

Minority Experiences and Perceptions in Early Hollywood: An Archival History

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A "Passing" Project

Introduction:

- Cross-race casting and forced racial passing have been exclusionary tactics used by the American film industry since the late 19th century. Frequently, roles in Hollywood that should have gone to people of color were instead given to light-skinned, "passing," individuals or white actors.
- This archival research project looked at individual accounts and experiences of how simply seeming whiter opened up manifold doors and opportunities within Hollywood that minority groups in America had been continuously excluded from.
- Research goals for the project included using personal archives from individual profiles in order to contextualize the exclusionary motivations and actions behind cross-race casting and racial passing in television and film casting at the turn of the 20th century.



Anna May Wong is hailed as Hollywood's first Chinese American movie star. She famously fought exclusion, racism, typecasting, and pay inequity during her career, defying odds to succeed. She is now set to be the first Asian American on US Currency. (sourced from "In Her Own Words," Center for Asian American Media)

Methodology:

- In order to develop a comprehensive archival website for the Columbia Libraries system, the "Passing Project" included categorizing archive collections that had been donated by a family member to UCLA, and adding them to a site with the scanned image archives sorted. Because the archives do not exist in the public domain and research on this individual has not been published widely, much of the project had to be done with privacy in mind.
- To supplement, database searches and copyright research was conducted, including finding secondary articles and taking inventory of glossy stills and digital images, as well as the archival deposits they came from, and even finding public images and archives to include with the personal profiles and case studies. Both the private archival materials and public research collected were centralized into a digital site and categorized both chronologically and different professional and personal milestones specific to the individual.

Conclusions:

1. Exclusionary practices and racial preferences towards light-skinned and white people illustrated in these stories continue to exist in Hollywood today.
2. People of color often felt compelled to "pass" racially in order to find a place, both physically in productions and socially, within the mainstream film industry.

Next Steps: Set to publish sorted archives and profiles as a digital site/web collection within the Columbia Libraries System, showcasing the individuals researched, their work and personal archive collections, in addition to shedding light on the larger scholarly history of racial passing in American Hollywood casting practices.

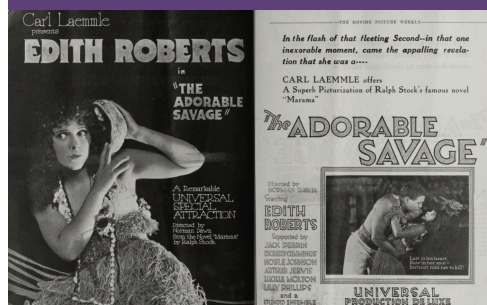
Works Cited:

Larsen, Nella. 1986. [1929] *Passing*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Gaines, Jane. 2005. "In-and-Out-of-Race: The Story of Noble Johnson," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, No. 29: 73-87.

Case Studies:

Actor Noble Johnson transitioned away from stardom in Black cinema when he began getting cast in Hollywood for Native American, Asian, and white roles due to his lighter skin complexion. Ultimately, he changed his name and began "passing" as white in order to remain in mainstream productions.



An advertisement for Universal's "The Adorable Savage," starring Noble Johnson as Native chief Ratu Madri, who forcibly marries the 'innocent' Edith Roberts. (sourced from Universal Pictures)

Early Hollywood and the Invention of Blackness

Introduction:

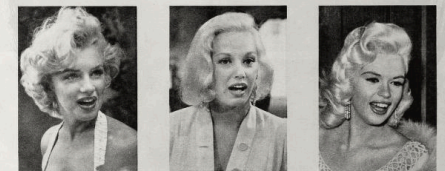
- Professor Racquel Gates' newest book focuses on the invention of a black aesthetic within Early Hollywood and interactions between Hollywood stars and racial and ethnic minority groups.
- This second archival book project tackled larger questions of perceptions of classic Hollywood and its stars from the perspective of often marginalized racial and ethnic groups, including African American communities and Italian American communities.
- Discussing the historical relationship between racial and ethnic identity and representation in the American film industry, a more complete picture was formed of said perceptions contemporaneous to the classic Hollywood era.

Methodology:

- Book project research consisted of compiling materials like secondary sources and scholarly articles surrounding the formation of a Black identity in classic Hollywood, in addition to sorting through and analyzing archival evidence on shared and shifting perceptions of classic Hollywood stars by a wider range of historically marginalized groups.
- Preliminary research included working with private archival collections, including that from the Academy of Motion Pictures, as well as archives open to the public, like fan magazine archives from the 1940s and beyond.
- All of this material was then analyzed and sorted into annotated bibliographies in order to better understand their applications in different racial and ethnic minority communities in the classic Hollywood era.

Case Studies:

Marilyn Monroe and her tumultuous relationship with baseball player Joe DiMaggio put her on the radar of Italian-American communities across the nation, who iconized her quickly.



There's a reason why Jane has very great admiration for her biggest rival, Marilyn Monroe. Hailed as "a second Marilyn," Mamma Fan (then appears to be following Jane's advice. Joyce Mansfield admits she's learned to heed Jane's words of warning by bitter experience. A 1957 article about Marilyn Monroe in the popular fan magazine, Photoplay. The article writes crudely about the sex appeal of Monroe and stars with similar appearances, namely the "earthy, dark-skinned, disheveled sex bomb" look. (sourced from Lantern Media History Digital Library)



Ella Fitzgerald and Marilyn Monroe developed a strong bond at a time when interracial friendships were looked down on. Monroe and Fitzgerald shared similar childhoods and became close publicly. Monroe used her credibility and fame to support Fitzgerald's growing career in the face of rampant racism. Even after Monroe's untimely death, Fitzgerald praised Monroe's ongoing support for her. (sourced from Getty Images)

Conclusions:

1. Specific Hollywood stars and icons gained new significance in the context of ethnic and racial spheres, sometimes of appreciation and admiration and other times of disdain.
2. Marginalized communities went unrepresented in most of Early Hollywood and relied on those in positions of privilege and fame in order to reach success and empowerment in the same vein.

Next Steps: Applying direct preliminary research to developing distinct arguments for Professor Gates' second book project, titled *Hollywood Style and the Invention of Blackness*.

Works Cited:

Maucione, Jessica. "Post-Neighborhood: Returning to Little Italy in American Narratives of the Globalization Age." Order No. 3333936, Washington State University, 2008.

"Making Their Voices Heard: The Inspiring Friendship of Ella Fitzgerald and Marilyn Monroe." *Kirkus Reviews* LXXXVIII, no. 1 (Jan 01, 2020).

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