

FREDI WASHINGTON
BLACK ENTERTAINERS AND THE “DOUBLE V” CAMPAIGN

THESIS

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by

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DEDICATION

For Fredi. May we never forget why she chose to fight.

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INTRODUCTION

SHADES OF BLACKNESS: IN THE HEART OF HARLEM

Early in her career, black performer Fredi Washington had to decide whether she would be the personal architect of her own career, or whether she would accept white patronage. During the 1920s, white millionaire Otto Kahn offered to finance Washington's formal dramatic education if she agreed to "pass" for French. During the 1920s, Khan, who had made his fortune on Wall Street, owned one of New York's most lavish neo-Roman style mansions. Like many other men of wealth and status, he was a patron of black arts. He reportedly invested two million of his own dollars in the financing of the Metropolitan Opera House. Khan is said to have

played a singularly significant role in the cultural history of his time, to the extent that he perfectly fit Zora Neale Hurston's term "Negrotarian," denoting humanitarian whites who supported talent striving for artistic recognition under the umbrella of the Harlem Renaissance.¹

Washington turned down Khan's offer, preferring to secure artistic recognition on her own terms. Khan allegedly once told her, "You look French. You could easily be French." To which she responded by saying, "I want to be what I am, nothing else." Washington's skin color was often a point of controversy and misunderstanding for others but never for herself. At the height of her film career she was cast in the blockbuster film, *Imitation of Life*, in which she played Peola, a young woman who

¹ "New York Architecture Images-Upper East Side: The Convent of the Sacred Heart School," <http://www.nycarchitecture.com/UES/UES070.htm> (accessed on 2 February 2005).

renounced her mother and denied her heritage in order to “pass” for white. However, in real life, Fredi battled to be recognized for her artistic talents as a black woman, despite her ability to look French.²

The controversial character Peola was based on a literary figure commonly used in late nineteenth century and early twentieth-century fiction. Lydia Maria Child, abolitionist and prolific nineteenth century writer, was the first to introduce the tale of the “Tragic Mulatta,” a woman born of “mixed,” white and black blood. Child authored hundreds of literary pieces, many of which were anti-slavery works. She used the character type in two of her short stories, *The Quadroons* (1841) and *Slavery’s Pleasant Homes* (1842), to attract white female readers to her anti-slavery literature. Child figured that white women could identify with a female character that looked white but was legally black by their common bond as women oppressed by a white male dominated patriarchal society. Child’s “mulattas” were “tragic” because they represented white male sexual exploitation of black female slaves.³

In the period just preceding Fredi’s appearance in *Imitation of Life*, the “tragic mulatta” image took on more racially-defined meanings. The mulatta’s destiny was depicted as an unavoidable tragedy due to her conflicting, “mixed,” blood. Neither “pure” white, nor “pure” black, the mulatta could never fully belong to either group and was often mentally torn about where she belonged. Peola was a cinematic version of this “tragic mulatta,” so troubled about being regarded as black that she decided to live as a white woman. Peola’s story forced American audiences to grapple with the issue of race

² “Fredi Washington Refuses to be Anyone but Fredi,” *Daily Compass*, 14 February 1949, Fredi Washington Papers, New Orleans, LA, Amistad Research Center.

³ Carolyn L. Karcher, *The First Woman of the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 320-343.

in their society Fredi, however, went further: she was a light-skinned black woman who tirelessly challenged the meanings assigned to race and skin color in theater, in film, and in American society.

Fredi Washington was both an entertainer and resident of Harlem. She arrived in New York after leaving Holy Providence Boarding School on the Motherhouse grounds of St. Elizabeth's Convent in Cornwell Heights, Pennsylvania. She was born Fredericka Carolyn Washington on December 23, 1903, in Savannah, Georgia, to Robert T. Washington and Harriet Walker Ward Washington. Unlike many blacks living in the South at the turn of the century, Fredi's parents were not field workers. Her father was a postal worker, her mother, a home maker. Both were described in the 1910 manuscript census as literate "mulattoes." Fredi departed the South in 1917, shortly after her mother's death, when she and her younger sister Isabelle were sent North to Philadelphia to attend Holy Providence. The girls were sent to the boarding school because their father was unable to care for them alone, and in Isabelle's words, wanted to "find a good place" for them.⁴

Holy Providence was not a typical boarding school; it was indeed a "good place." The school was run by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament (SBS) an order of nuns founded by Katharine Drexel. Born on November 26, 1858, into a wealthy white family,

⁴ Archivist biographical notes, Fredi Washington Papers; U.S. Federal Manuscript Census, 1910, Heritage Quest Online, <http://80persi.heritagequestonline.com.libproxy.txstate.edu/hqoweb/library/do/census/results/image?surname=washington&givenname=robert&series=13&state=12&countyid=787&hitcount=6&p=1&urn=urn%3Aproquest%3AUS%3Bcensus%3B4801491%3B40194147%3B13%3B12&searchtype=1&offset=4> (accessed 12 July 2004). Information on Holy Providence was obtained via an electronic message from Stephanie Morris, archivist for the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, 8 July 2004. Isabelle Powell, interviewed by author, via telephone, San Marcos, Tx., 23 December 2005. During this conversation Powell confirmed that their father placed them in the boarding school because their mother was dead and he wanted "to find a good place" for her and Fredi.

Drexel had been taught by her parents that “wealth was meant to be shared with others.” Drexel became a millionaire upon the death of her banker-philanthropist father, from whom she inherited a fortune exceeding twenty million dollars. While traveling in the northwestern United States, she was exposed to the plight of many Native Americans living on reservations in the region. She became equally concerned with the oppression faced by black Americans in the southern and eastern United States and decided to do something about it.⁵

Initially, Drexel financed Native American missions and schools as a lay person. It was Pope Leo XIII who suggested that she not simply share her wealth but also herself, as a missionary. When she decided to give her life to God, she did so “through service to Black and Native Americans.” In 1888, Drexel was approved by Bishop O’Connor to become a nun. He also suggested that she found her own order of nuns. On November 8, 1889, she accepted her first vows of “poverty, chastity and obedience,” as required by the Sisters of Mercy convent in Pittsburgh, where she prepared for her vows and her ministry. On February 12, 1891, she established the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, which was devoted to ministering to black and Native Americans. In 1892, Mother Katharine, along with “thirteen companions,” established the home of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament at St. Elizabeth’s Convent in Cornwell Heights, Pennsylvania. Holy Providence opened in September of the following year. Katharine Drexel’s humanitarian vision drove her to take a stand against “systematic justice issues of inequality, racism, hatred, violence, greed and prejudice in Church and Society.”⁶

⁵ “Saint Katharine Drexel: A Life Summary,” <http://www.katharinedrexel.org/summary.html> (accessed 3 January 2006).

Drexel was uncompromisingly committed to opening up opportunities for black children which led to her founding a “ladder” educational system in the Deep South for black students. The idea behind the “ladder” system was to train black educators who would then “staff schools for black children in rural Louisiana.” In 1915, Drexel purchased the former campus of Louisiana’s Southern University, which had been relocated outside New Orleans, and established Xavier University, a black, Catholic campus. Teachers of Louisiana’s Black parish schools encouraged their students to attend Xavier University’s Preparatory School, which then transferred them into Xavier University. For the first few decades after Drexel opened the university, Xavier served as “teacher-training” school.⁷

As the older sister, Fredi was sent to Holy Providence first, in February 1917, and was joined there by her sister Isabelle in July that same year. At their new school and home, the girls were taught the “usual academic subjects along with sewing, laundry and other useful skills.” It is highly likely that the Washington sisters understood Mother Katharine Drexel’s commitment to social justice in the church and society. They were baptized as Catholics while attending Holy Providence, and Fredi remained a devout Catholic for the rest of her life. The girls stayed at the boarding school for one or two years and then went to New York City to live with their maternal grandmother.⁸

⁶ Ibid [first quote]; “Saint Katharine Drexel: From Bensalem to the World,” <http://www.phillyburbs.com/drexel/bio.shtml> (accessed 12 March 2005) [second and third quote]. “The Legacy, the Blueprint,” <http://www.katharinedrexel.org/social.html> (accessed 8 June 2004) [fourth quote].

⁷ “The Legacy, the Blueprint,” <http://www.katharinedrexel.org/social.html> (accessed 8 June 2004) [ladder quote]. “Saint Katharine Drexel: From Bensalem to the World,” <http://www.phillyburbs.com/drexel/bio.shtml> (8 June 2004) [first quoted phrase]. “The Legacy, the Blueprint,” <http://www.katharinedrexel.org/social.html> (accessed 8 June 2004) [teacher-training quote].

Fredi briefly attended Julia Richmond High School in New York City, but was forced to drop out during her first year “to make her own living.” Her first job, as a stock girl in a dress shop, did not pay a decent wage; nor did her second job at W.C. Handy and Harry Pace’s Black Swan Record Company where she served as a “typist-bookkeeper.” Working at the Black Swan production company provided Fredi with first-hand exposure to the world of entertainment. She quickly realized that show girls made more money than girls who worked in clerk or secretarial positions, and later claimed that for this reason alone, she tried her luck with show business.⁹

Fredi’s entry into show business was directly connected to the development of Harlem, which emerged as an extraordinary center of black urban culture during the 1920s. Soon after World War I ended, Harlem became the home of an outpouring of black art, literature, music, and theater. In 1921, *Shuffle Along* was the first all-black musical to hit Broadway and it took white audiences by storm. One commenter noted that the show marked a new trend in “white fascination with black culture.” At any given time, Harlem was filled with foreign dignitaries, night-life frequenters, entertainers, and of course, its residents.¹⁰

There were even a number of “white-only” supper-clubs located in the heart of the black Mecca. The Cotton Club was the largest, most lavish, and expensive nightclub, featuring black talent that catered to white audiences. Seven blocks up from the Cotton Club, located on Lenox Avenue, was the Savoy Ballroom, known as a place where the

⁸ Electronic message from Stephanie Morris to author, 8 July 2004 [quote]. “Headlines and Footlights,” *Peoples Voice*, 11 March 1944. Isabelle Powell, interviewed by author, via telephone, San Marcos, Tx., 23 December 2005.

⁹ “Fredi Washington Our Four Star Gal,” *People’s Voice*, 14 August 1943.

¹⁰ *I’ll Make Me a World: Without Fear or Shame 1920-1937*, prod. Henry Hampton, 60 min., PBS Video, 1999.

“music never stopped.” The Savoy was considered Harlem’s most popular spot for a night of dancing. The ballroom was so massive that it occupied the entire block between 140th and 141st streets.¹¹

In later years, Washington reminisced about the days of prohibition and what the “day-to-day experiences” were like for artists before they became famous. With “sweet nostalgia,” she recalled a time in 1925 when jazz composer Duke Ellington played in a cellar called Club Kentucky, which she commented, was annually burned to the ground. According to rumors, Washington reported, fire insurance covered the periodic fires, paid nuisance creditors, and supplemented lost income during summer slumps. This was before Ellington and his band had begun to earn a good living off their talents. Sonny Greer, commonly known as the “Sweet Singing Drummer” of the band, was a ladies’ man, according to Washington, who could “talk his way into anybody’s pocket or pot” and typically “drummed up” meals for the rest of the band. During the “good old prohibition days,” she also noted, the band would stop at the home of a woman who lived on 135th Street off Lenox Avenue. There, they were served a meal and an alcoholic drink, which the woman provided “to the right parties after hours.”¹²

In 1924, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League (NUL) co-hosted a formal dinner in celebration of black American writers. The two organizations invited America’s most prestigious “white writers, publishers, and philanthropists.” According to museum

¹¹ Steve Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 126-139. The club was owned and operated by Owen Madden, reportedly an established and well-known mobster. It is also reported that in the Fall of 1923, Madden opened the Cotton Club, according to Watson, to serve as “the East Coast outlet for his bootleg beer.”

¹² “Headlines and Footlights,” *People’s Voice*, 23 October 1943.

director, Edmund Gaither, this gathering of leading blacks and whites was held by the NAACP and the NUL for the purpose of creating a bridge between black cultural creativity, “unduly confined,” and publishers and philanthropists who could help young black talent gain exposure to mainstream America.¹³

At some point during the dinner, Paul Kellog, editor of *Survey Graphic*, a magazine that featured essays on social issues, asked Charles S. Johnson, director of the NUL, if he would collaborate on a project that would devote an entire issue of his magazine to black writers and artists. Johnson agreed, and a year later, in March 1925, the Harlem issue of *Survey Graphic*, edited by Alain Locke under the subtitle *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro*, was published.¹⁴

In response to the public’s increased interest in black talent, the NAACP and the NUL encouraged young black writers to enter literary contests sponsored by the two organizations. Winners would have their works published in the NAACP’s *Crisis* and the NUL’s *Opportunity* magazines. Talented but relatively unknown black men and women such as poet Langston Hughes and novelist Zora Neale Hurston, entered their poems and short stories into the contests. Writer Dorothy West, who won a prize at the age of eighteen, said that she and many other young writers were “all very excited....living on hope,” and hoped that one or more of them would get their big break and become a great American writer.¹⁵

¹³ *I’ll Make Me a World*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

These writing contests signified to black artists that they should seize the opportunity and participate in the New Negro movement. Some artists went to Harlem just to contribute to or experience this creative outpouring. In a large sense, the movement was about creating new communities and new cultural representations. As Edmund Gaither observed, the participants gave a “face,” a “voice,” a “dance,” and a “step” which brought to life the “new personality” of the New Negro.¹⁶

After the Harlem *Survey Graphic* issue, Alain Locke published his anthology, *The New Negro*, which sought to define the New Negro. Various essays covered multiple topics from black roots in Africa to the black middle class and black womanhood in white America. Locke dedicated the volume to the “Younger Generation,” who he hoped would follow the trend of using art to advance the race.¹⁷

W. E. B. DuBois was one of the most vocal of those who believed that art should be used for social protest. In fact, many scholars have commented that DuBois thought art that did not carry a social message was worthless. Poet Claude McKay, a member of the younger generation who contributed to *The New Negro*, rejected DuBois’ position on grounds that the production of art, at all times, should be driven by freedom of expression. By the 1940s, driven by political issues of the day, Fredi Washington would agree with Dubois.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke, 1st ed., (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), dedication page; *I’ll Make Me a World*.

¹⁸ *I’ll Make Me a World*.

CHAPTER I

REFUSING TO 'PASS' FOR WHITE

Fredi Washington was not just simply an actress. She was a performing artist. Although she was initially drawn to the world of entertainment because it offered a more lucrative living than did clerical work, she quickly exhibited extraordinary ability and talent, especially for an untrained entertainer. Her first appearance was as a chorus dancer, which led to her being cast in plays, musicals, films, radio programs, and a television show. Although Washington's career spanned nearly thirty years and varied tremendously, she is today most widely known for her role as Peola in the 1934 film *Imitation of Life*. And despite her film success, Fredi preferred working on the live stage rather than in film. To understand why, the following pages trace her performance career and highlight those factors that most shaped her feelings about her career.

Most of Fredi's early stage appearances were as a dancer in supper clubs, musical revues, and on road tours. Beginning in 1922, she worked as a chorus dancer at Reisenweber's Café, a popular New York City nightspot where the first jazz reportedly was played in the region. The Café was located on the corner of Columbus circle, a street often compared to Broadway and known as "the place to be." That same year, Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle launched a road tour of their Broadway musical, *Shuffle Along*. Fredi joined the all-black cast as a chorus dancer, attracted by the promise of earning thirty-five dollars a week. Located on W. 44th Street in Manhattan just blocks away from

Broadway and Greenwich Village, the legendary Club Alabam', was advertised as having progressed "in the space of two short years, from a Night Club of local renown to an institution of international reputation." Here, Fredi began as a chorus girl, proved herself capable, and was promoted to principal dancer in no time. In 1926, Producer Lee Shubert noticed Fredi's outstanding artistic ability and recommended her for the female lead opposite Paul Robeson in the Broadway drama, *Black Boy*.¹

After the run of *Black Boy* was completed, and "With no serious productions for black actors in view," Fredi formed *Moiret and Fredi*, a ballroom dance team composed of herself and partner Al Moore, also a light-skinned black entertainer. The dancing duo were regularly featured at Cotton Club engagements, various supper clubs in New York City, and from 1927 to 1929 *Moiret and Fredi* toured major European cities in England, France, Belgium, and Germany. One reviewer for a Monte-Carlo newspaper praised the performance given by the "remarkable couple of American dancers," at Café de Paris. In particular, the reviewer hailed Fredi's eloquent moves as "Terpsichorean Art, carried out in its most perfect expression." Her artistic dance abilities, as described by the reviewer, left one so "fascinated by her art that the woman herself is entirely forgotten and only her graceful movements and poses claim one's notice."²

Reminiscing about the night view from her hotel room on the French Riviera, Fredi said "It was as if someone had thrown a handful of diamonds into the water, it was so beautiful; and here I was, thinking of home, the boardinghouses with no hot water, the

¹ Warren Shaw, "Columbus Circle, the Heyday!," <http://www.nyctourist.com/history2.htm>, (accessed 3 January 2006) *People's Voice*, 14 August 1943. Advertisement for Club Alabam', n. d., box 1, Fredi Washington Papers. "Fredi Washington, 90, Actress, Broke Ground for Black Artist," *New York Times*, 30 June 1994, p. D21.

² Margo Jefferson, "Vintage Glimpses of a Lost Theatrical World," *New York Times*, 20 October 1996, p. H1; Review of *Moiret and Fredi* performance, Monte-Carlo newspaper, Fredi Washington Papers, full date and title illegible, 1928.

bed bugs, the life we Negroes had to live, and how much had to be changed; and here I was crying in front of so much beauty.” Such contrasts helped Fredi to realize at an early age that the fight for racial equality would have to be waged throughout the United States.³

It likely would have served Fredi’s performance career better had she stayed abroad. *Moiret and Fredi* performed in the United States, but under a totally different set of circumstances than they experienced abroad. Most of the top dinner clubs, hotels, and ballrooms, such as the legendary Cotton Club or Club Alabam’ in New York City, catered to white patrons in search of an “exotic” show; hence, Club Alabam’ offered “Fantasies,” a series of productions that promised a genuine and original exhibition of the “innate talent of the Colored race” combined with other “unusual features.” *Moiret and Fredi* even made their way into the world famous St. Regis upscale hotel in New York City. One observer noticed that until 1943, “they were the only Negro dancers to fill an engagement” ever at that hotel.⁴

After Fredi returned to the United States and the theatrical scene in New York, she experienced seasons of unpredictable successes or failures and one-niters. In 1929, she was cast as a dancer in the musical *Great Day*, produced by Vincent Youmans, which had a short Broadway run lasting less than one month and featuring only thirty-six shows. In August 1929, *Moiret and Fredi* replaced Paul and Thelma Meers in the musical revue *Hot Chocolates*, which had a longer run of four months. In 1930, Fredi appeared in *Sweet*

³ “Vintage Glimpses,” *Times*, 20 October 1996, p. H1. Washington’s statements were recounted by Jean-Claude Baker, an associate of Josephine Baker. He toured with Baker and also assumed her last name, but was not officially adopted by her.

⁴ Advertisement for Club Alabam’, n.d., box 1, Fredi Washington Papers; “Our Four Star Gal,” *People’s Voice*, 14 August 1943.

Chariot, a drama depicting the life of Marcus Garvey, which closed after only three shows. On September 16, 1931, *Singin' the Blues* opened at Broadway's Liberty Theatre. This was a musical drama that featured Fredi among the cast; however, her sister Isabelle had the leading female role. In 1932, Fredi joined a dance team and hit the road touring the South with Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle's orchestra. The dance team also appeared with Duke Ellington's famous orchestra in major cities. Fredi's last stage appearance before being cast in a major film production was in Hall Johnson's *Run Little Chillun*, a folk drama set in a small southern town. *Run Little Chillun* had a cast of more than one hundred on its opening night, March 1, 1933, and featured 126 performances. It closed on June 17, 1933. Fredi did not appear on stage again until 1939, when she was cast in *Mamba's Daughters*, opposite stage sensation Ethel Waters.⁵

Washington's first film was a nineteen-minute musical short, *Black and Tan Fantasy*, in which she starred opposite jazz extraordinaire Duke Ellington. The film, an early precursor of today's music video, was primarily a showcase of Ellington's orchestra and music. Washington appeared in the short as Ellington's girlfriend who is stricken with a heart condition that causes her to collapse on stage while dancing to the jazzy tunes of his orchestra. After the death scare, Washington's character lay upon her sickbed

⁵ Fredi Washington Resume, 29 August 1950, box 1, Fredi Washington Papers. Internet Broadway Database (IBDB) <http://www.ibdb.com/production.asp?ID=10960> (accessed 27 December 2005) [*Great Day*]. Article clipped in Fredi Washington Papers announcing *Moiret and Fredi* as replacement for the Meers. IBDB <http://www.ibdb.com/production.asp?ID=10906> (accessed 27 December 2005) [*Hot Chocolates*]. Fredi Washington Resume, 29 August 1950, box 1, Fredi Washington Papers. IBDB <http://www.ibdb.com/production.asp?ID=11245> (accessed 27 December 2005) [*Sweet Chariot*]. Various clippings, Fredi Washington Papers. IBDB <http://www.ibdb.com/production.asp?ID=11165> (accessed 27 December 2005) [*Singin' the Blues*]. IBDB <http://www.ibdb.com/production.asp?ID=11728> (accessed 27 December 2005) [*Run Little Chillun*].

and told Ellington, “play me the Black and Tan Fantasy.” He did, and the film-short ended.⁶

In the midst of the uncertainty, promise, and hope that characterized the Depression years, Fredi both married and made her Hollywood debut. She and Lawrence Brown, a trombonist in Duke Ellington’s orchestra, married in 1933, while on a southern tour with Ellington’s orchestra and composer Noble Sissle. A career-changing event happened that same year. Washington was cast in not one, but four films, three of which were Hollywood productions: Paramount’s *Emperor Jones* (1933); Jamaica BWI’s *Drums of the Jungle* (1933); Universal’s *Imitation of Life* (1934); and Twentieth Century Fox’s *One Mile from Heaven* (1937).⁷

Fredi is most famous for her role as “Peola” in the film *Imitation of Life*. Universal’s film production of Fannie Hurst’s novel was groundbreaking on many fronts. To begin, it depicted female economic independence. Two women, one white, one black, both widows, each with a small daughter, unexpectedly cross paths, engage in a joint economic venture, and become millionaires. The film begins when Delilah (Louise Beavers), is employed as a maid by Beatrice Pullman (Claudette Colbert). After “Mrs. Bea” tastes one mouthful of Delilah’s pancakes, she suggests they open a diner and sell the pancakes for profit. They do just that, enjoy enormous success, and end up marketing and mass-producing boxes of “Aunt Delilah’s pancake flour.”⁸

⁶ Fredi Washington Resume, 29 August 1950, box 1, Fredi Washington Papers. *Black and Tan* <http://tesla.liketelevision.com/liketelevision/tuner.php?channel=206&format=movie&theme=guide> (accessed 15 June 2004).

⁷ Resume, 29 August 1950, box 1, Fredi Washington Papers.

⁸ *Imitation of Life*, prods. Carl Laemmle Jr., John M. Stahl, 111 min., 1934.

Never before had a black woman appeared in a Hollywood film as an economically secure business partner of a white counterpart. Despite her success, however, Delilah remained a servant to Bea, even after becoming rich off her pancake recipe, and adhered to the “mammy” stereotype throughout the film. While Delilah’s economic partnership with Bea was unusual, however, her character was nowhere near as controversial as that of Peola, her daughter.⁹

Fredi Washington played the role of Peola, a young light-skinned black woman who wants access to the opportunities available to whites, and therefore decides to “pass.” Shortly after Peola goes off to college, the registrar’s office reports that she has disappeared from campus. Delilah and Beatrice journey South to search for her. They find Peola disguised as a white woman and working as a cashier at a restaurant. Delilah, who is dark-skinned, approaches Peola and pleads with her to return home. At the cash register, and in the presence of white customers, Peola openly denies that Delilah could possibly be her mother. Later, at home, Peola tries to explain what transpired at the restaurant, telling her mother, “You don’t know what it’s like to be black and look white.” Peola decides to permanently “pass” for white after making this statement to her mother. She tells her mother that in order for her to successfully assume a new identity as a white woman, Delilah must not contact or look for her, and if they pass each other on the street they cannot acknowledge that they are mother and daughter. Peola disappears and Delilah dies shortly thereafter from a broken heart. Peola attends her mother’s funeral, racked by guilt at having abandoned her mother.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Fredi Washington and Louise Beaver's roles in *Imitation of Life* were character types routinely assigned to black actors and actresses. The five main types were the Tom, Coon, Tragic Mulatta, Mammy, and Buck. Each perpetuated a stereotype of underclass. Portrayals of black men depicted them as prone to fiendish criminality or unbending docility. Black women were usually portrayed as mammies, domestic figures who were happiest when tending to white people and their children. Peola, however, was a tragic mulatta, "tainted" with black blood and therefore unfit to be white, yet so light-skinned she could not accept being regarded as black.¹¹

In most instances, mulattoes were portrayed as senseless, lacking humanity, or as socially unfit. Some black entertainers made a career out of being typecast. Hattie McDaniel, a career "mammy," was the first black to win an Oscar in 1939. She won the category for best supporting actress for her role as "Mammy" in *Gone with the Wind*. In retrospect, McDaniel's Oscar affirmed the servile role that blacks would most commonly be assigned, for a long time to come, on the silver screen.¹²

Fredi Washington was an experienced and accomplished stage entertainer before being cast in *Imitation of Life*; nevertheless, being chosen to play the role of Peola was a truly extraordinary opportunity. Donald Bogle witnessed first hand how this newcomer to films managed to be cast in such a groundbreaking and important Hollywood film. According to Bogle, famed Universal Studios director John Stahl launched an unprecedented quest to locate the perfect "White Negro" girl. Bogle remembered that

¹¹ Donald Bogle, *Toms Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. (Continuum: New York, 1992), 4-9.

¹² Edward Mapp, *African Americans and the Oscar. Seven Decades of Struggle and Achievement*. (Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2003), 9.

Stahl “was making rounds, hitting the colored clubs and showing up at small theaters” all over the country. Members of Black Hollywood could not figure out why Stahl was spending so much time observing young black actresses. All confusion among them ceased, however, when a headline appeared in the *California Eagle* that read: “Universal to Film Story on Passing for White.” The article that followed explained that Universal planned to produce a film based on Fannie Hurst’s novel, *Imitation of Life*. Black Hollywood entertainers realized that Stahl was looking for a light-skinned black female, but curiosity still ran high as to who would be cast.¹³

More news about Universal’s big plans appeared a few weeks later in the *California Eagle*, which announced Universal’s intention to send “East for colored girl in big part.” A newspaper article entitled, “Noted Director on Strangest Casting Mission on Record,” reported that:

John M. Stahl, Universal star director, left for New York . . . It is Stahl’s intention and hope to find a talented young mulatto or quadroon, who could pass for white . . . He will make an extensive quest through Harlem night clubs in New York, believing that somewhere in that renowned colored belt he will find the right girl.¹⁴

Yet another article indicated that Stahl was still on his “strange” quest. Sounding like a casting call, the second article declared that “Director John Stahl requires in the leading role a young girl who must be of Negro blood but must be absolutely white, a ‘throwback’ of several generations” These were the qualifications and Stahl warned everyone that “she must fill them completely.” Stahl could have cast a white actress as Peola, as would later be done in the 1959 remake of *Imitation of Life*; however, he was certain that he would find what he was looking for. He commented to

¹³ Donald Bogle, *Bright Boulevards, Bold Dreams*. (Ballantine Books: New York, 2005), 127.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

the press that because Peola was the daughter of a black mammy she had to be biologically black. “*Imitation of Life* is now being prepared for filming,” he announced, “and before the other roles are cast I will be glad to interview at the studio any white Negro girl.” To his mind, a “girl of Caucasian birth” simply could not be used for the part.¹⁵

The dramatic climax of the film was found in Peola’s dilemma. Apparently, Peola was originally intended to be the leading character, but that idea was dropped. Certainly Stahl’s actions, and the storyline of *Imitation of Life*, indicated that Peola was central to the story. In all likelihood, Peola’s character was marginalized to ensure there would be no censorship of the film. A closer look at debates centering around the character of Peola indicate that it nearly caused total cancellation of production of the controversial film.

Film scholar Susan Courtney has studied *Imitation of Life* from the approach of how race was “picturized” and censored in accordance with Hollywood production codes. Courtney analyzed the correspondence between officials at Universal and the Hollywood Production Code Administration (PCA) to identify why the production of *Imitation of Life* was initially rejected. The PCA was the agency responsible for interpreting and enforcing Hollywood’s regulations for film production. Initially, the PCA found *Imitation of Life* to be in violation of the “Code clause covering miscegenation, in spirit, if not in fact.” That clause prohibited any display of miscegenation as “forbidden,” which it defined as a sexual “relationship between the white and black races.” In fact, the film did not depict any sexual relationship between a black and white person, but, as the PCA pointed out, it featured a “negro girl appearing as white” or a “white skinned negro girl”

¹⁵ Ibid., 129.

which implied that somewhere down the line there had been a racially-mixed sexual relationship.¹⁶

The PCA explicitly identified its problem with the script. In a memo dated March 9, 1934, the PCA noted that “this part of the plot—the action of the negro girl appearing as white--has a definite connection with the problem of miscegenation.” That same memo also declared that the story line was “based upon the very serious social problem which comes as a result of miscegenation.” That social problem must have been Peola’s racial identity crisis. As Courtney noted, it was Peola “appearing as white” that linked her to the taboo of miscegenation, not her desire for greater social opportunity. The Hollywood PCA was afraid that miscegenation was indirectly injected into the script, even though it did not appear in the form defined by the production codes. To determine whether Peola’s attempts to “pass” as white violated production codes on miscegenation, PCA officials in Hollywood consulted their New York staff office to ask what, if any, recommendations its officials might offer on how to solve their dilemma with the script. The New York staff disagreed that miscegenation was at issue. Instead, they argued that there was a “big problem” with the “subject matter . . . as a whole.” Even those at the New York offices who believed that no violation of the miscegenation code occurred in the script advised their counterparts “to persuade the company [Universal] to abandon its plan for production.”¹⁷

Instead, Universal decided to adjust the script to “avoid the inference that the leading character was a descendent of a white ancestor.” To achieve this, in the final

¹⁶ Susan Courtney, “Picturizing Race: Hollywood Censorship of Miscegenation and Production of Racial Visibility through *Imitation of Life*,” *Genders* 27, 1998 [journal on-line] http://www.genders.org/g27/g27_pr.html (accessed 10 November 2004).

¹⁷ Ibid.

script Delilah describes Peola's father as a light-skinned *Black* man. After months of haggling, Universal's controversial script was approved by the PCA. As a result, a film critic for the *Literary Digest* commented that the film's "most dramatic theme" had been downplayed because the studio "fears its social implications." As we have seen, however, it was the PCA, not Universal, that objected to what the character of Peola implied about interracial sexual relations. The critic described Peola as a "neglected character," relegated to a subplot which in truth was the "real story" and "should have dominated the picture."¹⁸

In recounting her recollections to Donald Bogle, Washington told him that she had received either a phone call or telegram from Universal asking her to contact the studio in New York. She soon auditioned for the role of Peola, but heard nothing back from Universal for at least four months. So much time passed between her audition and her next contact from the studio that she said she "forgot about it." More than likely, the lapse in time occurred during the period in which officials at Universal and the PCA were working out their differences over the script.¹⁹

In April 1934, prior to the filming of *Imitation of Life* but after Washington's audition, Fay Jackson of the Associated Negro Press (ANP) interviewed Washington at the Los Angeles apartment where she and husband Lawrence Brown were temporarily living. The couple was in Los Angeles because Brown was traveling as a member of the Ellington orchestra. Washington tagged along and the two made an extended honeymoon out of their stay. During this interview Fredi gave her personal views on the future of

¹⁸ Courtney "Picturizing Race" [first quote]; *Literary Digest*, 8 December 1934, box 2, Fredi Washington Papers.

¹⁹ Bogle, *Bold Boulevards*, 134.

black talent in Hollywood. She told Jackson, “I think that the hope for use or development of Negro motion picture stars in Hollywood is absolutely futile!”²⁰

Washington’s feelings were shaped by her own Hollywood experiences. On more than one occasion, she told Jackson, “Managers, producers, and film executives have tried to get me to pass for white in order to get the break they claim I deserve.” Difficult though it was, she had to accept the fact that her ability alone seemed to be of little importance to them. Washington, however, was unwilling to accommodate prevailing racial conventions and sacrifice her dignity and self-respect. Rhetorically, she asked, “Why should I have to pass for anything...but an artist?” By that, she meant the standards of a good performing artist, not those of a good black or white artist.²¹

Washington was adamant in asserting that those who controlled the images of race and representation in film were the same individuals responsible for making sure that productions brought in big profits at the Box Office. Producers, directors, and commercial sponsors determined what would or would not sell, especially in southern movie houses. Washington told Jackson that “if the performer happens to be ‘colored’ the question of race prejudice is immediately injected into what they think the box office reaction might be.” The final solution then rested with studio heads. Somewhat idealistically, Fredi claimed that “if they didn’t raise the question, I wager, no attention at all would be paid to the performer’s race.”²²

²⁰ “Uptown Fredi Washington Gives The Lowdown On Hollywood: No Great Hope For The Sepia Stars,” *Pittsburg Courier*, 14 April 1934, clipped in Fredi Washington Papers.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

Finally, Fay Jackson asked Washington if she intended to do any work in films while in Los Angeles. Washington firmly replied that “if they want me, they will call me, and if they accept me, they’ll have to take me as I am.” Clearly, Washington had her own set of conditions that had to be met. Selling her self respect and dignity was not an option. Against all odds, she refused to misrepresent herself, what she believed in, and what she stood for, describing herself as “too independent to fool around” with producers, managers, or studio executives who did not respect her as an able artist.²³

Fredi Washington later claimed she did not go to Hollywood seeking a career in films. She arrived at Los Angeles’s Union Station aboard a train with her husband and the rest of Ellington’s orchestra. To her surprise, there was a representative from Universal waiting to meet her when she got off the train. She recalled that “somehow” Universal knew she was supposed to arrive in town with Ellington’s orchestra, and that they had come looking for her.²⁴

Once she arrived at Universal’s Hollywood studio, she met with John Stahl, auditioned for the role of Peola again at his request, and took the script home to read it over. Stahl was eager to know what sort of reaction Washington had to the script. She returned it to him with a few suggestions for revisions. As a result, the scene in which Peola is “passing” and working in a white restaurant was changed. In the original scene, Peola’s identity was revealed when someone noticed that she did not have “half-moons” on her fingers at the edge of her cuticles. The next time Washington met with Stahl, she showed him her own nails and he saw that she, had half-moons demonstrating that such a

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Bogle, *Bold Boulevards*, 134.

“sign” could not indicate racial identity. Stahl agreed to omit this absurd scene from the script. Stahl’s respect for Washington’s opinions were probably uncommon in Hollywood. Unlike other executives at Universal, with whom she tangled over her salary, he welcomed Washington’s input.²⁵

After Fredi was cast as Peola, she was presented with the chance to land a Hollywood career but turned it down just as she had Otto Khan’s proposal years earlier. Representatives at Universal invited Fredi to enter a long-term contract with the studio—an obligation that she told Bogle she was not interested in at the time. A contract that committed her to Universal was not her best option, she argued, because she was not confident that she “would be good in the movies” and did not want to become a full-time film actress.²⁶

According to Bogle, Fredi told Universal’s representatives that she would consider discussing future film opportunities on another occasion, but at the present wanted to focus only on *Imitation of Life*. Reportedly, Universal continued to pressure her to sign a contract. She eventually got stern and told them to “forget it.” They continued to try to convince her that a contract was in her best interest. They even offered to “teach and train her for a career in films.” Although Fredi had doubts about her ability to perform in films, she had no doubts about whether she was an able actress. Bogle reported that she scoffed at the prospect of being trained for Hollywood, and told the representatives, “Look. I didn’t come out here to learn to act. I brought that with me.”

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 135.

Although she clearly was interested in doing *Imitation of Life*, she claimed that she was “really not that interested” in establishing a Hollywood career.²⁷

Although Universal offered Washington a contract, it offered her less salary than she was willing to accept. Studio executives were shocked when Washington requested five hundred dollars a week. One official brazenly responded that, “We’re not paying [Louise] Beavers that.” Washington did not take lightly the comparison made between herself and her potential co-star. More than anything else, she found it unprofessional and insulting that Beavers’ salary was brought up during a discussion of her own salary. According to Washington, she told them, “I didn’t come here to talk about the contract with Beavers. Beavers takes care of her own business. I take care of mine.” To demonstrate how irrelevant Beavers’ contractual arrangements were, she told officials flatly: “I don’t even want to know what you’re paying her.” Reluctantly, Universal finally agreed to Washington’s original request for a salary of five hundred dollars weekly.²⁸

According to Washington, as soon as the salary issue was settled Universal asked her to sign a formal agreement for *Imitation of life*. Once again, Washington claimed that she called her own shots. She refused to blindly sign the contract, and told the studio that the agreement would have to be approved by her attorney before she would consider signing it. By then, according to Washington, Universal knew that she meant business and would not to back down under pressure. They conceded to her demands and waited for her signature.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

Years after the release of *Imitation of Life*, many people questioned whether Washington was plagued by the same problems that compelled Peola to “pass” as white and whether she herself ever “passed.” Some people believed that she must have carried the same burden as Peola, or she could not have so convincingly played the role in the film. Forgetting that Washington was an accomplished actress, some movie-goers saw only a light-skinned black woman who must have passed in her own private life.³⁰

In 1945, Earl Conrad, a white columnist in the *Chicago Defender*’s New York Bureau, discussed the issue of passing and what role, if any, it played in Washington’s private life. Conrad had recently had lunch with Washington, who was by then a columnist for the Harlem-based *The People’s Voice*. During that lunch, Conrad said, he was suddenly “struck” by Washington’s “particular social situation,” which he described as “two-fold.” Washington, he explained, had the appearance of a white person but undoubtedly identified herself as black. The questions he posed to her reflected the curiosity of many people who were likewise preoccupied with her enigmatic appearance.³¹

The reporter asked Washington if she had any difficulty “passing in the white world,” or if she “passed” at all. Searching for a case-in-point, Conrad reframed his question and asked her what typically happened when she entered a white hotel or restaurant. His question assumed that she had occasionally patronized “white only” establishments. Washington’s response was, “Nothing happens.” If it was a hotel, she said, then she simply went in and got a room. If it was a restaurant, then she went in,

³⁰ Earl Conrad, “To Pass Or Not To Pass”?, *Chicago Defender*, 16 June 1945, box 2, Fredi Washington Papers.

³¹ Ibid.

ordered, and ate. For Conrad, Washington's response clearly indicated that she indeed "passed." To Washington, however, her actions silently ignored, and therefore rejected, segregation policies. She told Conrad that while he thought of her actions as "passing," she did not "think about it one way or the other." As she explained, "If a place is open to the public that means anyone who can pay the tariff." In truth, Washington was not "passing," but, rather, was refusing to acknowledge policies of segregation.³²

Fredi also identified an important distinction between herself and Peola. While they both looked white, Fredi never tried to deny that she was black. There were many people of African ancestry who, like Peola, chose to assume a white identity. Fredi acknowledged that "Peola types" did exist, but insisted that she personally did not worry about color. To clarify her position, she told the *Chicago Defender* writer, "I am a Negro and proud of it. I go where I want to and do what I like and enjoy life. I don't try to "pass" nor do I hang a sandwich sign on me to warn people that I am not white." Fredi ended by saying that she simply acted naturally.³³

Conrad continued to question Washington about "passing." He wanted to know why she chose not to 'pass' as white in the entertainment industry when so many people had suggested that if she did so, she would have a more stable, lasting career. Washington replied that she chose not to pass because of personal values. She shunned the idea of passing for career opportunity because she was an honest person and never believed that she had "to be white to be good."³⁴

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

Since Washington was frequently in the presence of whites who could not detect that she was black, Conrad asked whether she was ever moved to respond to negative remarks about blacks unwittingly made in her presence. Cunningly, she said, “I give them plenty of rope, I let them hang themselves, and then I quietly say, ‘I’m Negro’.”

Washington knew that “unmasking” herself could provoke unpredictable reactions; she acknowledged that anything could happen, but seemed unconcerned. Just as she had told Fay Jackson over ten years earlier, she informed Conrad that it was producers, both black and white, who always made an issue out of color. Again, Washington posited that if color was disregarded there would be no problem, as some claimed, with audiences being “puzzled as to whether you are white or colored.”³⁵

Regardless of how unimportant color was to Washington, it was usually at issue when it came to casting. In her first full-length film, *Emperor Jones*, she was ordered to darken her skin with makeup to lessen the chance that audiences might be confused as to whether she was a white or light-skinned black woman being romanced by a black man, Paul Robeson.³⁶

For Washington, the color issue came down to a matter of simple logic. She argued that she was born a certain color, had no control over the matter, and therefore was not going to let it “mar” her life or influence her judgment. The reporter for the *Defender* asked Washington if, for economic reasons, people light enough to “pass,” should. There was absolutely no legitimate reason to “pass” in Washington’s opinion.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Bogle, *Toms Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 62.

Doing so only meant that an individual bought into the flawed theories of racial superiority. As she told the reporter,

You see, I'm a mighty proud gal and I can't for the life of me find any valid reason why anyone should lie about their origin . . . Frankly I do not ascribe to the theory of 'white supremacy'. . . to try to hide the fact that I am Negro for economic or any other reasons, says in effect that, to be Negro makes me inferior, that, I have swallowed whole hog all of the propaganda dished out by the fascist-minded white citizens."

Washington delved further into questions of racial identity and separateness. She turned the conversation around and asked Conrad how many people he thought were living in America who did not have mixed ancestry, or "mixed blood," and told him that she only knew of a few. Conrad later said he had a difficult time getting Washington to discuss the social problems that black people faced in terms of color. She preferred instead to identify the contradictions in the American system of democracy.³⁷

Earl Conrad was interested in Washington's views because he was a liberal white journalist who studied the concept of race and all its implications in American society. Two years after his conversation with Washington, he dedicated an entire book, *Jim Crow America*, to uncovering the connections between what he called the "misdeeds of a century ago and the misunderstandings of the present." Conrad described his journalistic work as that of a war correspondent. His foxhole, he said, was the New York bureau of the *Chicago Defender*, which permitted him to "look out on the great 'racial fight' of America. . ." To do that, Conrad said he interviewed "big shots" to get their "American Viewpoint," on black-white relations. In his opinion, his assignments were "reconnaissance work," "for some great engagement that is bound to come."

Washington reassured Conrad that in the future Americans would:

³⁷ Conrad, "To Pass Or Not To Pass"?, Fredi Washington Papers.

put into place all of the beautiful ideals which many of us up to now have been giving little more than lip service to . . . We have much to look forward to but it will only come about if we are willing each to do our share in bringing the good life to realization.

Washington's comments on the need for everyone to do their part were inspired by her strong Christian beliefs. She told Conrad that in the Bible it is decreed that "all men must earn their bread by the sweat of their brow." In 1945, that ancient decree still held true for Washington; she embraced it and applied it to her own life. Like Conrad, she believed that the struggle for equality was bound to bring change.³⁸

Washington was a fighter and wanted to make sure Conrad understood that. She told him, "I am an American citizen, and by God, we all have inalienable rights and whenever and wherever those rights are tampered with, there is nothing left to do but fight." Two years after her conversation with him, she told another reporter, "There's no way for me to pass—feeling the way I do. I didn't think up this system, and I certainly didn't choose the way I look . . . I'm here as a Negro . . . that's the way I'll be and I'll fight until the day I die—or until there isn't anything left to fight against."³⁹

³⁸ Earl Conrad, *Jim Crow America*. (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1947), ix-x, Conrad, "To Pass Or Not To Pass"?, Fredi Washington Papers.

³⁹ Conrad, "To Pass Or Not To Pass"?, Fredi Washington Papers; Yvonne Gregory, "Who Passes for White"? *Our World*, n.d., Fredi Washington Papers.

CHAPTER II

FIGHTING TO DEFINE OURSELVES: FREDI WASHINGTON AND THE BLACK PRESS

The Negro Reporter is a fighting partisan. He has an enemy. That enemy is the enemy of his people. The people who read his newspaper. . . expect him to have an arsenal well-stocked with atomic adjectives and nouns. The Negro reader is often a spectator at a fight.

Percival Prattis, *Phylon*, 1946.

Since the early nineteenth century, the black press has played a vital historical role in exposing prejudice, discrimination, and violence against blacks in the United States. Like Percival Prattis, black journalists have used the print medium to launch and carry on campaigns against the blatant injustices committed against blacks. In turn, wrote Prattis, “The reporter is attacking the reader’s enemy and the reader has a vicarious relish for a fight well fought.”¹

The *People’s Voice*, a black weekly newspaper produced in Harlem, was part of this arsenal. Its editor-in-chief, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., was an influential Harlem minister and politician. He was also the husband of Fredi Washington’s sister, Isabelle. The timely appearance of the *Voice* is crucial to understanding Fredi Washington as a representative voice and active member of the “new order of the New Negro.” Disgusted with her limited career opportunities as an actress, Fredi took a clerical job at the

¹ Patrick S. Washburn, *A Question of Sedition: The Federal Government’s Investigation of the Black Press During World War II*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 38.

People's Voice sometime in 1942. By April, 1943, she was writing its drama and theater editorial column, *Headlines and Footlights*. Within months, she was promoted to editor of the entertainment section.²

In her new career, Fredi Washington aimed to create an arena in which thought-provoking material could be discussed with frankness. *Headlines and Footlights* was the official editorial column of the drama and theater section in the *People's Voice*, but Washington seldom discussed the world of entertainment exclusively. In the beginning, she struggled to limit her topics to theater, concert, and film news. Although she reported on current theater productions and provided particulars regarding ticket prices, performance times, and expected closing dates, she also probed the most pressing issues facing blacks. As a result, she was repeatedly questioned about the purpose of her column; some readers thought that she should refrain from discussing topics outside entertainment. Critics ridiculed her for sounding off about political issues and dismissed her as a woman with a chip on her shoulder. Washington confronted her critics by insisting that the column was written to “provoke progressive thought, to help people of the theater whenever possible and yes, to criticize those of us who need it.”³

Her editorials in the *People's Voice* reflected the historical role of the black press. The earlier actions taken by black leaders and newspaper editors during World War I precipitated the behavior of the black press during World War II. During President Woodrow Wilson's Administration, the War Department had accused the black press of fomenting dissent and discord among blacks in regard to the war effort after the press

² “Headlines and Footlights,” *People's Voice*, 31 July 1943; “Headlines and Footlights,” *People's Voice*, 10 April 1943.

³ “Headlines and Footlights,” *People's Voice*, 8 January 1944.

protested the military's inequitable treatment of black soldiers. Emmett Scott, appointed by the Wilson Administration to "oversee racial matters . . . generate black support for the war ... [and] eliminate black dissent," organized a conference of leading blacks in June 1918, many of whom were editors of newspapers that enjoyed wide circulation and influence. At the conference, delegates agreed to tone down their articles for the sake of promoting unity for the war effort. One of the delegates was none other than W. E. B. Du Bois. One month after the conference, Du Bois wrote a controversial editorial in the *Crisis* entitled "Close Ranks," which called on blacks to temporarily put aside their demands for equality in exchange for supporting the war as a first priority.⁴

Du Bois frankly hoped that blacks' support for the war would earn them respect from white society. Therefore, even before Harlem established itself as a cultural mecca, it gained international fame as the home of the 369th Infantry regiment, which was awarded the Belgian Croix de Guerre, or war cross medal, for its heroism during World War I. Yet, when 369th soldiers departed New York in December 1917, they were excluded from the farewell celebrations held in honor of New York's National Guard, the "so-called Rainbow division." Colonel William Hayward was told that his men were not permitted to take part in the parade because "black is not a color in the Rainbow."⁵

On February 17, 1919, the decorated Hellfighters returned triumphantly to Harlem, marching to the beat of James Reese Europe's 369th marching band. Many of its soldiers hoped that their service, as W.E.B. DuBois had argued, would lead to fuller

⁴ Eric Arnesen, *Black Protest and the Great Migration: A Brief History with Documents*. (New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2003), 19.

⁵ United States National Archives and Records Administration Online, available from <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/369th-infantry/> (accessed 3 January 2006). This division was formerly known as the 15th regiment New York National Guard. The "Harlem Hellfighters," as they were more commonly known during and after the war, were under the command of Colonel William Hayward.

participation in American society. To the contrary, racial tensions heightened after the war and erupted into at least twenty-five race riots during 1919. The post-World War I United States government also initiated reactionary policies against political radicals, socialists, communists, immigrants, and anarchists in what came to be known as the Red Scare of 1920. Almost thirty years later, immediately following World War II, the same type of campaigns were launched to ostracize suspected Communists.⁶

Du Bois's call for a temporary halt of black activism had not been endorsed by all blacks. Asa Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, both young black socialist, labor leaders, and editors of the *Messenger*, took a radical antiwar stance in the pages of their publication. In an open letter to President Woodrow Wilson, Randolph and Owen complained bitterly that,

lynching, Jim Crow, segregation, discrimination in the armed forces and out, [and] disfranchisement of millions of black[s] . . . make your cry of making the world safe for democracy a sham, a mockery, a rape on decency, and a travesty on common justice.”⁷

Twenty-five years later, this argument was common among black journalists. The fundamental contradiction between the promise and practice of democracy in American society described by Randolph and Owens was increasingly visible during World War II, which was also fought in the name of democracy. Even before the second world war erupted, the black press regularly called attention to discrimination and inequality in the armed forces. National preparedness for the second world war began as early as 1939, and, again, many blacks looked to military service as “one of the most effective ways to

⁶ Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance*, 14; David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue*. (Penguin Books: New York, 1979; reprint, 1997), 17-18.

⁷ Arnesen, *Great Migration*, 19.

open doors to their fuller participation in American life.” Headlines such as, “Should Negroes Save Democracy?” appeared regularly in the pages of black newspapers.⁸

The struggle for civil rights became an issue of national significance during World War II because America was engaged in an ideological war to defend democracy. America entered World War II as the modern, model government based on democratic freedoms. All too real, however, was the fact that America’s customary and legal treatment of blacks fundamentally contradicted its own ideals. Fredi Washington summarized this contradiction when she claimed that blacks were “theoretically free but part slave under a vicious system—a system which allows representatives of our government to stand on the floor of Congress and orate about [black Americans’] lack of responsibility, culture, [and] education.” The system that Washington criticized included Jim Crow laws, flagrant racism, and disregard for fellow human beings by the nation’s most powerful leaders.⁹

During the 1940s, the black press reported on black demands and aspirations for the wartime and post-war United States. Most of the national leading black newspapers were based in the North. The *Pittsburg Courier*, *People’s Voice*, *Chicago Defender*, and *The Messenger* all aimed to keep black readers informed about issues that affected them most, but which were largely ignored by the white press. During World War II, particularly after the “Double V” campaign took hold, the struggle for social justice was waged in the pages of black newspapers on an unprecedented level.

⁸ Stanley Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All Black Combat Squadrons of WWII*. (Washington D.C: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1992), xi [first quote]; Washburn, *Question of Sedition*, 37 [second quote].

⁹ “Headlines and Footlights,” *People’s Voice*, 7 August 1943.

The speed with which the “Double V” campaign caught on during World War II demonstrated that the desire to end racial segregation, discrimination, and violence was shared by blacks at every level of society. It also demonstrated the conversational and crusading relationship between the black press and its readers. For example, the “Double V” campaign was launched in the *Pittsburg Courier* in February, 1942, in response to a letter by James Thompson to its editors, entitled “Should I Sacrifice to Live Half-American.” Thompson, a black cafeteria worker, identified himself as a “true American” who wanted to see a victory over the Axis forces but questioned whether blacks should “sacrifice every other ambition to the paramount one, victory.” Thompson explained that as a black American he had specific questions about how the war and the peace to follow would affect him. Was there something wrong with “demand[ing] full citizenship rights in exchange for the sacrificing of [his] life,” by going off to war, he asked? Thompson questioned whether the postwar United States would be a “true and pure democracy” in which blacks would not suffer the “indignities that have been heaped upon them in the past.” Finally, he recommended to the editor that “while we keep defense and victory in the forefront. . .we don’t lose sight of our fight for true democracy at home.” A “V” for victory sign was displayed internationally by “so-called democratic countries,” Thompson noted, and he proposed that black Americans adopt a “Double V” for a double victory in a two-front war. The first V represented victory over the enemies abroad; the second V stood for victory over the enemies from within. Thus began the “Double V” campaign, the most aggressive civil rights campaign ever launched by the *Pittsburg Courier*.¹⁰

¹⁰ Washburn, *Question of Sedition*, 55; James G. Thompson, “Should I Sacrifice to Live ‘Half-American’?”, *Pittsburg Courier*, 31 January 1942.

The first issue of the *People's Voice* appeared on February 14, 1942, the same week that the *Pittsburg Courier* announced the “Double V” campaign. The *People's Voice's* declared in its statement of purpose that:

This [era of WWII] is the people's hour to make democracy real and thereby make it world triumphant Out of this chaos must come a real democracy, triumphant not only on the scene of battle, but triumphant on the scene of civil liberties, racial equality and human justice.

The *People's Voice* articulated the problems that plagued black people and kept them from enjoying real, participatory, democratic freedom. In this vein, the tone of the paper's articles was politically militant.¹¹

Fredi Washington had been in show business for over twenty years when she began writing for the *People's Voice*. She brought her diverse experience from show business to her new role as an editorial columnist. The world of entertainment, Washington emphasized, was an integral part of American life; therefore, she perceived, black entertainers could play a major role in an aggressive campaign to secure first class citizenship rights for blacks.

Writing for the *People's Voice* was not simply a new career for Fredi. As a member of the newspaper's staff, she became part of the continued work of the Harlem Popular Front. The Popular Front social movement consisted of a coalition of radical progressives who had cooperated since the late 1930s to bring about political, social, and economic reforms and combat the rise of fascism. The movement was international in scope and tied to the Soviet Union and foreign policy, but had distinct regional and local

¹¹ Reprint of *Statement of Purpose, People's Voice*, 17 February 1945.

characteristics which produced a stronger base in some parts of the country, particularly in New York City and Harlem.¹²

Michael Denning, author of *The Cultural Front*, illuminates the Harlem political left in his study of twentieth century American culture. According to Denning, there were three bases of Popular Front organization in New York City: the “garment and needle trades, white-collar unions, and the Harlem community organizations.” The Harlem political left coalesced around two issues: 1) A. Philip Randolph’s efforts, as early as 1925, to organize the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; and, 2) the campaign led by William Patterson and Benjamin Davis, both black attorneys and members of the Communist Party, to free the black men convicted in the famous Scottsboro rape case.¹³

The strength of the Popular Front in Harlem was evident in the creation of the National Negro Congress (NNC) in 1936, a coalition of over five hundred organizations with more than one million members. Most members of the NNC were also affiliated with either Randolph’s labor union, Adam Clayton Powell’s Abyssinian Baptist Church and his political campaigns, or the Harlem Communist Party, led by Benjamin Davis. The NNC institutionalized Harlem’s Popular Front, Denning observed, which “depended on a prickly and often fragile alliance,” between Randolph, Powell, and Davis. These men spearheaded most of the political organizing that “sustained the Harlem social movement through periodic crisis,” writes Denning. “The left-wing Harlem newspaper, *People’s Voice*, served as its principal organ.”¹⁴

¹² Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. (New York: Verso, 1998), 14-15.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Because it was a social movement, the Popular Front gave birth to a culture of increased public awareness, mass mobilization, and political action. Concerned Americans rallied around the push for greater social democracy by supporting legislation outlawing racial discrimination, lynching, and segregation. Internationally, the movement sought to oust fascist government regimes, combat colonialism in Africa, end world-wide labor repression, and support the Soviet Union.

New York City included a broad community of radical musicians, theater folks, and artists who participated in the Popular Front. Fredi Washington was one of them. As part of her critique of U. S. democracy, Washington turned her attention to the policies of the War Department and their effects on black soldier morale. She welcomed the War Department's decision to send black performers abroad to entertain soldiers. Her first line of action was to call on some of the top ranking black entertainers in the business to lift the spirits of soldiers during a time of desperate need. Washington believed that celebrities such as Lena Horne, Hazel Scott, Ethel Waters, and Paul Robeson should be the first to volunteer their services because they were well-known and had the "good fortune of working steadily and earning sizeable salaries" during the war. This was a moral mission for black entertainers, Fredi insisted, and of political necessity for the War Department.¹⁵

Washington did not advocate that black artists be sent abroad simply to entertain black soldiers. There was a deeper meaning beneath her insistence that black soldiers needed to be spiritually lifted by black entertainers. Because of America's dual social system, she wrote, blacks could not "obtain from whites the moral and spirit lifting

¹⁵ "Headlines and Footlights," *People's Voice*, 11 September 1943.

support” needed in a time of war. Black soldiers needed to be lifted by their “own stars” because they could identify with them, respect them, and aspire to be like them.¹⁶

The War Department oversaw entertainment for the troops, and Washington held it directly responsible for the disparity between the number of white and black artists sent abroad. She reported that the number of white artists sent overseas was in the hundreds, in contrast to only five black entertainers who were sent. She also criticized the government for segregating soldiers in unequal, and separate fighting units; that was yet another reason why the morale of black soldiers needed a boost. She recognized the psychological difficulty that black soldiers endured while fighting for a country that did not treat them on an equal basis with white soldiers. If the War Department wanted to win the war, she warned, they needed to “put up” more overseas black entertainment which would “put teeth into” the “mealy mouthed, jibbering democracy we’ve been talking about.” Otherwise, the War Department needed to “shut up.”¹⁷

The army, which had more black units than any other branch of service at this time, had intensely monitored the black press since before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Army officials went so far as to meet with twenty representatives of the black press in an attempt to undo the press’s damage to their image with its reports of a “Jim Crowed” armed force. Army representative Col. Eugene R. Householder delivered a prepared statement during the meeting that explained the Army’s stance on desegregating troops. A portion of the statement read:

The Army is not a sociological laboratory; to be effective it must be organized and trained according to principles which will insure success. Experiments to meet the wishes and demands of the champions of every race and creed for the

¹⁶ Ibid., 20 November 1943.

¹⁷ Ibid.

solution of their problems are a danger to efficiency, discipline and morale and would result in ultimate defeat.

The message was clear. The Army's policies of racial segregation and inequality could not be challenged because to do so might undermine the task of winning the war.¹⁸

Segregation, discrimination, and second-class treatment plagued the U. S. armed forces. If accepted into the military at all, black soldiers were typically relegated to the most menial posts. According to historian Patrick Washburn, the Marines and the Coast Guard "refused to accept blacks, the navy would only allow them to enlist as messboys, and the army turned away numerous black volunteers because of a lack of segregated facilities." Black morale was understandably lowest among soldiers who were enlisted in these branches of service. Everywhere around them were reminders that they were not considered equal to white soldiers. All army camp activities were segregated. Thus, even when stationed at the same camp, blacks and whites were kept completely apart, except in the mess hall where whites were typically served by blacks. Racism permeated camp rules; according to Washburn, a camp rule in Pennsylvania declared that "any association between the colored soldiers and white women, whether voluntary or not, would be considered rape." Black women were also discriminated against. The army, when it announced a need for three thousand more nurses in early 1942, stipulated that only fifty-six of them could be black, and that those nurses would only be allowed to administer care to black soldiers.¹⁹

Government agencies, including the Army, blamed the black press for any and all problems of black morale. Government officials claimed that reports of discrimination in

¹⁸ Washburn, *Question of Sedition*, 57.

¹⁹ Ibid., 99 [first quote]; Ibid., 59.

the black press were highly inflammatory and partially truthful at best. Those who blamed the black press and called for “toned-down” articles accused the press of stirring up discontent instead of simply reporting it. The underlying assumption was that if there were no reports of defense industry discrimination, or Jim Crowed service camps, then blacks would not be discontent or know they were being mistreated.²⁰

Black discontent was in place long before the war, however, and the government knew it. Multiple agencies monitored the black press and reported on black attitudes. Racial tensions, however, were exacerbated by the war. In early summer 1941, A. Philip Randolph warned President Franklin D. Roosevelt that thousands of black men and women would march in front of the White House to demand their “right to work and fight” for their country. Randolph’s threatened “March on Washington” movement was to a large degree fueled by protests against racial discrimination in the awarding of jobs in defense industries.²¹

Roosevelt responded to Randolph’s ultimatum on June 19, 1941, by issuing Executive Order 8802, which outlawed job discrimination in defense industries and federal agencies. The Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), also created under 8802, was responsible for implementing the order. Roosevelt’s issuance of 8802 and the creation of the FEPC were positive actions in response to Randolph’s threatened march. Patricia Sullivan has observed that while the FEPC was undermined by a lack of enforcement powers and opposition in Congress, the creation of a federal agency

²⁰ Ibid., 101.

²¹ Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era*. (Chapel Hill :University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 136

“devoted exclusively to race-related” employment problems proved that blacks’ protests could be effective.²²

The Roosevelt Administration took criticisms from activists such as Washington seriously. Her criticism of the War Department was halted, briefly, when the government released the *Negro Soldier* in early 1944 as part of a public relations campaign to salvage relations with black troops and the black press. *Negro Soldier* was a documentary film that highlighted the contributions of blacks to every war that America had ever fought, beginning with Crispus Attucks and the American Revolution. Washington praised the War Department and all affiliated organizations for the production of the film. She acknowledged the government for partly fulfilling its responsibility to the “people.” She praised the film for its dignified representations and commented on the “wholesome types . . . chosen to represent the Negro civilian population.” She was also ecstatic that Black heroes were paid tribute in a film that depicted them as true Americans. While she agreed, however, that the images projected in the *Negro Soldier* were progressive, she regretted that the material presented in this film was not incorporated into the government’s “everyday newsreel.” To her, the film was a step forward, but still reflected the divided nature of American practices, or what she termed the “backwash of an American jimcrow and armed services system.” But she was pleased overall that the War Department had at least realized the necessity of presenting blacks to the public as first-class citizens.²³

²² Ibid.

²³ “Headlines and Footlights,” *People’s Voice*, 19 February 1944.

Washington failed to mention, or overlooked, what was not depicted in the film: namely, the unequal conditions under which black soldiers were fighting for a democratic victory. She knew of the conditions since she herself had criticized the War Department for its policies of segregation and discrimination. Two months after Washington's favorable review of *Negro Soldier* appeared, she reprinted a letter from "a white soldier" who resented the discriminatory practices he witnessed in the service. For him, the film was an "insidious propaganda job," because while it showed blacks in combat, actual black combat units were a small percentage of the total number of black army units. The soldier went on to claim that black infantry, tank, and air units were few in number, and that some had been "broken up into labor battalions." The soldier's greatest opposition was to the War Department's attempt to give the "absolutely false impression that colored soldiers are doing exactly the same job as white soldiers." The *Negro Soldier*, he insisted, was a "lie from beginning to end," and he wondered if it was "asking too much for the War Department to tell the truth."²⁴

This "white soldier" wanted to expose what the *Negro Soldier* was never designed to reveal. For him, the *Negro Soldier* was a "subtle combination of historical fact and contemporary fiction" that permitted the War Department to create the image that blacks were "happy" in the army. To counter that image, he included a disturbing description of black daily realities in the segregated army. According to him, the army's policy on blacks actually meant:

Being shunted off to a remote section of the camp, "across the tracks".... being divorced from all major activities in the camp having PXs, Service Clubs, chapels and theatres that are ugly caricatures of what the white soldiers have walking miles to the bus station, and then having trouble on the bus. It means that

²⁴ "Headlines and Footlights," *People's Voice*, 29 April 1944.

you are the object of extreme curiosity and ignorance because you are conspicuous by your rare appearances in the white area. It means that in every respect the gap between you and your white brothers is made even deeper than it was in civilian life.²⁵

The “white soldier” letter may have been pure propaganda. Its startling descriptions of the typical conditions in segregated army camps gave credence to Fredi’s argument that more black entertainers should be sent abroad. Also, although there were white soldiers who opposed mistreatment of blacks, few of them embraced each other across racial lines as “brothers.” It is even possible that Washington wrote the letter herself. During the war, propaganda was especially common and in fact it was a customary practice to fabricate political messages. Nevertheless, it was true that segregation was as accepted and as rampant in the army as it was in small-town America. This letter made that point; propaganda or not, it served its purpose.²⁶

By October 1944, Fredi launched the second phase of what she called the “home front push” to get the War Department to understand how important entertainment was to boosting soldier morale. Approval was granted for more black artists to go overseas; however, the War Department’s policy of segregation, in Fredi’s opinion, deterred top ranking artists and lesser known ones from volunteering to go. She reasoned that because all USO activities were segregated, artists such as Paul Robeson, who had struggled to have anti-segregation clauses included in their contracts would “become part of the very un-American pattern” they had fought against. Therefore, the War Department’s decision to allow more black overseas entertainment was not enough for Fredi. In the second

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid; The last line of the letter referred to the film as a “*rank* [emphasis mine] insult to our colored men in uniform.” Fredi often used the word *rank* to communicate her disgust with segregation and discrimination.

phase of her struggle, she wanted to see “every vestige of influence and power” used to persuade the War Department to approve mixed shows for the soldiers who, she reminded her readers, were “fighting and dying to wipe out intolerance and hatred.”²⁷

In order for black Americans to freely participate in democracy at home on an equal basis, Fredi knew they had to fight for it, and she worked hard to make her readers understand that. While soldiers were mobilized to fight against America’s enemies in foreign lands, there remained an enemy to be defeated at home. In an open letter to the soldiers, Fredi assured them that a vigorous home front battle was being waged to ensure that their sacrifices were not made in vain. She told them that while the enemies at home were not fighting with weapons, they were “deadly vicious” because they posed as democratic Americans, unlike the fascist enemies abroad who openly upheld policies of racial superiority. Fredi, and many other activists like her, knew that the fight to bring about a free democracy in America would be an unending battle.²⁸

The deteriorated state of democracy in America did not go unnoticed by white people. Swedish social economist Gunnar Myrdal organized an investigative team of more than one hundred young black and white scholars to research and compose his massive study, *An American Dilemma*. The project was funded by the Carnegie Corporation, which, historian John Egerton noted, wanted “a comprehensive study of the Negro in the United States, to be undertaken in a wholly objective and dispassionate way as a social phenomenon.” For that reason, Myrdal, an outsider, was chosen. The 1,483 page study was published in 1944, just as the war ended. The book’s arguments were not

²⁷ Ibid., 14 October 1944.

²⁸ Ibid., 13 November 1943.

strikingly new, but because it was authored by a well respected, white social economist, whites unlikely ever to read a black newspaper read this study.²⁹

Myrdal pointed out that because fascism and Nazism were grounded in theories of racial superiority, “the principle of democracy had to be applied more explicitly to race.” America’s “dilemma” was a “moral issue of conflicting valuations.” Myrdal insisted that his theory was based on an “analysis of morals and not in morals.” What he meant was that the United States’ s treatment of blacks stood in stark contradiction to its own stated beliefs about freedom, equality, tolerance, and justice. Myrdal concluded that the greatest task that lay ahead for America was the moral dilemma of “how to reconcile the inequitable and discriminatory realities. . .with the ideas on which the nation was founded.”³⁰

It is likely that Washington read Myrdal’s study, or was at least aware of it. Certainly she studied the problems that black people faced. Those problems, she wrote in 1946, were “crowded into [her] consciousness daily by those people who have taken the time to study the situation.”³¹

There was much hope that the end of World War II would usher in a new world order. The post-war world was not something that activists such as Washington merely sat back and waited for. She and many others believed, as one commentator noted, that the effectiveness of struggles carried out during the war, would “determine the extent” of social, political, and economic security after the war ended. Thus, Washington used her

²⁹ John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 274.

³⁰ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*. (New York: Harpers & Brothers, 1944), 1004 [first quote]; *Ibid.*, intro I [second and third quote]; Egerton, *Speak Now*, 275 [last quote].

³¹ Fredi Washington, “Fredi Says,” *People’s Voice*, 4 May 1946.

energy, voice, and influence to bring forth fundamental changes in the status quo that had long relegated black Americans to second-class citizenship.³²

Thousands of black soldiers returned home after the war, proud of the service and sacrifice given to their country. At home, however, they faced the same treatment endured before they left, if not worst. Segregation remained in full force in the South and discrimination, especially in job opportunities, abounded throughout the country.

After the war was over, Washington continued to monitor the policies of the War Department. She was outraged when it cancelled a radio broadcast of *The Glass*, which was a segment scheduled to be aired as part of Columbia Broadcasting's *Assignment Home* series, which highlighted job discrimination against black veterans. For Washington, the War Department's decision put them on "record as being one of the first governmental agencies to lose no time in reverting back to the pre-war policy of procrastinating on all questions dealing with Negroes" CBS's post-war policy was not in question by Washington, despite the fact that the radio address was to be aired on that station. She recognized that CBS had no copyright to the script and that, without authorized consent, the station could not legally use it.³³

Truman Gibson, a black civilian aide to Secretary of War Henry Stimson, was urged by the black press to take action. Gibson was not only in a key position to persuade the department to rescind their decision, he himself had requested that *The Glass* be aired. On August 30, 1945, Washington telegraphed Gibson and urged him to make the War Department aware of the implications of their actions. Because of the cancellation of *The Glass*, Washington informed Gibson, "Hell is busting loose on progressive front and in

³² "Editorials," *People's Voice*, 27 January 1945.

³³ "Fredi Says," *People's Voice*, 1 September 1945.

press. . .Do you intend to fight the issue when you return to Washington? If not, why not?" It is unknown how Gibson responded, if he did at all, or if *The Glass* was ever broadcast. After being appointed to President Truman's "black cabinet," however, he did spearhead the drive that led to Truman's issuance of Executive Order 9981, which ended segregation in the armed forces.³⁴

Washington's approach to Gibson demonstrates the emerging militancy of the Civil Rights Movement, in which ordinary people did not hesitate to confront those who had connections inside the government's power structure. If black people, especially those in power, adopted a "do-nothing program," Washington warned, then blacks as a group were going to be "hoodwinked into a permanent second-class citizenry"³⁵

As Charles Hamilton Houston, a black civil rights lawyer and newspaper editor, poignantly argued, the government could not continue to expect blacks to be "valiant defenders in time of war when it ignore[d] them and insult[ed] them in time of peace." On March 20, 1942, black leaders and newspaper representatives met in Washington with members from the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF). At that meeting, Roy Wilkins, editor of *The Crisis*, described blacks as having been "psychologically demobilized" by World War II. Fredi Washington, meantime, pushed for change, encouraging her readers to become psychologically mobilized by the aims of the Civil Rights Movement.³⁶

³⁴ "The Glass Championed-but not by Truman Gibson," *People's Voice*, 8 September 1945; International Herald Tribune Online, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/01/02/news/obits.php> (accessed 3 January 2006).

³⁵ "Fredi Says," *People's Voice*, 1 September 1945 [first quote]; "Headlines and Footlights," *People's Voice*, 27 May 1944.

³⁶ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 135; Washburn, *Question of Sedition*, 101.

As a political activist, Washington locked in on two of the most hot button issues of the time, troop morale and labor, and she linked both to the democratic goals associated with the war. She politicized the role of black entertainers by provoking her readers to consider the social importance of using the screen, stage, and radio to promote positive images of blacks. Because there was a vigorous fight being waged on the home front to secure black citizenship rights, Washington argued that it was vitally important that the black image fit the demands being made.

CHAPTER III

THE BLACK ENTERTAINER AS A VOICE FOR CHANGE

By the 1940s, drama was a powerful political weapon that caused some blacks in the theatre professions to call for more meaningful dramas about race. There was so much racist propaganda in print that movies and stage productions, which on the surface offered promising black material, carefully avoided any material that challenged conventional race relations. There were, as well, those black entertainers who did not want to risk their careers by pushing for fair treatment. Some had carved out careers by playing stereotypical racial types, and were therefore reluctant to agitate against demeaning racial images in film.

Fredi Washington was one of the agitators. Her light skin had gained her access to mainstream films, but had limited her performance opportunities. Some producers felt that she was too light-skinned to be cast among darker skinned blacks, arguing that her skin color would confuse audiences; therefore she was often cast as a “tragic” woman who was not quite black or white.

Fredi’s exposé of the hidden evils in the business overlapped with her critique of racial stereotypes and the sheer lack of variety of roles offered to blacks. One Hollywood star who made a career out of playing mammy roles was Hattie McDaniel, who made her way into the movies after appearing in road shows and on some radio broadcasts.

Weighing nearly three hundred pounds, dark-skinned with a round jovial face, McDaniel

was type-cast as a mammy early on in her career. In 1939, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences nominated her for best supporting actress for her portrayal of “Mammy” in *Gone with the Wind*. Not only was the nomination the first for a black performer, but McDaniel was also the first to attend an Academy Award ceremony and the first to take home an Oscar.¹

McDaniel was often criticized for always portraying “mammy” roles. Reportedly, she responded to such criticism by saying she would rather “play a maid for \$700 per week than to be one for \$7 a week.” She essentially argued that she was doing nothing more than playing a character part, and did not acknowledge the demeaning images inherent in her characters. Perhaps McDaniel was not willing to speak out against the roles she played because of the potential career damage she might suffer as a result. She was well aware that pushing for change, especially in a place like Hollywood, was a brave act. She is said to have told fellow co-star Butterfly McQueen, who played Prissy in *Gone with the Wind*, that “You’ll never come back to Hollywood [if] you complain too much.” In fact, McQueen did return to Hollywood in the years that followed, while McDaniel faced opposition from the NNC, NAACP, and the National Negro Publishers’ Association when they protested Walt Disney’s *Song of the South*, in which she appeared. McDaniel responded to the protest by releasing a letter through Hedda Hopper’s *New York Daily News* syndicated column. A portion of that letter, as reprinted in Washington’s column, read:

I don’t think I’ve disgraced my race by the roles I’ve played. I’m trying to fathom just what an ‘Uncle Tom’ is. People who can afford to certainly have maids and butlers called ‘Uncle Tom.’ Truly, maids and butlers in real life are only trying to make an honest dollar, just as we who work in pictures. I only hope that producers

¹ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 83; Mapp, *African Americans and the Oscar* 9-11

will give us Negro actors and actresses more roles-even if there will be those who will call us 'Uncle Toms' When they speak thus, I'm sure it's only because of their frustrated minds.

If there were real servants who answered the name 'Uncle Tom,' McDaniel wondered, then why should anyone be ashamed or consider it a disgrace when a black actor portrayed an 'Uncle Tom'?²

Producers had their own justification for always casting McDaniel as a mammy: they declared that they "couldn't make a Lena Horne out of her." To cast McDaniel in the sultry night club singer parts played by Horne *was* impossible; but, as Washington pointed out, why not cast McDaniel as someone like civil rights leader Mary McLeod Bethune? Not only would the story be told of a black female "educator who attained success the hard way," Washington noted, but it would allow McDaniel the opportunity to play a different type of woman, one who exuded dignity and earned respect.³

Washington voiced her opinions about racial stereotypes loudly and clearly beginning in 1943, and never wavered on how she felt about the issue. Not only did negative stereotypes pervade the screen, so too did the omission of positive images hide the fact that blacks were involved in "all phases of government, education, white-collar professions, the sciences and the ordinary business of everyday living." Although Washington was sympathetic to the need for black performers such as Hattie McDaniel to find work, she also knew that white film makers would never expand their images of blacks unless black performers insisted they do so. Although one scholar has suggested that Washington jumped on the bandwagon with "educated journalists" who led an assault on McDaniel's career, such a charge ignores years of experiences that shaped

² Mapp, *African Americans and the Oscar*, 9-11; "Freda Says," *People's Voice*, 26 April 1947.

³ "Freda Says," *People's Voice*, 26 April 1947.

Washington's beliefs. Her criticism of McDaniel reflected her strong commitment to elevating the status of blacks in the movie industry.⁴

In March 1944, Fredi met with a group of black and white playwrights, novelists, and editors to discuss the handling of black material in their respective fields. Edward Chodorov's socially significant play, *Decision*, had recently taken Broadway audiences by storm during its run at the Belasco Theatre. The topic of Chodorov's play came up during the meeting when an attendee derided the black character Virgie, a house keeper turned defense worker, because she fit the same old played-out comic pattern which American audiences had come to expect from black cast members. It is not clear whether Fredi entered the debate at the meeting, but she addressed the issue in her column soon after. Fredi described Virgie as a "human being, a worker belonging to a minority group who, because of the jimcrow [sic] system, has not had the advantage of a formal education," but had "common intelligence" and was an "everyday Negro" aware of the problems facing the world and the home front. The character of Virgie provided insight into those problems. Fredi said plainly, "I do not object to a Negro playing a servant role if it is naturally integrated into the scheme of things." Fredi's "scheme of things" meant part of everyday American life. But if there were going to be subservient roles, Fredi believed, there should also be an indictment of the system that limits opportunity, liberty, and equality. In her eyes, Virgie represented the life and perspective of the "little people who know the indignities of life and who are willing to fight for a better way of life."⁵

⁴ "Fredi Says," *People's Voice*, 26 April 1947 [first quote]; Miriam J. Petty, "Doubtful Glory": 1930 Hollywood and the African American Actor as Star" (Ph. D. diss., Emory University, 2004), 190, ProQuest [database on-line] <http://80-proquest.umi.com.libproxy.txstate.edu/pqdweb?did=765353511&sid=1&Fmt=2&clientId=11421&RQT=309&VName=PQD> (accessed 25 May 2005).

⁵ "Headlines and Footlights," *People's Voice*, 11 March 1944.

To make her point, Fredi recalled her earlier years. At an impressionable age, she had moved to New York City, entered high school, and lived with her grandmother who worked as a housekeeper at a lodging house. She recalled their “one large room which served all. . .needs and purposes” and remembered helping her grandmother clean after school, labor that she knew allowed them to continue “living-in.” It was from her grandmother that Fredi learned about the brotherhood of man and “how white people had to get it out of their heads that whites are superior to Negroes.” She described her grandmother as a woman who did not know a “verb from an adverb, never heard of a sentence construction,” but who nonetheless had “backbone, a knowledge of world affairs . . . never misses voting in an election and can and will tell anybody what’s on her mind anytime or anywhere.” Her grandmother was never ashamed of the fact that she had to earn her living by hard work, and she always impressed upon Fredi’s mind the “grave necessity of a good fight well fought.”⁶

Fredi’s response demonstrated that her commitment to racial equality was informed by class consciousness. The play had such social significance to Fredi that she went to the producer and writer to see about adjusting the price of the show. She imagined that there were a lot of working people who likely wanted to see the show but could not afford Broadway ticket prices. The producer and writer agreed that making profits was not as important as making the show accessible to working-class people.⁷

By September, there was talk of doing a motion picture version of *Decision*. Fredi was adamant that *Decision* should be filmed just as it appeared on Broadway, especially

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Headlines and Footlights,” *People’s Voice*, 4 March 1944.

the character of Virgie, who “Hollywood could so easily type as mammy and call in one of its nice jovial professional mammies to do her stuff.” On Broadway, *Decision* identified some of the problems that compromised democracy in America. In particular, wrote Fredi, the play demonstrated how a “corrupt politician can affect every branch of democratic life.” A film version that retained Broadway’s message, particularly if released on the eve of a Presidential election, could serve as a “guiding factor in helping to put into office the men who give more than lip service to democracy.”⁸

Washington’s first *Headlines and Footlight’s* article was a response to a question posed by Joe Bostic: “should Negroes accept ‘Uncle Tom’ roles in the theater and movies?” “Uncle Tom”, in this sense, encompassed not only male characters, but all the degrading types described in chapter two. Bostic, who wrote the editorials in the *Headlines and Footlights* column before Washington took full-time responsibility, believed that Washington’s experience in the entertainment business gave her special insight into his question.⁹

Washington argued that black entertainers were not “forced to accept unsavory roles in order that they might eat,” as some claimed. Instead of placing all the blame on writers, producers, and studio heads, Washington admonished black entertainers to take some of the responsibility for removing barriers to better roles. In her view, too many black entertainers were caught up with being in the limelight and receiving a fat paycheck, even if it was only temporary. Accepting ‘Uncle Tom’ roles for immediate short-term gains, Washington argued, was a “nearsighted conclusion [that] blinds us to

⁸ “Headlines and Footlights,” *People’s Voice*, 2 September 1944.

⁹ “Headlines and Footlights,” *People’s Voice*, 10 April 1943.

the many complicated evils which exist within the business, and softens us for exploitation.” Demeaning roles that lacked dignity hindered the attempts of black entertainers to gain respect as talented professionals in the entertainment industry.¹⁰

The root causes of such demeaning roles for blacks, as Washington understood it, were complex. On one level, black entertainers sacrificed their leverage and handicapped their position in the profession by failing to “make suggestions on pictures in which they appear[ed].” Entertainers also lost leverage when they blindly accepted and signed contracts without ever reading the script. Too often, Washington observed, white scriptwriters’ repeated misconceptions about blacks were based on observing black nightlife, reading racist literature, or listening to other whites “who are supposedly interested in Negroes and ‘know all about them’.”¹¹

There was no room for the demeaning portrayals that resulted from these misconceptions, Washington argued, as she presented the role of black entertainers in a larger social and political context. By 1943, relations between blacks and whites had long been shaped by segregation. Some interracial civil rights coalitions and labor unions had been established, but for the most part there was little interaction between “black America” and “white America.” For this reason, very few black and white Americans knew each other personally and only gained glimpses of one another’s lives through film, literature, or theater. Black entertainers were in a unique position to help change the image of blacks held by mainstream white society, Washington argued, and she therefore

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

urged her fellows to initiate steps in the right direction and to be conscious of their role as “race relations ambassadors.”¹²

Early on, then, Washington pushed for a unified effort on the part of black entertainers to use their position of power and importance gained through their access to an American audience. If entertainers realized the “full impact and responsibility of [their] position,” they could possibly affect the attitudes of blacks and whites. She considered the screen the most powerful educational medium that could be used to trace the “fertile and [under] explored” history of blacks. Legitimate black characters could bring pride to blacks and possibly influence some whites to change their attitudes and maybe gain some respect for them. There was a white America that did not accept blacks, as well as a “vicious network of fascist minded whites” who controlled politics, big business, and government, and who were “hell bent on putting [blacks] in their so-called place and keeping [them] there.” All blacks needed to “muster up all...resources in a unified effort” to combat the forces working against them. The world of entertainment was one such resource.¹³

It was not long before Washington was ridiculed for the role she had played nine years earlier in *Imitation of Life*. Tim Moore, an Apollo comedian, wrote a letter to the *People's Voice* in response to a piece Washington wrote, entitled, “Apollo Comedy Bad for Race.” In that article, Washington expressed her utter disgust at what she witnessed as she sat in the audience at the Apollo. It amounted, she said, to a “no reading, dumb arguing, razor wielding, name calling, liquor drinking, woman debasing, vulgar stupid

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

brand of so-called comedy which has no place in the new order of the New Negro.”

Moore responded to Washington by reminding her that he saw nothing “uplifting to the race” in the character of Peola. Washington understood Moore’s criticism but responded by explaining that material considered acceptable in the early thirties was no longer tolerable nine years later. *Imitation of Life* was filmed in the middle of the Depression, a time described by Washington as when “each individual was solely interested in buttering his own bread.” Conditions suffered during the Depression made it okay to put money ahead of pride, according to Washington, but not any longer.¹⁴

During her tenure at the *People’s Voice*, Fredi tried to keep the focus off herself in both her columns; however, in 1945 she decided to speak on her own behalf. *Imitation of Life* was being shown at the Republic Theater that summer. While reading the screen credits, Fredi noticed that neither she nor Louise Beavers—the only major black actors in the film—were listed. Fredi was incensed and rightfully so considering that *Imitation of Life* was her first serious dramatic role in Hollywood and that she was witnessing a denial of credit for her work even though she considered the film a “feeble” attempt to “tackle the ever present social problems” between black and white Americans. She admitted that when the movie was originally released, eleven years earlier, she might have accepted the insult and responded with “little more than a grumble.” In light of the world struggle in which all underprivileged people were fighting for equality, she could not stand aside and accept discrimination.¹⁵

¹⁴ “Headlines and Footlights,” *People’s Voice*, 31 July 1943 [“Apollo Comedy Bad for Race” column]; *Ibid.*, 7 August 1943 [Moore’s response].

¹⁵ “Fredi Says,” *People’s Voice*, 14 July 1945.

She told her readers that she was suiting up in her fighting armor and would get an explanation for such “rank discrimination” come “hell or high water.” After speaking with theater management at the Republic, she discovered that they had run the film exactly as it arrived from Universal. Since Republic had “passed the buck” to Universal, Washington contacted them and was told that the re-release was an exact copy of the original produced in 1934. When she spoke to Al Hourwich, Universal’s publicity director in New York, about the omissions and informed him that she was Fredi Washington, he claimed that he “could not understand why the deletion had been made unless it was to save time.” Hourwich soon realized that excuse after excuse would not satisfy Washington, and told her that he would get back to her after contacting management at the Republic. Hourwich called her back and reported that the theater assured him that all credits were included at the end of the picture. Washington told him that the theater management was lying because only a few days earlier she had looked for the credits and they were “conspicuous by their absences.” For such reasons and many others, Washington wanted her colleagues to be aware that the “fight for the rights of the Negro actor is an integral part of the fight for a permanent FEPC, Anti-Poll Tax Bill, etc.” Simply put, discrimination needed to be stamped out in all its forms.¹⁶

That column generated a lot of mail from readers, something Washington enjoyed because she felt that part of her purpose was fulfilled when she presented material that provoked people to think and respond. One reader, Wilma Fondel, wrote a letter very critical of the film. Fondel thought the character of Peola was an “exaggeration” because the notion that blacks could be so “tormented with discrimination” to be driven to such extremes was a “falsehood.” She also remarked that she came away from the picture with

¹⁶ Ibid.

the impression that Washington was “ashamed and disgusted with being a Negro.” She wanted to know how Washington could criticize others for accepting degrading roles when she had played Peola, “a role not fitting any race loving Negro.”¹⁷

Nothing was better than criticism to spark a good debate, and Washington felt compelled to respond. She reminded Fondel that *Imitation of Life* was nothing more than a screenplay and that actors played their parts according the whims of writers and directors. This remark was intended to counter Fondel’s statement that Washington’s portrayal of Peola indicated that she was personally ashamed and disgusted with being black. Washington reminded the woman that “The word actor means one who acts, or make believe, or who is something other than one’s self.”¹⁸

To Washington the most important part of Fondel’s letter had nothing to do with her, but instead was a shadow of attitudes and thinking which kept far too many people blinded. Washington commented that Fondel’s letter indicated that she could not accept the suggestion in *Imitation of Life*, “of the unjust social system under which we live which produces confused, neurotic people like Peola.” She explained to Fondel that, “‘Life’, in a not too certain way, was an indictment of that system.” Washington conceded that she would like to believe that all black people, regardless of the whiteness of their skin, would “stand up and fight the injustices heaped on Negroes and damn the system rather than take the easy way out by succumbing to its evils.” Anyone who would admit the truth, however, would agree, Washington insisted, that there were black people all over the United States who were “hiding their racial identity.” Washington considered

¹⁷ “Fredi Says,” *People’s Voice*, 4 August 1945.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Imitation of Life to be Hollywood's single attempt to demonstrate how a young black girl could be psychologically affected by the un-American way of life forced on black Americans. She praised Universal for having taken a step forward in 1934 by bringing a "hush-hush subject to the screen," but commented that they had not dealt with the subject since. In the end, she decided that the "American public needs to be shown the causes of [their] ills before they can understand or become inspired to [do] their part to cure them."¹⁹

Washington pointed out that offensive material promoted or performed by blacks sabotaged the continuing struggle to secure first-class citizenship for black Americans. She saw no room for anything, be it entertainment or public conduct, which might retard "race progress." She was basically arguing that a new collective image was vitally important because, since the war began, "unprecedented attention" was given to the fact that blacks were denied their rights as citizens in what was touted as a democratic society. The images projected on screen, stage, and radio needed to be adjusted to reflect an increasingly changing world and a more socially and politically conscious black populous.²⁰

Washington obviously considered it her responsibility to awaken black entertainers to the fact that their role in shaping the image of black Americans was highly political. She wanted to see blacks depicted as "American citizen[s] and not as...debased, disinherited, sub-normal human beings," and for producers to "stop treating Negro

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "Headlines and Footlights," *People's Voice*, 31 July 1943 [first quote]; Ibid., 7 August 1943 [second quote].

material in a very special way but rather to present it simply as part of the American way.”²¹

Film historian Donald Bogle has referred to Peola as “the New Negro demanding a real New Deal.” Miriam Petty, a film scholar, took Bogle’s argument a step further and argued that “As Peola, Washington was a moving, living and breathing New Negro woman.” Petty’s statement was based on her observation that Peola represented the visual icon of the New Negro woman—light skin, straight hair and European facial features—that often appeared on the cover of black publications like *The Crisis*. True, some blacks’ attempt to reshape the degrading image of themselves led to idealizations of who was considered a “pretty race girl,” but to refer to Washington as New Negro in the character of Peola dismissed her real life struggle to advance the cause of black Americans and lift them out of their so-called place. Both Bogle’s and Petty’s interpretation of Peola is highly flawed. Peola rebelled, and rebelling against the system was definitely a New Negro credo, but simple rebellion, regardless of its nature, did not qualify one as “New Negro.”²²

Washington’s long-held belief in the power of organized action to benefit black actors was evident as early as 1937 when she participated in the founding of the Negro Actors Guild (NAG) and served as the organization’s first executive secretary. The organization was established out of necessity, according to founding president Noble Sissle, because black actors in need had difficulty obtaining financial relief “because they were unable to identify themselves.” NAG officials initially sought money from the

²¹ “Headlines and Footlights,” *People’s Voice*, 21 August 1943 [first quote], *Ibid.*, 18 December 1943.

²² Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 60 [first quote]; Petty, “Doubtful Glory,” 181 [second quote]; *Ibid.*, 156 [third quote].

Theater Authority, a group that collected a “percentage of the receipts of theatrical benefits” and distributed those funds to organizations similar to NAG. The organization had committees that oversaw membership, visitation of the sick and fundraisers; however, it primarily functioned as a financial welfare group for black actors.²³

Miriam Petty studied Washington’s 1930s’ star persona, but neglected to thoroughly evaluate her efforts to combat stereotypes in film. Although she acknowledged Washington’s efforts to gain better roles for blacks, she argued that Washington simply joined an assault by light-skinned elites on the careers of Hattie McDaniel, Clarence Muse, and Stepin Fetch-it, all of whom were dark-skinned. Washington’s criticisms were not personal, however; rather, they reflected her participation in the Popular Front social movement. Washington had deep roots in this leftist culture and any understanding of her views on entertainment, particularly on blacks in the industry, must include an analysis of that culture. Washington dedicated her life to advocating for black people, especially those in show business. When Washington joined the *People’s Voice* as an editor, it meant that she joined a fight visible to anyone who picked up the paper and found their way to her column. She did not simply join the ranks of “young, sophisticated, and educated journalists,” as Petty suggested.²⁴

²³ “Negro Actors Form Guild: Benefit Show by New Group Will be Given on Friday,” *New York Times*, 11 December 1937, p.23, available from ProQuest Historical Newspapers Online; general information about the purpose of NAG was found in the New York Public Library Online Catalogue’s description of the NAG records series, available from, <http://catnyp.nypl.org/record=b3195136>, Internet; accessed 25 June 2005. Other founding members of the group included Washington old employers, W.C. Handy and Noble Sissle, as well as Cab Calloway, Bill “bojangles” Robinson, and Muriel Rhan.

²⁴ Petty, “Doubtful Glory,” 190. Petty only mentioned Washington’s *Fredi Says* column which is a sure indication of the wealth of material she ignored in Washington’s *Headlines and Footlights*. An evaluation of both columns would have yielded evidence contrary to Petty’s argument about Washington assaulting the careers of dark-skinned entertainers.

To demonstrate the pervasiveness of whites' view that America had a "Negro Problem," Fredi told a story about former Commissioner of New York State, Elmer Carter. Carter, a Harvard graduate, gave a speech in St. Paul, Minnesota, that he was sure had to be the "best speech St. Paul had ever listened to." He was certain that the daily papers would glorify him the next morning. Instead, he woke up the next morning to newspaper headlines covering a murder committed by a black person the night before. Washington praised Carter's observation that, "No Negro, it matters not what his education or accomplishments might be, could never rise above that Negro who is mentally and physically unfit and handicapped." Basically, the accomplishments of blacks took a backseat to the actions of blacks who perpetuated the image of all blacks as being unfit for white society.²⁵

In response, Fredi turned her attention to how monolithic images of blacks affected the field of entertainment and the careers of black actors and actresses. Paul Robeson, a black actor, singer, and human rights activist who had gained international notoriety, was scheduled to narrate *Labor for Victory*, a documentary radio script that focused on the "contribution of the Negro to the war effort." The special was also scheduled to be aired nationally. This was exactly the type of production Washington deemed necessary for correcting the misconceptions and improving race-relations. She was stunned when the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), the corporation broadcasting the documentary, notified all radio stations that they had the option to cancel *Labor for Victory*. NBC's actions, in Washington's view, pointed "effectively to the fact that Negroes, large and small, in factory and office, on the farm and on the stage,

²⁵ "Headlines and Footlights," *People's Voice*, 3 July 1943, p. 22.

north and south, east and west, scholar and criminal are all placed in one category, (Negro Problem), by white America.”²⁶

Washington knew that much work remained to be done to convince mainstream white America to accept blacks as fellow citizens instead of a “problem.” That is why she diligently sought better roles for black performers and urged get them to use the power of their position to correct the image of blacks. Accordingly, when she learned that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s abolitionist novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, was being considered for the big screen, she was ready for a fight.

In February, 1944, Washington learned from a press announcement that Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) studio was planning a film version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Washington’s first reaction was to become “incensed.” Instead, she decided to reread the novel before making her decision on whether or not to support MGM’s proposed project. Of particular interest to Washington was whether or not the character of Uncle Tom was the “selfish, back-bending, white-folks loving yard man” who “sold-out” fellow blacks to accommodate the wishes of white folk. After reading the novel, she concluded that the character was a “living saint” and not the “scoundrel” that the image which bears his name came to represent. Furthermore, she considered Stowe “one of the finest women ever to fight” the abolitionist cause and the book “one of the most eloquent pleas for the abolition of slavery which has probably ever been written.” Even so, she was opposed to “any picturization of it by MGM or any other studio” because, she noted, present conditions in the North and South were “not too far removed from conditions which existed under actual slavery.” All over the South blacks were restricted from voting while those in the North faced so much discrimination in the defense industries that the

²⁶ Ibid.

President had issued an executive order mandating fair employment practices. For Washington, the heart of the issue was the fact that “White America has not accepted the emancipation of the negro.” Her rationale for opposing a film production of Stowe’s once eloquent plea for black freedom was that its scenes of slavery would only satisfy white supremacists who would like nothing more than to see blacks “parade across the silver screen... in their so-called places.”²⁷

There were militant characters in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* who rebelled against the institution of slavery and did not mirror the image of ‘Uncle Tom.’ Washington knew, however, from her own experiences and from monitoring the entertainment industry that Hollywood, which often destroyed great literature through film, could not be trusted.

By the end of February Washington received news that the filming of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had gone cold. She spoke to an official at MGM’s New York offices who told her, “Because Negroes protested so vehemently against the screening of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer has decided to abandon the idea.” This was a sweet and swift victory. On the one hand it proved that protests, in the form of letters, telegrams, and post cards, that appealed “directly to those responsible” could have the desired effect. Hollywood was listening to and considering the demands of an increasingly socially conscious black audience. Washington commended the unified effort of the *People’s Voice*, the NAACP, the *Los Angeles Tribune*, and many locally based organizations for encouraging people to flood MGM with letters of protest.²⁸

²⁷ “Headlines and Footlights,” *People’s Voice*, 5 February 1944.

²⁸ “Headlines and Footlights,” *People’s Voice*, 26 February 1944.

Washington was not totally opposed to themes depicting the era of slavery. She did, however, want to see stories that dealt in fact and carried a social message of the day. When Dorothy Heyward, a white playwright, asked Washington to read her script, *Set My People Free*, based on the life of Denmark Vesey, Washington not only voiced her approval of the script, but also wrote an open letter in her column inviting Paul Robeson to consider playing the part of Vesey. For Washington, Vesey's slave conspiracy spoke to her present-day struggle of blacks to free themselves from prejudice, discrimination, and segregation.²⁹

Heyward asked Washington if she would consider accepting the role of Rose in the play, but under one condition. She wanted Washington to wear make-up to darken her skin, because, she asked, "wouldn't it confuse and bewilder the audience to see a fair complexion among the slaves—especially when they are told that Rose was born in Africa?" Washington's reaction is not known, but, considering that she had commented repeatedly on the need for producers, directors, and writers to accept the fact that black people were "apt to be milk-white, jet-black, or any color that happens to fall between the two," she was likely disappointed.³⁰

Washington's politics were directly tied to her experiences as an entertainer. She was deeply troubled by the professional limits she and many other black entertainers faced. She wanted both cultural and racial differences to be accepted in America. When asked about her politics, she said:

²⁹ "Fred! Says," *People's Voice*, 1 June 1946.

³⁰ From Dorothy Heyward to Fredi Washington, 4 June 1946, box 1, Fredi Washington Papers [first quote]; "Headlines and Footlights," *People's Voice*, 19 August 1944 [second quote].

I want a free America for many reasons, one being that I should like an opportunity for myself and others like me to be able to do plays because we have talent and not because we happen to be of this hue or that.

Washington longed for the day when entertainers would have the freedom to express themselves according to their ability and not the color of their skin.³¹

In 1949, Washington made her last known attempt to return to the screen. The story of a black family living in small-town New Hampshire, who “passed” in real life, was being told in the film *Lost Boundaries*, and Washington felt that she should have been cast for a leading part. While reading the *Los Angeles Daily News*, she found an interview with the director of the film, Alfred Werker. Washington was upset that Werker justified hiring no black actors for leading parts on grounds that “the majority of Negro actors are of the Uncle Tom, Minstrel show, shuffling dancer type of performer.” In a letter to Darr Smith, who conducted the interview and wrote the column, Washington labeled Werker’s excuse as lame since no black actors were ever interviewed for major roles in the film. *Lost boundaries* would have provided a rare opportunity for performers like herself, who were constantly turned down for “plays and screen fare on the excuse that they are too fair [skinned] . . .” For Washington, Werker’s excuse for denying black actors “the right to express [themselves] through the medium of screen . . .” was “a gross insult to [them] as American citizens, as Negroes, and as actors.” Some big name black actors, Canada Lee for example, were cast in the film but only in small roles. She concluded that Werker was “Hollywood’s number one anti-Negro bigot.” One year after

³¹ “Headlines and Footlights,” *People’s Voice*, 27 May 1944.

Washington blasted Werker for his anti-black comments, she would find herself officially unemployable in Hollywood.³²

³² To Darr Smith from Fredi Washington, 2 August 1949, box 1, Fredi Washington Papers.

EPILOGUE

After the war ended, Washington spoke out more and more about the need not only to recognize discrimination but also to take action against it. During her last year at the *People's Voice*, her writings focused on making her readers understand that they had to take a side and do their part to make sure that their side came out of the fight victorious with their demands met. She wanted the right to work and live as a black woman with dignity, which was the essence of her outcry. Washington was outraged when neither she nor any other black performer was considered for a leading role in *Lost Boundaries*. The demeaning excuse offered by Werker underscored her conviction that accepting stereotypical roles brought short-term financial success to blacks, but crippled their leverage in the industry.

It was not enough for blacks to want a better life or more opportunities to work. They had to do something about it, and by 1946, Fredi began encouraging black entertainers to join unions, cultural committees, or any sort of organized campaign that worked toward bringing an end to racial stereotypes.

Simply becoming a member of a labor union was not enough. Fredi encouraged entertainers to get the most out of their union membership by making their union work for them. They were laboring citizens just like anyone else who worked for a living. Theaters throughout the world were guilty, according to Fredi, of exploiting the labor of its musicians, dancers, and actors. Box Office stars generated weeks of profit when

demand was high, and theaters like Paramount, Radio City, and the Strand “put on as many shows as can be crowded into one day” to accommodate theater goers. As a result, twelve to fifteen hour work days left many performers “passé, broken in health, and without fire. . . .” These performers, Fredi pointed out, were “human too and deserve[d] the same protection against unfair working conditions as the rest of labor.” Theater officials clearly overworked performers and Fredi wanted the theater unions, to whom members paid dues, to crack down on such abuses.¹

Politically-minded individuals like Fredi also used other organizational means to force theater unions to address issues such as discrimination against black performers and audiences. For instance, in mid-1946, the theater division of the Independent Citizens Committee of Arts, Sciences and Professions (ICCASP), an organization in which Fredi was an active member, presented Actors Equity with a resolution demanding that a clause be included in all contracts which would prohibit all union members from performing in venues that enforced discriminatory policies.²

Pressures from such organizations forced Actors Equity to respond. In August 1947, Actors Equity took concrete action to try to force the National Theatre in Washington, D.C., to drop its ban on black theatergoers. More than ten years earlier, in 1935, the theater had temporarily abandoned its “white-only” audience policy during a performance of *Porgy and Bess*, in response to protests by Ralph Bunche, Todd Duncan, and George Gershwin. After the production ended, the National reinstated its “no-black” admission policy. In 1947, Actors Equity gave official notice to the theater that it would

¹ “Headlines and Footlights,” *People’s Voice*, 30 October 1943.

² “Fredi Says,” *People’s Voice*, 4 May 1946.

be “out of bounds for its members,” unless it raised the ban by June 1, 1948. Fredi considered this as only a partial victory because the owners planned to turn the theater into a movie house to avoid “taking the lead in breaking down discrimination in D.C.” By the time the August 1948 deadline came around, the National was indeed operating as a movie house. The full victory over that theater did not come until 1952, when it reopened once again as a live performance theater and did away with its exclusionary admission policy.³

In 1947, the National Negro Congress launched its Cultural Division, in which Fredi became involved. According to her, the group developed the most “far reaching plan yet to be devised for the purpose of ousting discrimination in the arts and opening up job opportunities” for black artists and musicians. The Cultural Division’s purpose fit perfectly with Fredi’s own drive and she proposed that it could serve as the “Fair Practices Committee of the artistic world.”⁴

Despite such progress, Fredi grew increasingly impatient with the slow movement for change. She feared that top black artists had become complacent and reluctant to take political action because they were too economically secure. She mused that “surely” their complacency was not due to their being “satisfied with their civil rights status.” She attempted to get “a prominent band leader” to endorse the Cultural Division but he refused on grounds that he was not sure of “its political views” and suspected that he would be labeled a radical for being affiliated with the group. The band leader’s concerns were legitimate, considering the escalated post-war hysteria over fears of alleged

³ Ibid., 30 August 1947; Cultural Tourism DC. “African American Heritage Trail,” [database online], http://www.culturaltourismdc.org/info-url3948/info-url_show.htm?doc_id=212951&attrib_id=7967 (accessed 3 January 2006).

⁴ “Fredi Says,” *People’s Voice*, 8 March 1947; Ibid., 29 March 1947.

Communist infiltration in American society and possible overthrow of the United States government. Radicals, socialists, liberals, labor and civil rights leaders were predominately viewed as “subversive.” Often, the unions or organizations they joined were accused of being either Communist fronts or run by communist. A. Philip Randolph had earlier refused to continue his involvement with the NNC on grounds that it was overrun by Communists.⁵

World War II ended with a second allied victory over undemocratic regimes. After the war, American authorities, including investigators for the Federal Bureau of Investigation and members of Congress, intensified their monitoring of Communist influence in the United States. On-going investigations and monitoring of persons alleged or known to have been affiliated with the Communist party began as early as 1938, when the House of Representatives created the Special Committee on Un-American Activities, later known as the House Un-American Activities committee (HUAC). The committee was authorized to investigate, 1) the “extent, character, and objects” of what was determined to be “un-American propaganda activities;” and, 2) the diffusion of subversive propaganda initiated from outside the United States or attacks from inside on “the principles of the form of government as guaranteed” by the Constitution. The language of the authorization, however, does not reveal the abuse of that power during the early 1950s by Joseph McCarthy, the notorious red-baiting Senator responsible for destroying the lives and careers of many innocent Americans.⁶

⁵ “Fred Says,” *People’s Voice* 7 June 1947; *Federal Bureau of Investigation file on the National Negro Congress* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1987).

⁶ Albert Fried, *McCarthyism: The Great American Red Scare, A Documentary History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 16.

During the war, U S. government officials, particularly southern Congressmen, led loyalty attacks against many Americans who were politically outspoken, whether Communist or not, and summoned them to testify before HUAC. In 1945, with the end of WWII and increasing concerns about the threat of Communist influences in radio, labor unions and Hollywood, the committee regained its significance. As Ellen Schrecker observed, it was not until HUAC'S 1947 investigations of Hollywood that the committee "gained national attention." Screenwriters, directors, producers, and actors were called before HUAC to testify to their political loyalty to the United States. Some Hollywood witnesses were "friendly," others, most notably the "Hollywood Ten," refused to answer questions about their political beliefs on the grounds that the committee "was unconstitutionally violating their freedom of speech and association." The Ten were ordered to serve six-month sentences for contempt of Congress and, in 1950, the Supreme Court turned back their appeal.⁷

Hollywood's reaction to the controversy came by way of its official spokesman, Eric Johnston, also president of the Motion Picture Association of America. Initially, Johnston "pledged that Hollywood would cooperate with the investigation at the same time as he insisted there would be no blacklist." That position quickly changed, however, and by December of 1947, just two months after the Hollywood Ten had testified, they were fired and blacklisted by top-ranking Hollywood producers. In the now famous Waldorf Statement, released 3 December 1947, members of the Association of Motion Picture Producers declared the "actions" of the Ten as a "disservice" that warranted suspension and no chance for re-employment until they were acquitted or vowed "under

⁷ Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents*. (Boston: Bedford/ST. Martin's Press, 1994), 203.

oath” that they were not a Communist.” The Waldorf Statement was just the beginning of blacklisting in Hollywood.⁸

On June 22, 1950, the official entertainment industry blacklist, *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*, was issued, and Fredi Washington’s name was on it. The report was compiled by the publishers of *Counterattack: The Newsletter of Facts to Combat Communism*, who were reportedly three former Federal Bureau of Investigation agents and a television producer. *Red Channels* represented the formalization of blacklisting, which had been practiced since at least the release of the Waldorf Statement. In alphabetical order, *Red Channels* listed the names of alleged Communist, “fellow travelers” of Communists, suspected Communist front organizations, and pro-Communist publications. The names of alleged Communists were listed next to the organizations of which they were members, the events they had sponsored, or affiliations which deemed them Communists.⁹

There are several possibilities for why Washington was blacklisted in *Red Channels*. She may indeed have been a member of the Communist party at some point in her life. In a 1989 interview with Kathleen Currie, Marvel Cooke, a black woman who served as assistant managing editor of the *People’s Voice*, said that she recruited Washington into the Communist party; however, she also said that Washington was not an active member of the party in Harlem. According to Cooke, she, Washington, and Doxey Wilkerson, all staff members at the *People’s Voice* and all party members, were fired from the paper one-by-one, and notified of their termination by way of letters. This

⁸ Schrecker, *Age of McCarthyism*, 215-216. The statement was named after the 24, 25 November 1947 meeting of producers at New York City’s Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.

⁹ *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*. (New York: American Business Consultants, Inc., 1950), 153; Schrecker, *Age of McCarthyism*, 217.

may explain why Washington never announced her resignation from the *People's Voice*. Her column just simply vanished from the pages of the paper sometime in 1948, and the publication of the paper ended shortly thereafter.¹⁰

Red Channels listed seven organizations and two events for which it alleged Washington was either a sponsor, participant, or simply affiliated with. There were no specific references to her participation in any of the groups and causes she was linked with in her writings, making it difficult to determine if she indeed had any connection. Although Washington was definitely active in the NNC and the ICCASP, neither of these groups was listed with her name, although each was included in the organizations section of *Red Channels*.¹¹

Years before her official blacklisting, Fredi was aware that many considered her a Communist, and may not have been surprised to find her name in the report. In 1944, she commented that many people had asked her if she was a Communist and some just assumed she was. At that time, she claimed she was “not a Communist,” nor had she been “invited to join that organization.” Fredi was not as interested, she claimed, in whether people thought she was a Communist as she was about what made them think that she was. She believed she was labeled a Communist because she fought for black entertainers and used her column to show how their “destiny [was] tied with that of every Negro, big or small” In that same column, Fredi said she wanted “a free America for all peoples” and would “work with anyone who wants the same thing, be he communist or any other named group.” A year later, an admirer of Fredi’s column wrote

¹⁰ Marvel Cooke, interview by Kathleen Currie, 1 November 1989, Washington Press Club Foundation [documents on-line], <http://press.org/wpforal/cook5.htm> (accessed 28 December 2004).

¹¹ See *Red Channels*.

the *People's Voice* and asked if someone could tell him more about her. She responded to his request through her column, and answered by writing, "Some folks call me a Communist, others a reactionary but between you and me, I'm a Catholic."¹²

Washington's last stage performances were in 1948 and 1949. She did not make any movies during that time, but she did appear in two Broadway plays, *A Long Way from Home* (1948) and *How Long Till Summer* (1949). She also appeared on the television show, *The Goldbergs*, in which she played a maid. Her television performance was well received by one viewer who sent a letter to CBS, praising the station for not stereotyping the maid character, but rather, allowing "Washington a chance to act as herself."¹³

After being blacklisted in 1950, however, Washington never again appeared on stage or screen. Her film career was virtually over by the late 1930s, and five years passed between her first and following appearance during the 1940s. By 1950, her performance career was near its end, but being labeled a Communist certainly hastened that end.

In 1951, Washington's eighteen-year marriage to Lawrence Brown ended in divorce. One year later she married Dr. Hugh Anthony Bell, a dentist, and moved with him to Stamford, Connecticut. In Stamford, Washington reportedly took a job at the local Bloomingdales, where she worked from 1954 to 1980.¹⁴

¹² "Freda Says," 57 May 1944; Ibid., 29 October 1945.

¹³ Mr. and Mrs. Leslie E. Coles to "The Goldbergs," 26 January 1949, box 1, Freda Washington Papers

¹⁴ Archivist biographical notes, Freda Washington Papers; New York Public Library Digital Library Collections, Freda Washington Papers biographical abstract [database on-line] (accessed 10 August 2005), http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/ead/scm/scmfreda/@Generic__BookTextView/132;pt=191.

Washington's contributions to the arts did not go unnoticed. During the same year that she was blacklisted, she was presented with a scroll from The Committee for the Negro in the Arts for her "outstanding contributions as an artist, to the cultural life of the United States and to the struggles of the Negro people and their artists for full equality and freedom." In 1975, she was also inducted into the Black Filmmaker's Hall of Fame, followed in 1979 by the CIRCA Life Achievement Award.¹⁵

Privately, Fredi enjoyed reading, going to the theatre, horseback riding, driving, taking long walks, and smoking Marlborough cigarettes. She had no children. She was widowed in the 1970s, but continued living in Connecticut until she died at the age of ninety on June 28, 1994, after suffering a stroke and contracting pneumonia.¹⁶

As she herself often said, Fredi Washington wanted an America in which all citizens could be treated equally and be respected, despite physical differences. She stood by her principles, diligently voiced her demands, and agitated for change by criticizing a few, praising others, and taking an active part in the Popular Front and Civil Rights Movements. When Fredi joined the *People's Voice*, she joined ranks with a cadre of progressive blacks and whites who made it their life's work to push for political, social, and economic changes in America that more closely resembled the ideals on which the country was based. She was tired of black people being simply "tolerated" in America. Instead, she stood and fought for equality.

¹⁵ Photocopy of scroll, box 2, Fredi Washington Papers; Archivist biographical notes, Fredi Washington Papers; To Ms. Washington from Dennis Fox and Dearl Thomas, 21 March 1979.

¹⁶ Various clippings, Fredi Washington Papers.

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