dixie* (Paul Sloane, 1929), *Green Pastures* (Marc Connelly and William Keighley, 1936), *Stormy Weather* (Andrew L. Stone, 1943), and *Carmen Jones* (Otto Preminger, 1954).<sup>49</sup> Naremore writes:

The social tensions and ideological contradictions expressed by this opposition were always crucial to any art or entertainment that involved blackness; notice, for example, how the country-city polarity functioned in early uses of “jazz.” . . . Was jazz a primitive music, a people’s music, or an entertainment music? All three possibilities were suggested by critics, and the term seemed to oscillate between diametrically opposed meanings. On the one hand, jazz was associated with flappers, skyscrapers, and the entire panoply of twentieth-century modernity; on the other hand, because it originated with African Americans who migrated to the northern cities, it connoted agrarian or precapitalist social relations, and could be linked to a pastoral myth.<sup>50</sup>

Discussing the space of the urban saloon in *Cabin in the Sky*, Knee argues that, although it represents the film’s “freest African American self-expression, a realm that allows sexually allusive dialogue, open physical movement and dancing

combined with sweeping camera dollies, and spontaneous performance in the relatively free, unrestrained idioms of jazz," it is "ultimately condemn[ed] and destroy[ed]." <sup>51</sup> In a similar manner, the playing or performing of *St. Louis Blues* in Hollywood's productions of the 1930s sanctions but finally condemns a transgressive female sexuality.

Jazz appears simultaneously as a product of an overcultivated metropolitan sensibility and the natural primitive instinctual urge of a rural premodern sensibility. This cultural instability is precisely what is available to Hollywood for representing the sexually transgressive woman. More particularly, the locus of the conflation of sexual desire, gender, race, and urban primitivism is found in the figure of the symbolic octoroon, whose discursive hybridity, as Jennifer DeVere Brody has argued, replays an "anxiety about the destruction of one's whiteness" as a legacy "expressed through references to the figure of the blackened woman." <sup>52</sup> Lorraine O'Grady suggests a similar paradigm when she argues that

the female body in the West is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse: on one side, it is white; on the other, not-white or, prototypically, black. The two bodies cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West's metaphoric construction of "woman." White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she had better not be. <sup>53</sup>

In broader culture, according to Stanley Aronowitz, black women are "labeled temptress, symbolically considered the embodiment of the dark side that links race with sexuality." <sup>54</sup> This is why, in the "black" casts of *Hallelujah!* and *St. Louis Blues*, the sexually aggressive woman is played by a light-skinned actress and, conversely, sexualized white women in the films discussed here are "blackened"—that is, symbolically constructed as octoroons. Their moral, sexual, and gender "transgressiveness" is attributable to their coding as racially uncertain and hence impure, sullied. This idea is present in *St. Louis Blues*, in which the temptress is characterized partly through her use of the "whitening" devices of "powder and store-bought hair," which suggest a face powder to lighten skin tone and a wig made of straight hair. In sum, the instability of racial "boundaries" becomes conflated with a woman's moral standing and is thereby corrupted.

From these accumulated readings, it should be clear why Hollywood's use of the song was not unmotivated. For Barbara Stanwyck, the role of the mother in *Stella Dallas* was something of a departure from her earlier performances of lower-class sexualized women that had typically characterized her star persona. Her portrayals of sexually transgressive women are ably assisted in a number of films by the musical signature of *St. Louis Blues*, making the song something of an intertextual signifier of her star persona. In turn, the repetitive use of *St. Louis Blues* in Stanwyck's early-to-mid-1930s star vehicles confirms the song's claims to represent an "excursion into the lower depths" of female sexuality. <sup>55</sup> In *Baby Face* (Alfred E. Green, 1933), in which she plays an archetypal gold digger, the song follows her on her sexual journey from the beer parlor of a Midwest steel town to the penthouse of a city skyscraper. Her amorality and rise out of illegal drinking shop, where her father forced her to sleep with his customers, to eventual wealth

and marriage are both qualified and commented on by the presence of her black friend/servant (Theresa Harris), who punctuates the narrative with a rendition of *St. Louis Blues*. The song, which is both vocalized and used as a musical motif, acts as a constant reminder of the lowly status of Stanwyck's character. The song functions like an aural birthmark, a sign of her vulgar beginnings and flawed character that regardless of how much wealth she accrues she is unable to shake off. The film's resolution has her return, penniless but happily married, to the city from where she started out. Although this ending was tacked on to provide a morality lesson and to placate the censors, it can also be seen as a confirmation of who the Stanwyck character is, where she has come from, and where she must stay. In contradistinction to the singular use of the song in *Stella Dallas*, the multiple performances of *St. Louis Blues* in *Baby Face* never allow the audience to forget that Stanwyck's character is forever doomed.

In *Stella Dallas*, the phonograph recording of *St. Louis Blues* is an instrumental, and recognition of the song's subject matter is thus dependent on the cinema patron's identification of the tune. However, in *Baby Face*, the song is sung by an African American woman, so that its racial and sexual connotations are relatively unambiguous. In *Baby Face*, *St. Louis Blues* comments overtly on Stanwyck's character: "St. Louis woman, wid her diamond rings,/pulls dat man roun' by her apron strings./ 'Twant for powder an store-bought hair,/ De man ah love—would not gone no where." Stanwyck's character is given an equivalent role to the active protagonist in the song—she is the woman with "a heart like a rock cast in the sea." That is, she plays the part of the temptress who can make a "freight train jump the track" and a "preacher ball the jack."

In *Ladies They Talk About* (William Keighley, 1933), Stanwyck plays a gangster's moll who is sent to prison for her role in a bank job. While serving her sentence, she plays an instrumental version of *St. Louis Blues* on a phonograph to cover the sound of prisoners trying to dig their way out. The choice of the song fits neatly alongside the film's exploitation of abject and vulgar femininity, as displayed by Stanwyck's character and the other inmates. The song also underscores the essential loneliness of the emotionally abused heroine—the woman who has lost her man. But as in *Stella Dallas*, this reading depends on the listener's recognition and knowledge of the song.

In *Banjo on My Knee*, as in *Baby Face*, the principal performance of the song is by an African American woman. Stanwyck again plays a lower-class character, Pearl, but, unlike the protagonist in *Baby Face*, Pearl's heart is not hard, just broken. The role of the temptress is played by another character. Pearl is "love-sick," and, in contrast to the sexually meretricious woman played by Stanwyck in *Baby Face*, Pearl does not lead her man around by her apron strings. Her husband, Ernie (Joel McCrea), consistently absents himself from the narrative and their bed whenever it appears as if they will consummate their marriage. This scenario poses a dilemma for her father-in-law, Newt (Walter Brennan), who has long waited to play *St. Louis Blues* outside his son and daughter-in-law's bedroom on their first night of matrimony.



Figure 3. In *Ladies They Talk About* (William Keighley, 1933), Barbara Stanwyck (left) and Lilian Roth play two inmates in a prison where one of the few pleasures is a phonograph record and a recording of *St. Louis Blues*. Courtesy BFI.

The setting is a cluster of rafts tied to an island in the middle of the Mississippi. Newt's riverboat neighbors had serenaded him and his bride with the song, and now it is Newt's turn to pass on this totem of good luck and blessing to his future grandchild. Pearl and Newt end up performing in a New Orleans bar, Cafe Creole, where she wows a slumming, sophisticated audience with sentimental ditties. Newt gets them dancing as he plays his bones and banjo and bangs out a medley of nineteenth-century minstrel tunes on a weird musical contraption that harnesses all sorts of homemade instruments. Despite their success and acclaim, Newt and Pearl drift back to their river home, where he finally plays *St. Louis Blues* as Pearl and her husband consummate their marriage in the closing moments of the film. While the use of the song in *Baby Face* reinforces the heroine's exploitative sexuality and lowly status, it serves a different purpose in *Banjo on My Knee*: Pearl is aligned with the abandoned female character in *St. Louis Blues*, not with the temptress. Although the song can represent either exploitative or exploited female sexuality, this representation of a feminized black urban demi-monde is unambivalent.

Hollywood perceived *St. Louis Blues* as an example of a genre of songs that deployed images of urban black female sexuality; another key instance was the song *Frankie and Johnny*. The close relationship between the two songs is demonstrated

in *Red Headed Woman*, the story of a white working-class gold digger who uses sex to get what she wants. When her boss stays home with his wife rather than making love to her, the heroine, Lillian (Jean Harlow), consoles herself by drinking cheap hooch and playing a vocal version of *Frankie and Johnny* on her phonograph and later, having finally won her man, she plays an instrumental version of *St. Louis Blues*. In both cases, the song confirms her illicit desires and her *déclassé* status.<sup>56</sup>

In *Banjo on My Knee*, the producers' original choice was not *St. Louis Blues* but *Frankie and Johnny*—the Production Code Administration advised against including the latter, as it was certain to be cut by local censor boards. *Frankie and Johnny*'s instantly recognizable melody had enabled filmmakers to display the song to signify desires, impulses, and moral values that could not be relayed to an audience in an unadulterated and unambivalent manner for fear of the censor's scissors. By the mid-1930s, though, as *Frankie and Johnny* became overworked as a motif, the set of concerns it was meant to suggest became even more fixed and direct; ambiguity dissolved. Used originally to mask offensive material, the song itself became censorable:

Dear Mr. Mayer:

We have read the Frankie and Johnny number for your proposed picture Ziegfeld Follies. We regret to report that we feel this subject matter would be unacceptable from the standpoint of the Production Code, on account of its flavor of prostitution and excessive sex suggestiveness.

Furthermore, it has been the practice of censor boards generally to delete even the mention of this song, whenever any attempt has been made to inject it into pictures.

We strongly urge, therefore, that you steer away entirely from this extremely dangerous material and substitute something else.

Cordially yours,

Joseph I. Breen, 1944.<sup>57</sup>

For the Fred Astaire number, Arthur Freed substituted *Limehouse Blues*, a 1924 hit written by Douglas Furber and Philip Braham and introduced to America in the *André Charlot Revue*. As Sigmund Spaeth points out, the song was "not at all 'Blues' in the American sense" but a "fascinating combination of words, melody and harmony, in the pseudo-Chinese mood of London's Limehouse district."<sup>58</sup> In the interceding twenty years, it had, nevertheless, become something of a jazz standard. Being unable to use *Frankie and Johnny* clearly posed few problems for the producers, who simply substituted a less controversial (but similarly downbeat) number that also connoted a racially mixed urban underworld.

Similarly, thirteen years earlier, *Frankie and Johnny* was dropped from the script of *The Public Enemy* (William Wellman, 1931). *Frankie and Johnny* was to be sung by Putty Nose to the boys at the Red Oaks Club and was to be performed with "many sly winks and grimaces to bring out the suggestive part."<sup>59</sup> This, and subsequent scenes, were little affected by the substitution of the less-known (and therefore less-controversial) *Hesitation Blues*—a version of which Handy had copyrighted as *The Hesitating Blues* in 1915.<sup>60</sup> Al Bernard, who had recorded one of the first versions of *Frankie and Johnny*, also recorded a version of *Hesitation*





Figure 4. Sadie Thompson (Joan Crawford), men, booze, a phonograph player, and *St. Louis Blues* in *Rain* (Lewis Milestone, 1932). Courtesy BFI.

*Blues* in 1927, accompanied by the Goofus Five, suggesting a continued blackface fascination with the blues. Like *St. Louis Blues*, *Hesitation Blues* and *Limehouse Blues*, at least in commercially available versions, avoided the overtly bawdy lyrical material of *Frankie and Johnny* but were able to do the same dramatic work while remaining immune from censors' inquisitions.<sup>61</sup>

Just how useful *St. Louis Blues* could be in expressing a transgressive female sexuality is perfectly summarized in the Joan Crawford vehicle *Rain* (Lewis Milestone, 1932)—the second Hollywood adaptation of W. Somerset Maugham's short story. Sadie, a prostitute, arrives in the South Sea Island of Pago Pago by way of Kansas, San Francisco, and Honolulu. In Pago Pago, she comes into conflict with a missionary reformer, Davidson (Walter Huston). As in *Baby Face*, the song recurs throughout the film, but, rather than have another character perform the song, Sadie plays a particularly raucous instrumental version on her omnipresent phonograph. Sadie's use of the phonograph brings to mind Robert Johnson's *Phonograph Blues*—the singer conjuring up an image of a lover corrupted by listening to his phonograph records: "What evil have I done? . . . What evil has the poor girl heard?"<sup>62</sup> Remarkably, in early-to-mid-1930s Hollywood productions, the phonograph was rarely simply utilized as a decorative domestic appliance—a harmless *divertissement* for the family. Instead, as in *Female* (Michael Curtiz and William Dieterle, 1933), in which

it is a key tool in the heroine's seduction of young men who work in the factory she owns and manages, the phonograph signifies, as much as an ankle bracelet or overrouged lips might, provocative and defiant female sexuality.

In *I'm No Angel* (Wesley Ruggles, 1933), Mae West makes comic capital out of this idea when her character, Tira, seduces her suitor, who is from Dallas, Texas, by playing a recording of *No One Loves Me Like That Dallas Man*; other records in her collection include *No One Loves Me Like That Memphis Man* and *No One Loves Me Like That Frisco Man*. The use of phonograph recordings suggests characters such as Tira and Sadie are active agents in the art of seduction, an idea that would be less persuasive were the music played by either a live band or over the radio. In effect, the source of the diegetic music used to accompany the scenes of seduction is gender specific: the public broadcast of radio and the public performance of live music are outside the women's control, while the domestic space occupied by the phonograph is registered as female and under the control of the women.

Sadie's sexuality is as strident (and as "primitive") as that of the native islanders Davidson and his wife are hoping to convert to Christianity. Holding true to its title, the film begins with images of overcast skies that pour relentlessly with rain. The emphasis on the elemental is echoed in Sadie's physically unfettered deportment, yet it is the city and its "civilized" manners that have transformed Sadie from an innocent teenage orphan from rural Kansas into a San Francisco chippie—and then into an asocial sexual primitive.

Although *Rain* deals almost exclusively with American characters, the South Seas context helps create a universal parable of corrupted innocence, thereby avoiding accusations that the film depicts an exclusively American prurience. Similar concerns dictated the geographical relocation of the story told in *Frankie and Johnny* from the Barbary Coast to an unidentified island off the southern coast of the United States for *Her Man* (Tay Garnett, 1930). The effect is to place the characters in a primitive Oriental setting that paradoxically confirms their essentialist American characteristics. With its denotation of a black feminized American urban milieu, *St. Louis Blues* exemplifies this "American primitiveness." The sexualized lower-class woman's distinctly American characteristics are fostered through connotations of "blackness" that accrue through her being identified with this prototypical blues song and through cinematic techniques and motifs associated with "black" America.

To make manifest the figure of the urban primitive, the association of blackness with the working class or underclass is apparent in all the films mentioned here, with the exception of *Female*, which deploys an Oriental primitivism.<sup>63</sup> In this film, the female lead is upper class, and she is consequently aligned with a degenerate Eastern European aristocracy (her servants liken her to Catherine the Great; she seduces her men by plying them with vodka). Nonetheless, she is positioned as akin to the meretricious primitives of the other films. Her penthouse "lair" is festooned with stuffed animal heads and carpeted with animal skins. Her acts of seduction are accompanied by an instrumental version of *Shanghai Lil* (the number used as the finale of *Footlight Parade* [Lloyd Bacon, 1933]), played on the phonograph. The "Orientalism" of the tune compounds the link between voracious female sexuality and the primitivism of the other, yet the song

carries none of the specific connotations of the black feminized urban milieu that are so overtly present in *St. Louis Blues* and, therefore, her “aristocratic” status is not overtly vitiated.

The discursive force of the distinction—between an Oriental and a black American primitivism—is encapsulated in the “yellow-face” film *The Hatchet Man* (William Wellman, 1932), a mutation of the high-profile cycle of gangster dramas produced in the previous season. The setting is San Francisco, where Wong Low Get (Edward G. Robinson) works as an assassin for the Tongs—Chinatown’s equivalent of New York or Chicago’s criminal gangs. When first shown, the community is insular and bound by tradition, apparently untouched by the wider world of American culture. With the passing of years, modern values and business practices take their effect: Wong Low Get cuts his hair and wears Western suits, and he becomes the head of a legitimate import/export concern. The waning of tradition is further felt when criminal gangs threaten the Tongs’ power base. This necessitates the use of Americanized Chinese “bodyguards” from New York, who have forsaken traditional clothes and customs and adopted the dress and manners of the Jazz Age. The hold that tradition has over the community begins to weaken.

All the principal characters in the film are Chinese, albeit played by white actors in yellow face; “American” characters are limited to the mounted police who lead a funeral procession, an Irish American gangster, and, significantly, a black railroad porter and a black jazz band. Although white Americans police the borders of Chinatown, the rest of America is conveyed almost exclusively by reference to a black American culture. On his first excursion outside Chinatown, a black porter chauffeurs Wong Low Get from platform to train, and his wife’s first encounter with American culture occurs at an afternoon jazz dance. In isolation, the inhabitants of Chinatown continue to practice their “primitive” and centuries-old customs, untouched by the surrounding sounds and sensations of American modernity. But when corrupting agents (symbolized by the Irish American gangster and the black primitivism of jazz) breach the community’s borders, the forces of modernity undermine its Chinese culture—a black American primitivism repositions the discursive valence of the Oriental primitivism.

Symbolized in part by its proximity to black culture, the corrupting influence of modernity is particularly marked by its effects on Wong Low Get’s wife (Loretta Young), who readily exchanges tradition and marriage for the sensual attractions of modern urban America; a New York bodyguard becomes her lover after seducing her with his fast slang, whiskey, and wild abandonment while dancing to jazz. In their adoption of Jazz Age culture, the wife and her lover display a modern sensibility, but also, paradoxically, they regress to a primitive state of physical sensuality. This paradox is coded as black *and* as American.<sup>64</sup>

Chinatown’s primitivism situates it outside (white) America’s mainstream. Similarly, the aristocratic Oriental pose of the lead character in *Female* and of the underclass white primitives in *Banjo on My Knee* are positioned as outsiders. The characters in *Banjo on My Knee* are coded as primitive not only because they are literally and figuratively adrift from the mainland but also because their shared culture and lifestyle are associated with “blackness.” The black origin of *St. Louis Blues*



Figure 5. Barbara Stanwyck and her shadow, Theresa Harris, in *Baby Face* (Alfred E. Green, 1933). Courtesy BFI.

is confirmed in a scene in the last third of the film, in which Stanwyck's love-sick character, roaming the back streets of New Orleans at sunset, hears a black woman singing *St. Louis Blues* (performed, as in *Baby Face*, by Theresa Harris). Cut into the scene are vignettes of black laborers bent double by the weight of the cotton bales that they carry on their backs. The scene both adds poignancy to the evocation of lost love and works to suggest how close the white riverboat community is to becoming "black." Indeed, the lighting changes from the opening scenes, in which Stanwyck gives off a white radiance, to the scenes in the appropriately named Cafe Creole, where she becomes markedly darker. In *Baby Face*, Stanwyck's character is symbolically "shadowed" by Theresa Harris, who rarely leaves her side—that is, until the Stanwyck character's final atonement, when moral ambiguity (her "shadow") needs to be expelled from the narrative in order to confirm the correctness of her decision to give up material desire and return to her working-class roots as a married woman.

**Conclusion.** Because they suggested the need for a much more complex understanding of the position of black Americans within the transformation to modernity, the performances of blues songs by black female singers such as Bessie Smith were not used in Hollywood films. *St. Louis Blues* symbolically supports Hollywood's characterization of female sexuality as simultaneously transhistorical *and* the product of

modernity, aiding the conflation of race with sexual transgression and thereby creating a uniquely American discursive circuit for signifying female desire. As such, in the films discussed here, “transgressive” female sexuality is rooted both in the apparently eternal concept of the female temptress and in the historical causality of consumer desire defined as modern American. Upon arriving in the big city, Stanwyck’s and Harris’s characters in *Baby Face* watch a rich young woman in a fur coat climb into an expensive automobile, the fur coat and the automobile standing as two eminent symbols of American glamour, wealth, and modernity. Harris’s character simply gawks, and Stanwyck’s responds: “What I want to know is how did she get it.” The unspoken answer is “sex”—male sexual desire feeding female material desire—caught in an urban American web of class, race, and gender.

By 1937, the repeated use of *St. Louis Blues* (and of other songs of equivalent black urban origin) by filmmakers to represent “transgressive” female sexuality meant that it had accreted connotations for contemporary audiences of racial and sexual imperfection.<sup>65</sup> In *Stella Dallas*, these meanings are evoked to enable the filmmakers to suggest credibly to Stella’s daughter—against the evidence of her experience—that her mother is unworthy of her continued familial loyalty. However, because *St. Louis Blues* is double-coded in its address to both an exploitative and an exploited female sexuality, it maintains the audience’s sympathy for Stella as the abandoned wife who has lost out to another woman. Social and cultural convention demanded that Stella’s masquerade as a sexually active woman coded her as black. The repressed racial marking of film noir, detected by Lott and Kaplan, then, is not the product of genre. Rather, it is the product of a cultural tradition that determines that morally suspect, lower-class, sexualized women are represented as literal or figurative octoroons; a process of representation that is, in part, guaranteed through the use of songs such as *St. Louis Blues*.<sup>66</sup>

## Notes

I would like to thank Esther Sonnet, whose critical engagement with this essay left me dizzy, Frank Krutnik, who helped sharpen the argument, and the following individuals who also gave me their time and comments: Steve Neale, Lee Grieveson, Linda Ruth Williams, Peter Kramer, Mike Hammond, and Daniel Bernardi.

1. Eric Lott, “The Whiteness of Film Noir,” in Mike Hill, ed., *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 82.
2. Manthia Diawara, “Noir by Noirs: Toward a New Realism in Black Cinema,” in Joan Copjec, ed., *Shades of Noir* (London: Verso, 1993), 262.
3. 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 E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Women in Film Noir*, new ed. (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 185.
4. On race and film noir, see also James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 233–53. Robert G. Porfirio examines the soundtrack in film noir but links it to German Expressionism rather than to its immediate American context, and he has little to say about race, gender, or Hollywood’s use of jazz in the 1930s. Porfirio, “Dark Jazz: Music in the *Film Noir*,” in *Film Noir Reader 2* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1999), 177–88.

5. *Stella Dallas* is a key film in the debates on women and melodrama. See, for example, Linda Williams, "‘Something Else besides a Mother’: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 1 (fall 1984): 2–27; Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928-1942* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 132–49; and Anna Siomopoulos, "‘I Didn’t Know Anyone Could Be So Unselfish’: Liberal Empathy, the Welfare State, and King Vidor’s *Stella Dallas*," *Cinema Journal* 38, no. 4 (summer 1999): 3–23.
6. In the *Lux Radio Theatre* adaptation of *Stella Dallas*, broadcast on October 11, 1937, *St. Louis Blues* is used in the equivalent scene; its significance is underscored by the absence of the visual in detailing Stella’s masquerade.
7. Lott, "The Whiteness of Film Noir," 92, and Kaplan, "The ‘Dark Continent’ of Film Noir," 186.
8. Chip Rhodes, *Structures of the Jazz Age: Mass Culture, Progressive Education, and Racial Disclosures in American Modernism* (London: Verso, 1998), 188–89.
9. Gary Giddins considers *St. Louis Blues* to be the "most frequently recorded song in America during the quarter century between the two world wars." Giddins, *Visions of Jazz: The First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 29.
10. Ethel Waters, *His Eye Is on the Sparrow* (1951; reprint, London: Jazz Book Club, 1958), 72. Charles Anderson is one of the many "lost" performers in a history of African American vaudeville that is still to be written. He recorded three sessions for the Okeh label in 1923, 1924, and 1928. He specialized in novelty yodel numbers (a mainstay of blackface vaudeville performers), mimicking contemporary female sopranos. He recorded *St. Louis Blues* in his final session, but it remains unissued. His issued recordings can be heard on *Eddie Heywood and the Blues Singers* (Document, DOCD-5380) and *Male Blues of the Twenties* (Document, DOCD-5532); they do not make for easy listening. Despite a much more productive and commercially successful recording career, Ethel Waters did not record the song until 1942. For a full discography of both artists, see Robert Dixon, John Goodrich, and Howard Rye, *Blues and Gospel Records, 1890-1943*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
11. See W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography* (1941; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 195–97.
12. Al Bernard’s recording of *St. Louis Blues* with the ODJB can be heard on *The Original Dixieland Jazz Band: The 75th Anniversary* (BMG, ND90650; 1992); Emmett Miller’s version and the parody is on *The Minstrel Man from Georgia* (Columbia, 483584 2; 1996); the Cotton Pickers’ *St. Louis Gal* is on the Original Memphis Five/Napoleon’s Emperors/The Cotton Pickers, 1928–29 (Timeless, CBC 1-049 Jazz; 1998).  
 Yet another blackface minstrel recording was by Roy Evans and is featured on *Blue Yodelers with Red Hot Accompanists* (Retrieval, RTR 79020; 1999). The recording is apparently the soundtrack of a 1929 MGM short. Other than the minstrel parodies, variations on the theme of *St. Louis Blues* were common currency in the late 1920s and 1930s, notably Mae West’s performance of Johnson and Coslow’s *When a St. Louis Woman Comes down to New Orleans*, as seen in Leo McCarey’s *Belle of the Nineties* (1934).
13. For a listing of jazz performances of *St. Louis Blues*, see Brian Rust, *Jazz Records, 1897-1942*, 5th ed. (Chigwell, Essex: Storyville, 1983).
14. David Schiff, *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 41.
15. For example, see Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (1968; reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 237.

16. Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 100.
17. To capitalize on the boogie-woogie craze, Handy copyrighted an Earl Hines arrangement, *Boogie-Woogie on St. Louis Blues*, which is included in W. C. Handy, ed., *Blues: An Anthology* (1926; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1990), 167–71. Hines's recording is collected on Various Artists, *A Left Hand of God: Boogie-Woogie* (Nostalgia: NOS 3682)
18. Unless otherwise noted, all lyric transcriptions are taken from Handy, *Blues*, 82–85.
19. Ian Whitcomb, *Irving Berlin and Ragtime America* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1988), 205.
20. Alan Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll* (1952; reprint, London: Pan Books, 1959), 215.
21. For example, see J. Martin Favor, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 1–24, 69–74.
22. Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 77.
23. *Ibid.*, 119–21.
24. *Ibid.*, 28–29.
25. *Ibid.*, 118, 119.
26. Quoted in Burton W. Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race, and Culture in Urban America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 168.
27. H. O. Brunn, *The Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band* (London: Jazz Book Club, 1963), 135.
28. Nick Tosches, *Country: The Twisted Roots of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 251.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Nick Tosches, "Emmett Miller: The Mystery Solved," *Journal of Country Music* 18, no. 3 (winter 1996): 34–35.
31. Annemarie Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide: The Female Impersonator in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy," in Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 249.
32. *Ibid.*, 245. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 26.
33. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), and Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). See also Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), which discusses Hollywood's use of blackface in a manner analogous to Rogin (53–94). Somewhat at odds with these writers, Peter Stanfield considers blackface performance in Hollywood's films as a nostalgic invocation of an American vernacular. Stanfield, "'An Octoroon in the Kindling': American Vernacular and Blackface Minstrelsy in 1930s Hollywood," *Journal of American Studies* 31, no. 3 (December 1997): 407–38. An edited version of this essay, retitled "From the Vulgar to the Refined: American Vernacular and Blackface Minstrelsy in *Showboat*," is in Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell, eds., *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond* (Exeter, U.K.: Intellect Press, 2000), 147–56.
34. Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 141.
35. W. T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 179.

36. Ibid., 107.
37. Ibid.
38. Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, 141. See also Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, 111–15, for a discussion of minstrelsy and whistling.
39. For more on the relationship between white singers and black music from this period, see Roger Hewitt, “Black through White: Hoagy Carmichael and the Cultural Reproduction of Racism,” *Popular Music* 3 (1983): 33–50. On blackface and jazz, see Berndt Ostendorf, “Minstrelsy and Early Jazz,” *Massachusetts Review* 20 (autumn 1979): 574–602. For a review of jazz biopics, which inevitably highlight the white influence on the development of the idiom, see Krin Gabbard, *Jammin’ at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 64–100. The Crosby and Ellington version of *St. Louis Blues* along with *Black Moonlight* is on *Bing Crosby, 1927 to 1934* (BBC CD 648, 1986), and *Mississippi Mud* is on *Bix Beiderbecke*, vol. 2, *At the Jazz Band Ball* (CBS 466967 2, 1990).
40. Gabbard, *Jammin’ at the Margins*, 160–203.
41. The longest version I have encountered is from 1956 by Louis Armstrong—close to nine minutes—on *Louis Armstrong Plays W. C. Handy* (Columbia/Legacy, CK 64925, 1997) with the vocals sung by Velma Middleton and Armstrong, but even this does not contain all the stanzas from Handy’s original and includes a number of stanzas unique to this version.
42. Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, eds., *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, rev. ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 384–405.
43. Waters, *His Eye Is on the Sparrow*, 73.
44. Gabbard, *Jammin’ at the Margins*, 166.
45. For the fullest account of the film’s production, see Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 204–7. The film’s soundtrack can be heard on Bessie Smith, *The Final Chapter: The Complete Recordings*, vol. 5 (C2K 57546 Columbia/Legacy, 1996). The film has been released on video as part of Kino Video’s *The Paramount Musical Shorts, 1927-1941*.
46. Gabbard, *Jammin’ at the Margins*, 166.
47. Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 119.
48. Ibid., 61.
49. James Naremore, “Uptown Folk: Blackness and Entertainment in *Cabin in the Sky*,” in Krin Gabbard, ed., *Representing Jazz* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 169–92, and Adam Knee, “Doubling, Music, and Race in *Cabin in the Sky*,” in Gabbard, *Representing Jazz*, 193–204.
50. Naremore, “Uptown Folk,” 170.
51. Knee, “Doubling, Music, and Race,” 196.
52. Jennifer DeVere Brody, *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 57.
53. Quoted in Gubar, *Racechanges*, 16–17.
54. Quoted in Rhodes, *Structures of the Jazz Age*, 188.
55. For further discussion of Stanwyck’s early-to-mid-1930s star persona, see Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928-1942* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), and Richard Maltby, “Baby Face or How Joe Breen



- Made Barbara Stanwyck Atone for Causing the Wall Street Crash," *Screen* 27, no. 2 (March/April 1986): 22–45.
56. According to one of her biographers, when sixteen-year-old Harlean Harlow Carpenter (Jean Harlow) married Charles McGrew II, *St. Louis Blues* was playing on the radio. David Stein, *Bombshell: The Life and Death of Jean Harlow* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 26.
  57. Quoted in Hugh Fordin, *The World of Entertainment: Hollywood's Greatest Musicals* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 121–22.
  58. Sigmund Spaeth, *A History of Popular Music in America* (New York: Random House, 1948), 441.
  59. Henry Cohen, ed., *The Public Enemy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 73.
  60. Jelly Roll Morton also claimed authorship of *Hesitating Blues*; his risqué version is heard on *The Library of Congress Recordings*, vol. 1 (Rounder, CD1091; 1993).
  61. See Peter Stanfield, "'Extremely Dangerous Material': Hollywood and the Ballad of *Frankie and Johnny*," in Daniel Bernardi, ed., *Classic Whiteness and the Hollywood Studio System* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 442–65.
  62. For more on Johnson and his *Phonograph Blues*, see Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music*, 4th rev. ed. (New York: Plume, 1997), 23. In *Come Up and See Me Sometime*, her 1934 parody of Mae West, Ethel Waters sings: "You'll be at ease, you can relax and stay as long as you please/ Just bring a needle for my talking machine—get what I mean?—and we can dance in between/ Come up and see me sometime." The song is collected on *Ethel Waters, 1929-1939* (Timeless, CBC 1-007, 1992). Blues yodeler Cliff Carlisle also uses the phonograph metaphor in his 1936 recording of *Nasty Swing*: "Wind my motor honey, I've got a double-spring/ Put the needle in the groove and do that nasty swing." It is collected on *Blues Yodeler and Steel Guitar Wizard* (Arhoolie, CD 7039; 1996).
  63. For a more detailed discussion of Hollywood and Orientalism, see Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar, eds., *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1997), and Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
  64. For a broader discussion of the cultural impact of jazz on the American imagination, see Kathy J. Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
  65. *St. Louis Blues* was also featured in *Dancers in the Dark* (David Burton, 1932), starring Miriam Hopkins and Jack Oakie. David Meeker, *Jazz in the Movies: A Guide to Jazz Musicians 1817–1977* (London: Talisman, 1977) records the use of the song in twenty short films between 1929 and 1952. During the 1940s, the song was featured in *Birth of the Blues* (Victor Schertzinger, 1941), starring Bing Crosby and apparently based on the story of the ODJB; *Is Everybody Happy?* (Charles Barton, 1943), starring the Ted Lewis band; *So's Your Uncle* (Universal, 1943); *Jam Session* (Columbia, 1944), which features Louis Armstrong; in the Tom Tyler series western *Sing Me a Song of Texas* (1945), in which it is played by the Hoosier Hot Shots; the song's racial cast is further confirmed by its use in *Bataan* (Tay Garnett, 1943): as American troops prepare to blow up a bridge, a Negro soldier (Kenneth Spencer) calms his nerves by humming *St. Louis Blues*, *Do You Love Me?* (Gregory Ratoff, 1946), and *For Heaven's Sake* (George Seaton, 1950).
  66. Apart from the Bessie Smith short, two other films were titled after the song, both made by Paramount. The first was made in 1939 and starred Dorothy Lamour and

Lloyd Nolan; the second, in 1958, was a biopic of Handy, starring Nat King Cole. The latter all but denies the song's origins as it moves with relentless pace from vulgarity to refinement—from a squeaky-clean honky-tonk to a concert hall. Outside Hollywood, *St. Louis Blues* could still resonate as a signifier of black urban vernacular. Chester Himes uses the couplet “Black gal make a freight train jump de track/But a yaller gal make a preacher Ball de Jack,” among other allusions to a black musical vernacular—spirituals, blues, jazz, rock ‘n’ roll, the latter heard emanating from “nightmare-lighted jukeboxes.” Himes, *A Rage in Harlem* (1957; reprint, Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1996), 129.