Performing African American Womanhood: Hazel Scott and the Politics of Image in WWII America

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In 1943 famed piano virtuoso, singer and actress Hazel Scott held up production for three days on the Columbia Studio film, *The Heat's On*.[1] Her foray into films was a new, welcomed, and unexpected opportunity for Scott. At the young age of twenty-three she signed a three picture deal with Columbia Studios which sought her out because of her mesmerizing performances as a classically trained "boogie woogie" pianist.[2] Scott's on the set protest developed because of what she identified as negative stereotyping of African American women performing in the film. She furiously opposed the insistence of the film's crew in sullying the formerly white, neatly pressed aprons of Black women extras in the scene Scott was shooting. These women were filmed seeing their soldier boyfriends off to war. Ironically, this war was being fought to "preserve" democracy and freedom abroad as racism, discrimination, and segregation were sanctioned national practices at home.

The film crew working on *The Heat's On* felt that "Negro" female domestics would not be dressed in aprons that "looked too new."[3] Initially, Scott saw it as unfortunate that the only African American actresses in the film were playing domestics, but she understood the power and importance of the positive image provided by her own performance in the film. Upon discovering this unnecessary adjustment to the script, Scott became unwilling to participate in perpetuating the debasing and stereotypical image of untidy African American women because she understood the awesome power of film and media in the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. She went on a one woman strike for three days until, "black women in the film were given proper costumes and not depicted as seeing their sweethearts off to war wearing dirty Hoover aprons."[4] Following this "strike" the director relented and allowed these extras to be dressed in street clothes.[5] Although Scott would go on to be the first African American woman to host her own television show, and her popularity would increase with meteoric velocity over the next decade, this small victory would cost her a budding film career.[6]

Under contract for an additional film with Columbia, Scott appeared in the film *Rhapsody in Blue,* which was released in 1945, though she explained that after the film was completed, "I never did make another picture in Hollywood."[7] Her protest was not in isolation. She, along with other performers and national African American organizations, exerted pressure on Hollywood to improve the images of Blacks in cinema.[8] She refused to play degrading roles, including those traditionally given to Black women such as maids, mammies or prostitutes.[9] Instead, Scott always exuded glamour, sophistication, and pride. Her film and television career stood in stark contrast to film appearances often made by African American women, and through this resistance Scott was able to create an on stage persona that positively represented African American women.

Multiple lenses are required to understand the impact of Hazel Scott on the progress in cultural imagery of African American women as well as to recognize her historical contributions in a multifaceted and complex way. A Black feminist lens is vital to understanding her life, artistic production, and resistance. Another lens, which is central to understanding Scott, is that of performance representation and the importance of performance as a historic site of struggle and resistance. Lastly, her location as an African American female performer in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s is also essential for understanding Scott's significance. From this location she confronted the negative cultural image of African American women that is a major component of her legacy. Finally, I will consider her positionality within and without the dominant gender narrative of the historical eras in which she lived in order to interrogate her unorthodox life and legacy.[10] To leave a legacy of resistance Scott placed herself in the forefront of this battle over cultural image by challenging and disrupting in several ways the dominant racial and gender narratives that gave rise to these false tropes. She waged a relentless challenge against negative representations of Black women perpetuated throughout U.S. media and used her life and her livelihood to interrupt pervasive forms of oppression by subverting gender and racial traditions.

African American Women and Image in WWII

Scott and other African American women artists confronted endless assaults on African American women's integrity and worth by the mainstream media and Hollywood. Blues singer Bessie Smith's singular appearance on film in the 1929 *St. Louis Blues* demonstrated one of these degrading images of African American womanhood: Smith was portrayed sitting first on the floor of her room, and later at a bar drinking whiskey straight from the bottle, disheveled and distraught.[11] In reality, Bessie Smith was known for her glamorous costuming that often included feather boas and silk gowns.[12] The film's portrayal of African American Blues women flowed from the White popular imagination and was not a Black reality. The American film and media industries reduced the image of Smith and scores of other African American women to common stereotypes though World War II era films allowed for a temporary gap in this on-screen degradation with occasional glimpses of positive Black imagery. This change ended as McCarthyism descended upon the nation.[13] African American performers, Scott above all, understood the link between negative cultural imagery, representation, and political and economic subjugation during the waning years of World War II.

The public debate surrounding the access of African Americans to democracy and freedom raged during as well as after World War II. For many African Americans, a war fought for freedom abroad, led to the possibility of attaining equality at home and seemed to loom on the horizon. The conclusion of the war represented a watershed decade for African America. Franklin Roosevelt

signed Executive Order 8802 in 1941 which outlawed racial discrimination by federal contractors, including the defense industry, leading to the slow but eventual opening of defense and Northern factory jobs to over a million African American men and women. Thousands of African American southern laborers, consisting of mainly sharecroppers and farmers, were able to join the military. Thousands used this as an opportunity to migrate to the North to improve their lives and fortunes. Blacks, in both the North and South, increased their access to unions and employment protections. They also gained limited political power. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. was elected to the House of Representatives in 1944 becoming one of only two Black congressmen elected in the post-Reconstruction age. By 1946 there were over twenty five African Americans serving in state legislatures around the country.[14]

The entertainment industry was touched by these gains as well, as the African American community was represented as never before on radio, America's most coveted form of media in the forties. Black entertainers were heard on radio talk shows, variety shows and some networks were able to develop Black timeslots.[15] Although performers' appearances were not substantial, Americans were able to see Black images in films and in theatre in an unprecedented fashion. Several all-Black productions were created including the Broadway production *Porgy and Bess*, the American Negro Theatre's production of *Anna Lucasta*, and the historic movie musicals *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) and *Stormy Weather* (1943).[16] Musicians also made gains during the 1944-1945 seasons alone when over twenty-three performers, including Hazel Scott, appeared in recitals at famed Carnegie Hall in New York.[17] These gains represented small immediate changes in the lives of African American families. They produced a hope that was palpable rooted in new positive African American images, from the proliferation of Black defense workers featured in recruitment posters, to Black movie actresses *sans* maids' uniforms, and reinforced the message that a new day had come. Scott symbolized the change achieved and that to come for Black Americans.

Though she was based in New York her image, activism and contributions as an artist and performer were spread throughout the nation via regional and national Black and White press, mainstream media, and her relentless touring schedule. This image was also transmitted through her appearance in a small number of Hollywood films and her short lived post-war television show. She became a national symbol of African American progress and signified an expansion of opportunity that the Black community had fought to obtain, at home and abroad, in the war. For African Americans Scott's dignified image signified a small movement toward equality.

The overarching negative portrayals of African American women did not simply represent a national insult to African American womanhood, one tool within a contingent that was meant to subvert Black political and economic

power. The contradictory imagery reveals an inherent political debate and tension within both the negative and positive portrayals of African American women historically. This is a particularly important struggle during and immediately following World War II. Few other facets of American society have had as much impact on the lives of African Americans as that of the cultural image. Sociologist K. Sue Jewell, in her study on African American women's image in popular culture, points to the fact that cultural images are not benign and especially reflect social hostility which correlates with the value of various segments of American society. Cultural images work to identify those segments that are unlikely to access social power or resources and, ultimately, not contribute to society. They determine who deserves equal citizenship, full rights and opportunity. She says convincingly of African American women, "In many instances, cultural images of African American women … have been distorted and generally uncharacteristic of individuals belonging to this group; yet these images have had a profound influence" on other people's perceptions and expectations of African American women.[18]

Prior to and during World War II the pervasive cultural images of African American women were those of servants who were excessively obedient and/or lascivious women. These images lent no credence to the African American woman's fight for equality. There is a conscious attack on these images by Scott who participated in "reject[ing] and reconstruct[ing] cultural images symbolizing African American women" and attempted to place the ownership of cultural image into the hands of "African American women themselves."[19] Because of the historical degradation and assailment of African American images the World War II era represents a time period in which agency over cultural image was seen as crucial political terrain. Framed by the whims of Hollywood, Scott was acutely aware in the war years and throughout her career of the distortion of the African American woman's image on stage, in film and on television.[20] Scott's protest on the set of *The Heat's On* represented a small but important battle that she waged throughout her career in countless other major and minor political and artistic protests. *The Heat's On* work action denoted but one dimension of Scott's protest, however, it embodied all of the essential elements of her approach to resistance in equally attacking racism and sexism. Scott used her on stage and screen representations as her central mode of resistance.

Harlem Prodigy

The seeds for a life of resistance were planted in Scott's unusual childhood and adolescence. Hazel Scott was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad, in 1920. Her family background is representative of the transnational identities created via the African Diaspora. Her father, R. Thomas Scott was an English professor who was born and raised in Scotland where his Nigerian (Yoruba) ancestors were brought during slavery. He was later educated and eventually taught in England. Her mother, Alma Long was the daughter of Afro-Venezuelans

who emigrated from Venezuela, just a ten mile ferry ride away from Trinidad. Alma Long was a sought after debutante and talented musician who played several instruments including the piano and saxophone.[21] Long's father, a government architect who designed several "official buildings," was a "man of considerable importance [o]n the island."[22] He saw to it that his daughter had the best musical education available in Trinidad.

Scott's parents' lineage, income, education and status suggest that they were a part of the island's bourgeois class.[23] Rooted in her father's occupation, and her mother's heritage, the Scotts' position in the class hierarchy should have been somewhat secure considering their background. In the early twentieth century the average Trinidadian labored in agriculture and earned as little as thirty-five cents per day in the booming industries of sugar and cocoa.[24] While Scott's father worked as a professor at St. Mary's College, educating the island's male elite, over forty-three percent of the islands population remained illiterate.[25] After several years of marriage the security that the family's future promised was soon ripped away by the departure of Thomas Scott who left his family in 1923 to seek his fortune in the United States. Unlike many in the Caribbean emigrating at that time Scott did not send money back to support his family.

Growing emotionally distant from his wife, he used this relocation to begin a new life without a wife and child.[26] His departure left Alma Scott struggling to survive by performing a variety of jobs and slowly descending in class status. It is not completely clear why a man with his social status and elite occupation would choose to move to the U.S. There is a claim in one biographical account of Hazel Scott that her father moved to work as a professor at Fisk University; however, there is insufficient proof in the small number of historical references of him to demonstrate that this was true.[27] It is very likely that Thomas Scott moved to the United States with the dreams that accompanied many Caribbean immigrants, the many men and women from all class stratifications who saw the promise of opportunity and increased access to wealth in the U.S. Hazel, her mother and grandmother would also leave Trinidad for New York in 1924. The most common destination for these immigrants was Harlem, a thriving Black enclave in northern Manhattan.[28]

In 1924 Harlem was about to embark on a renaissance that would attract Black intellectuals and artists from all over the globe.[29] Arthur P. Davis describes the neighborhood during this period in the following way,

> Harlem in the 1920's was a delightful place…with its broad avenues uncluttered then by excess traffic, with its clean streets and well kept apartments houses … Harlem was then still a relatively new settlement for Negroes, and the grime and the deterioration that came with subsequent years of poverty and job-discrimination and frustration had not blighted the black

> city…our enjoyment was in part the pride of having a city of our very own- a city of black intellectuals and artists, of peasants just up from the south, of West Indians and Africans, of Negroes of all kinds and all classes.[30]

In the 1920's Harlem's atmosphere was thick with a southern and Caribbean overlay. It was also alive with artistic creativity and bourgeoning Black modernity. This is the Harlem that four year old Hazel Scott encountered with her family. This Black cultural and political space deeply influenced the exceptional person she would become.

By the time Scott arrived in Harlem she was already known as a child prodigy in her native Trinidad. By the age of three she had learned to read, had perfect pitch and made her public debut as a pianist.[31] At age eight, Scott was permitted to audition for Paul Wagner, a renowned professor of music at Julliard,[32] who after her audition placed his hand on the little girl's head and is reported to have said, "I am in the presence of a genius".[33] He then agreed to teach her privately, as she was far too young to attend Julliard.[34] Scott transitioned from private music student to professional musician by the start of adolescence. She was formally introduced to the Harlem community at a recital in which she was publicized as "Little Miss Hazel Scott, Child Wonder Pianist".[35] Scott's star was ascending rapidly.

Ascendancy

The dreams and aspirations that led Scott's father to immigrate had been quickly dashed within the racial binary that was embedded at all levels of America's societal structure. R. Thomas Scott's "sense of dignity was constantly in conflict with American race prejudice".[36] Separated from his family and unable to secure a job in which he could utilize his academic prowess he was "reduced to odd jobs" and "fell into a deep depression".[37] In the years before he fell ill he instilled a great sense of racial pride in his daughter, a pride which was heightened after he joined Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association and became a Garveyite.[38] In the absence of R. Scott Thomas' financial support Alma Scott held a variety of jobs when she first arrived in New York, including teaching piano. She taught herself how to play the tenor saxophone when she discovered that there was no audience or work for Black classical piano players.[39] Eventually, she began doing gigs with various bands, going on the road, even working a brief stint with the famous band leader and trumpet player, Valaida Snow; then she took a job as a saxophonist in Lil Hardin's' all woman band, the Harlem Harlicans.[40] Her father's descent and her mother's ingenuity and hard work must have imparted sobering and profound lessons. First, Hazel Scott saw the devastating impact that racial oppression could have on the lives of African Americans. Second, she became privy, through her mother's gigs and contacts, to a community of capable Black women who

functioned in non-traditional occupations, and projected very different images of Black womanhood, and often rejected roles prescribed by the dominant gender norms.

As she grew into womanhood, Hazel Scott was able to access a dynamic circle of African American women who existed within a women's musician subculture of their own construction.[41] These women employed traditional vehicles of resistance in new ways. Patricia Hill Collins describes two primary areas of resistance for African American women as self-definition and self determination:

> For Black women as a collectivity, emancipation, liberation, or empowerment as a group rests on two interrelated goals. One is the goal of self definition, or the power to name one's own reality. Self determination, or aiming for the power to decide one's own destiny, is the second fundamental goal. Ideally, oppositional knowledge developed by, for, and/or in defense of African American women should foster the group's self-definition and self-determination.[42]

This description accurately depicts many of the women that Scott would encounter, first as her mother began to work full time for Lil Hardin's all women band and, later, when she formally went to work as a paid member of her mother's own all female band.[43]

These women were not always attached to bands, such as her mother's friend and Scott's eventual mentor, Billie Holiday. Scott grew fond of Holiday and found in her both a teacher and friend. Scott said of Holiday, "She always protected me. She had a very fierce protectiveness where I was concerned." After one show very early in Scott's career Holiday chased the young performer down the street and through several subway cars to scold her (and bring her to her mother) after she lied about her age, pretending to be eighteen, in order to impress an older male musician. Scott explains Holiday's attitudes toward other female musicians, "God help you if you sang out of tune, but if you had something going, she was very interested and willing to help you".[44] This description is telling as it points to a self defined Holiday, a woman detached from the dominant gender narrative's focus on meekness in women. Concurrently, it reveals a Holiday who contributes to the success and self definition of others. In fact, it was Holiday who would secure Scott a gig at Café Society, a job that would transform her career.[45] Scott built working relationships and/or friendships with a host of women who worked against and outside the dominant gender narrative including piano player Lil Hardin, who married Louis Armstrong.[46] Hardin was assertive and unorthodox as both a musician and businesswomen. She said of her own playing, "I hit the piano so loud and hard,

they all turned around to look at me."[47] After disbanding the Harlem Harlicans, a Black "all girl band," she formed a nearly all male band keeping Alma Scott on the tenor sax.

It was Hardin's band where Alma Scott honed her skills. The image of this beautiful woman wielding a tenor sax and her "strong way of playing" resulted in several run-ins with unappreciative male audience members. The harassment was so incessant that Alma Scott developed memorable one-line answers to combat their insults. Men would often complain, "Lady you play that thing just like a man." Scott would retort, "Mister, you carry your children just like a lady!"[48] These men were undoubtedly threatened by this shift in gender roles encouraged by the actions and images of women performing within a musical space that was traditionally male dominated. Within jazz and swing musical productions women were often limited to participation as vocalists, and it was easier to attach sexuality to the vocalists than the instrumentalists who were expected to be much more aggressive in their playing. Women musicians were seen as occupying inappropriate roles; "girl musicians' often inherited the girl singer' stereotype, i.e., that they were unskilled sex objects. The women instrumentalists were also seen as freaks whereas girl singers were not. The girl musicians were seen as masculine as their instruments: drums, trumpets, saxophones, etc.[49] This experience was only exacerbated by racism. Alma Scott, like other African American woman instrumentalists, was not deterred by this negative characterization. Instead her/their occupation of this musical space became a form of resistance to endemic sexism and racism. Acting as a witness to this configuration of Black womanhood Hazel Scott would incorporate many of these ideals into her life and career.

Regardless of the role modeling accessed by Scott via a subculture of Black female musicians, none compared to the influence of her mother. Well before Thomas Scott's death, Alma Scott had already begun to impart an unconventional wisdom to her daughter; for example, the elder Scott never taught her daughter to cook for fear that she would burn her hands on the stove, ending her promising career as a pianist.[50] Scott described her mother:

> "She was cool and level headed. When I stumbled or bumped my toe she was right there saying 'Forget it. Move on.' And when she found me getting carried away with myself she was on hand to tug my coat. As a result I kept my feet firmly on the ground. I still have them there."[51]

It is clear from Scott's description of her mother that a woman who existed inside this Black female musician subculture assimilated attributes that were not commonly associated within dominant narratives such as assertiveness, outspokenness and discernment, but were valued within the African American community. From these women Scott must have learned and assimilated a

range of skills as a musician as well as how to navigate life as a woman.[52] Angela Davis identifies these skills as possible Black feminist traits.[53] Davis' analysis can be applied to the lives of Black women in all walks of life throughout American history including Hazel Scott, her mother, and their circle of Black women musicians in the 1930s and 1940s. This sentiment, that could be seen as Black feminist in nature, would suffuse the life, performance, image, and activism of Hazel Scott.

In spite of the tragic loss of her father and her subsequent despair, Scott's career began an ascent that would crest during the late 1940s and early 50s. She performed her first professional solo in 1935 at the Roseland Ballroom playing on a bill with the Count Basie Orchestra.[54] She exclaimed, "The Basie band! Sixteen men. When they walked off the stand, I went on."[55] In 1936 she won a competitive radio audition sponsored by the Mutual Broadcasting System, beating ninety-seven other young people who tried out for the job. The contest resulted in her being awarded a six month contract in which she was charged with "sustaining programs with the added privilege of announcing her own numbers".[56] It is during this tenure that she began to share her unique style of "swinging the classics" with a broader audience; "During her series with Mutual she would select classical numbers and play them straight, but sometimes a habit of beating her foot in steady tempo developed unconsciously. Gradually she found herself introducing unusual rhythmic touches into the music. The radio listeners seemed to like it and the fan mail arrived like a tidal wave".[57] The good fortune in her career continued when in 1938 her mother's band broke up and she was featured in the Broadway production *Sing Out the News* at the young age of eighteen.[58] She brought the house down with her rendition of "Franklin D. Roosevelt Jones."[59] This appearance would lead to stardom.

On Election Day in 1939 the managers of the popular Café Society were left without entertainment. Blues singer Ida Cox had fallen ill and Billie Holiday, who headlined at the club, suggested Scott as a fill-in.[60] Scott took this gig that was originally intended to be three weeks and turned into six years. In her run there she presented an alternative to the light skinned black beauty that pervaded the New York and national club and music scene. She also challenged the negative conception of African American womanhood through her serene, dignified performances. Within this space she would draw on her African diasporic roots to craft her signature style of "swinging" the classics in which she would syncopate European classical music. Her popularity was so intense that a Hazel Scott/Café Society association was formed that lasted from 1939-1943.[61]

Many observers describe Scott as always reflecting confidence, poise and sophistication.[62] One Harlemite described the impact of Scott's image and career on her. She explained, "She was a beautiful women and she was talented. The black community really supported her…little girls have dreams about what they want to do [and] I thought, gee, maybe I could play the piano like Hazel

Scott. I used to sit on the side of the Apollo where the piano was so I could see her hands. I was fascinated with her hands…She was always a lady. She always played the piano. She always played herself".[63] From the very beginning of her career Scott was concerned about the image she portrayed on behalf of African American women as well as the consumption of that image by the public, both White and Black.

A reporter from the *Baltimore Afro American's* 1944 description of one of her performances at the Café Society Uptown, which opened in 1940, reinforces the idea that Scott was always vigilant of her image not only as a performer but as an African American woman.

> The difference between Café Society Uptown and most other night clubs is similar to the difference between chess and black jack. Miss Scott contributes to this atmosphere. Men look at her and pant, but they are polite about it. Miss Scott flits down the aisle to the piano. White spectators lean out to talk to her, but she maneuvers away and sits at the piano. All the lights are dim. Her round, brown face and sensuous shoulders are illuminated only by a spotlight. She plays three or four numbers. As soon as a number is over she floats through the café, which she calls a 'room' and gets upstairs to her dressing room.[64]

In this description Scott seems concerned with her interaction with the audience and their perception of her. Never one to sit and mingle with the crowds at the clubs when she was playing, Scott preferred the privacy of her dressing room to the sometimes raucous crowds. She explained to an interviewer, "I am not kidding when I say I don't like night clubs. People go to them to get drunk and show other people they're having a good time."[65] This avoidance of fawning crowds was very likely to have arisen out of her sense of the historical positioning of African American women as wanton objects of sexual desire that began during enslavement. Although this label could be attached to a variety of women, historically the branding of African American women in this way became embedded in society's view of African American womanhood. As a result, "resistance to sexual exploitation therefore had major political and economic implications."[66]

Audience members and managers sometimes, "mistook her sensuality for promiscuity".[67] "Everyone wants to sleep with you," she reportedly confided to a friend. "If you don't, you've got problems. When you brush off the bosses and geniuses in the front office, you automatically become a lesbian. If you do go along with these idiots, you're a bum. Name it and take your choice".[68] There is no doubt that stories such as these could be recounted by women, black and white, at all levels of varied occupations during this period. However, her

positioning as an African American woman and as an entertainer complicates Scott's experience.

As an entertainer, like many African American women before her, Scott walked a fine line in which she, at times, embraced her sexuality and sex appeal, in an effort to advance and secure her career; and, at others, rejected it, in an effort to be taken seriously by the entertainment industry and larger society. Even as she was deified as a sex symbol in the media, intimate descriptions of her do not uncover any over emphasis on sex or sexuality. Darlene Clark Hine has outlined what she terms "the culture of dissemblance." According to Hine, within this culture African American women have developed skills, due to their historical experiences of rape, sexual exploitation, and oppression "that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors".[69] If Scott is considered as operating from within this culture, which she seems to be, then her sensual celebrity persona could be interpreted as representative of a small part of her total and authentic self. Part of her success as an entertainer relied on the audience's perception of her as open, engaging and approachable despite her inner feelings at the moment. However, at least one reporter picked up on the duality of her existence when he wondered,

> What kind of person is she inside? This is hard to say. She is definitely an enigma. She is extremely pleasant to meet, when you can manage to meet her, which is not too easy. She rather avoids the crowd, and though she is grateful for the admiration of people she shows diffidence in mixing with them…she does not talk much but when moved to talk, can talk of things that you never thought she had the slightest knowledge of, like philosophy. When among her friends and not in the public eye, she likes to be treated as a friend and not as *the* Hazel Scott.[70]

This reporter seems to suspect that there is much more to Hazel Scott than she makes apparent.

The Other Side of the Game

By 1942 Hollywood discovered Scott. First appearing in *Something to Shout About*, directors became enamored with her and offered her parts in two other films that year, *I Dood It* and *Tropicana*. In 1943 she appeared in the film *The Heat's On*, in 1944 *Broadway Rhythm* and *Rhapsody in Blue* in 1945. Scott's skill as a pianist and exceptional ability as a show-woman, as well as the public demand allowed her to be granted contracts that were very unlike the handful of African American actresses in Hollywood. Her contracts stipulated that she would

not play any degrading roles. Barney Josephson, who acted as her manager, wrote it into her contract that she would only appear as herself in movies.[71]

Scott elucidated, "…I've turned down four singing maid roles in movies during the past year or so…there are plenty of white performers who can play maid's roles and then step into a pent house or a school classroom. Colored performers represent their people…"[72] Even in films in which African Americans' image remained distorted by White Hollywood, Hazel Scott understood that her appearance as herself, a real life poised, talented and successful woman (who demanded respect from whites), was integral in the economic, cultural and political advancement of African Americans, particularly women. These images would have been particularly important for African American women who felt as if they were on the cusp of a new American society in which equality could be realized. Scott was one symbol of that transformation.

Unfortunately, this would not be the reality for the majority of African American women during or following WWII. Long after Scott took a stand against, "dirty Hoover aprons" other Black women would encounter similar fights over negative depictions of African American womanhood. Just three years after Scott filmed *The Heat's On,* Billie Holiday was cast in her only feature film, *New Orleans* (1946). Her experience would support the worst fears of African American women performers who were "discovered" by Hollywood. Holiday describes the making of the film in this way:

> I thought I was going to play myself in it. I thought I was going to be Billie Holiday doing a couple of songs in a nightclub setting and that would be that. I should have known better. When I saw the script, I did. You just tell me one Negro girl who's made movies who didn't play a maid or a whore. I don't know any. I found out I was going to do a little singing, but still playing the part of a maid…I'd fought my whole life to keep from being somebody's damn maid. And after making more than a million bucks and establishing myself as a singer who had some taste and self respect, it was a real drag to go to Hollywood and end up as a make believe maid.[73]

Holiday's encounter with Hollywood represents a sharp turn from the more positive imagery of African American womanhood that filtered through ever so briefly during WWII. It also reinforced the message to African Americans that WWII was not the panacea for inequality within the United States that many African Americans had hoped it would be. In fact, Holiday's casting in this film following the more positive portrayals of actresses such as Hazel Scott and Lena Horne demonstrated a reversal in the gains made by Black women in film.[74] Scott would see the impact of this reversal within her career as a performer in the post-war period as well.

The dismantling of slight economic and political gains made in World War II by African American women coincided with the return to the assailment of their image. Trinidadian radical and communist Claudia Jones, who like Scott immigrated to Harlem in 1924, explains in her 1949 article, *An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!* "Negro women –as workers, as Negroes and as women –are the most oppressed stratum of the whole population".[75] Jones further elucidates the position of a vast many African American women when she states, "the low scale of earnings of the Negro woman is directly related to her almost complete exclusion from virtually all fields of work".[76] Despite Jones' accurate evaluation of the economic location of African American women in the era, scholar Maureen Honey points to some political and social advancements during World War II for Black women;

> For all its racial barriers and limited opportunities for real economic change…evidence…suggests that World War II provided an empowering political base for African American women, one that contrasts markedly with the narrowing base for white women. The battle against racism undertaken during the war created a militant discourse for women and men alike that undercut traditional gender construction in the culture at large. The war against racism, in short, furnished African American women with models of pride and resistance…[77]

Scott became one of those models for African Americans. She understood the interlocking nature of African American women's oppression and fought against it through her career as a performer and activist.

In conclusion, Scott was vigilant in her attack of the American social and political systems from her particular position as an African American woman entertainer. She attempted to dismantle the cultural image of the unintelligent, servile, unsophisticated and lascivious African American women on film, television and in print. She lived her own life in a way that often challenged the dominant gender and race narrative. She defied the American political structure that relied on racial and sexual discrimination, prejudice and other forms of oppression to suppress African American women. Further, her expressions of resistance can assist us in interrogating the lives of other African American women in her time period for examples of Black female agency. In her simple human quest for dignified representation in American society she succeeds in disrupting the gender and racial narrative of her historical moment and adds to a lineage of African American women committing varying social and political acts of sabotage, both large and small.

End Notes

1. Art Taylor. *Notes and Tones : Musician-to-Musician Interviews*. Expand , 1st Da Capo Press ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993) 266.
2. Dwayne Mack, "Hazel Scott: A Career Curtailed" *The Journal of African American History,* 155.
3. Taylor, 266.
4. Mack, 155.
5. Taylor 266
6. Donald Bogle, *Primetime Blues : African Americans on Network Television*. 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001) 15-16.
7. Taylor, 266
8. Jim Pines. *Blacks in Films: A Survey of Racial Themes and Images in American Film* (London: Studio Vista, 1975) 55-57.
9. Bogle, 106.
10. The "dominant gender narrative" refers to the way in which women and men have been historically assigned roles, acceptable modes of behavior and hierarchical positions within the dominant society. These assigned roles have created inequity between women and men in society, with women occupying a lower position in the societal, political and economic hierarchy. William Chafe historical study entitled *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the Twentieth Century* has an in depth discussion of this. The dominant society with in American is constructed by the white majority and is not to be confused with the actions of minority segments, such as African Americans, within the population. For a historical survey discussion of this segment of the population see *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Sex and Race in America* by Paula Giddings. This paper acknowledges that African American women, like all other American, live and function within the dominant narrative. However, it also acknowledges that African American women are simultaneously navigating a gender space that is marked by race and dissimilar from the dominate gender narrative in several ways.
11. Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998) 60-61.
12. Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* 4th ed. (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2000) 11-12.
13. Thomas Cripps, *The Negro in American Film 1900-1942* 1st ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 387.
14. Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America 1945-1990* 2nd ed. (Jackson, MI: UP of Mississippi, 1991) 14-15.
15. Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Move from WWII to the Civil Rights Era* 1st ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1993) 30-31
16. Ibid, 30, 80-84.
17. *New Negro Handbook 1946-47* (Online 61).
18. K.Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Ms. America and Beyond: Cultural Image and the Shaping of US Social Policy* 1st ed. (New York: Routledge 1993) 31-32.
19. Jewell, 33
20. MichealCarter, "She Makes the World Wiggle," in *Bitter Fruit : African American Women in World War II*, ed Maureen Honey (Columbia Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1999) 340-343. This sentiment on behalf of Scott was also confirmed in an interview with her son, Adam Clayton Powell III, April 11, 2008 in which he stated, "Over and over again, as long as I can remember, she would talk about the dignity of how Black people, and Black women especially, had to be models for everyone else…she found it so totally unacceptable that there was just no room in her universe to compromise on this…"
21. *Current Biography 1943* H.W. Wilson Company. ""Hazel Scott"." (1954, 1943) 678. See also, John A. Garraty, John A., Mark C. Carnes, and American Council of Learned Societies. *"Hazel Dorothy Scott" American National Biography*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 491.
22. Arna Wendell Bontemps. *We have Tomorrow*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin company, 1945)
23. Nigel O. Bolland, "Race and Class Struggles in a Colonial State: Trinidad 1917-1945, Review." *The Americas* 51, no. 4 (Apr., 1995): 615-616. See George Simpson's article entitled "Social

Stratification in the Caribbean" for an in depth discussion of social and class categorization in the Caribbean. During this time period Trinidad, like many other islands in the Caribbean, had a complex ethnic-racial structure in which skin complexion often correlated to class status. This status was also most often hereditary. Trinidad's racial-ethnic social caste system was more fluid than, for example, that of India that had a more rigid caste system.

24. From Colombus to Castro Williams, 444;
25. Hazel Scott, Chilton 4; Williams 456
26. Chilton, 5
27. *Current Biography,* 678. See also Maureen Honey . *Bitter Fruit : African American Women in World War II*. (Columbia Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1999) 340.
28. James Weldon Johnson. *Black Manhattan*. A Da Capo Paperback. (New York, N.Y.: Da Capo Press, 1991) 153.
29. Scholars widely identify the Harlem Renaissance as beginning in 1925 with the publishing of the *New Negro*, a compilation of Black writing edited by Alain Locke. For more on this see *When Harlem was In Vogue* by David Levering Lewis.
30. Arthur P. Davis and J. Saunders Redding ed. *Cavalcade; Negro American Writing from 1760 to the Present*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971) 429.
31. *Primetime Blues*, 15; Perfect pitch is the ability to reproduce or identify musical notes with absolute precision without an outside reference.
32. Garraty, 491
33. *Current Biography,* 677.
34. Garraty, 491
35. Garraty, 491
36. *Current Biography 1943* H.W. Wilson Company. ""Hazel Scott"." (1954, 1943) 678.
37. Will Haygood *King of the Cats : The Life and Times of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* 1st Amistad ed. (New York: Amistad, 2006) 121.
38. Haygood, 121
39. Margo Jefferson, "Great (Hazel) Scott!" Ms. Magazine (New York, 1974)
40. Taylor, 255; Salem, 444-5.
41. For an excellent discussion of this "subculture" as well as the character, composition and challenges of these female bands see *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940's* by Sherri Tucker.
42. Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words : Black Women and the Search for Justice*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) 45-46.
43. Haygood, 121; Bontemps 95.
44. Taylor 262-3; Jefferson, 25.
45. Billie Holiday with William Duffy, *Lady Sings the Blues* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2006) 103.
46. Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather : The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen*. 1st Limelight ed.(New York Limelight Editions, 1989) 23.
47. Dahl, 25
48. Jefferson, 25
49. Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All Girl" Bands of the 1940's* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 6.
50. Haygood, 121. This lack of training in the kitchen would have been unheard of for most girls, Black or White, because of the emphasis on domestic skills that were customarily stressed in preparation for marriage.
51. "I Found God in Show Business," 42
52. Tucker 10. Sherrie Tucker explains, "African American all-woman bands may have been unique in their ability to link expressions of the political desire of race women with the sensual desire of blueswomen." This is yet another trait that Scott would share with these women.
53. Davis, xix. Angela Davis notes in her work *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* that there are multiple and simultaneous African American feminist traditions, many of which have been overlooked by scholars as they depicted feminist history as overwhelmingly white leaving the majority of history books largely bereft of a Black feminist/womanist presence. Davis' focus is on early twentieth century

Blues women including Ma Rainey. She explains of these women, "…although prefeminist in a historical sense, [this] reveals that Black women of that era were acknowledging and addressing issues central to contemporary feminist discourse."
54. *Current Biography*, 445
55. Taylor, 253
56. *Alpha Kappa Alpha* Program, 5-6, 16.
57. *Alpha Kappa Alpha*, 16-17.
58. *Current Biography*, 678
59. "Hot Classist," 89
60. Bontemps, 97-98; Holiday 102-103
61. Garraty, 491
62. *Primetime Blues*, 15-16
63. Interview with Gene Caldwell, April 29 2008
64. Carter, 341
65. Carter, 342-43
66. Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American* History (Brooklyn: Carlson Pub, 1994) 34.
67. Haygood, 122.
68. Scott qtd. in Haygood 122
69. Hine 37
70. Roy Coverley, "Queen of Café Society" *Off Stage and On* (November 1948).
71. Mack, 154; *Primetime Blues*, 16.
72. Carter, 342.
73. Billie Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*. (New York: Harlem Moon Broadway , 2006) 136.
74. Tyler, Bruce *From Harlem to Hollywood the Struggle for Racial and Cultural Democracy, 1920-1943*. (New York: Garland, 1992).
75. Claudia Jones "An End to the Neglect of the Negro Woman!" in Guy-Sheftall. In *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 109.
76. Ibid, 110
77. Honey, 2