Women and Migration

Responses in Art and History

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21. Fredi's Migration: Washington's Forgotten War on Hollywood

Pamela Newkirk

Fig. 21.1 Portrait of Fredi Washington. Courtesy of Schomburg Center,
New York Public Library.

Nearly eight decades before #OscarsSoWhite focused attention on the dearth of roles for Blacks and other people of color in Hollywood, actress Fredi Washington became one of the most vocal critics of the industry's racial bias. But despite her trailblazing work on stage and screen beginning in the 1920s, Washington has largely been forgotten as one of the pioneering African-American leading ladies, and for her noteworthy civil rights activism.

The eldest of five children, Washington was born in Savannah, Georgia in 1903 and relocated to Philadelphia aged eleven following the death of her mother, a former dancer. In 1919 Washington launched her own career as a chorus girl in Harlem's Alabam Club, and, in 1926, landed a coveted role in the landmark Broadway play *Shuffle Along*. When the show closed she sailed to Europe to tour with her dance partner Al Moiret. Two years later she returned to the United States and starred in a string of successful films and plays including the short film *Black and Tan Fantasy* with Duke Ellington (1929); *Black Boy* starring Paul Robeson (1930); *Emperor Jones* with Robeson again (1933); and *Drum in the Night* (1933); with an equal number of plays, including *Singing the Blues* (1930), *Sweet Chariot* (1930) and *Run Lil' Chillun* (1933).

Washington's stardom was secured with her performance as Peola, the tortured bi-racial daughter who passes for white in *Imitation of Life*, the 1934 feature film starring Claudette Colbert and Louise Beavers. However, after achieving critical acclaim for her performance Washington was routinely passed over for lead roles. This was in part due to Hollywood's Hays Codes, which, beginning that year, explicitly prohibited the depiction of miscegenation in film. The Hays Codes made life especially challenging for Washington, whose green eyes and pale complexion rendered her too light to be cast in films with all-Black casts. In 1937 her skin was darkened for her co-starring role in *One Mile from Heaven* with Bill Robinson.

Early in her career Washington was counseled by studio heads to pass as white to achieve greater stardom. She'd later write: 'Frankly, I do not ascribe to the stupid theory of white supremacy and try to hide the fact that I am a Negro for economic or any other reasons. If I do I would be agreeing [that being a Negro makes me inferior].'¹

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1 'Race Prejudice too Strong, She Tells Reporter', from an unidentified newspaper in the Fredi Washington Papers, Schomburg Center For Research in Black Culture.

Instead she continued to openly challenge Hollywood's color line. After co-starring with Robinson in *One Mile From Heaven* she immersed herself in civil rights and in 1938 became one of the founding members and later the executive director of the Negro Actors Guild. Other officers included Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Ethel Waters, Robeson and Adam Clayton Powell Jr.

In 1939 Washington appeared with Waters in the play *Mamba's Daughter* and in 1946 had a lead role in an all-Black Broadway production of *Lysistrata*, which would mark the end of her stage and film career. However, she continued to speak out against discrimination in the industry. In 1949 she publicly condemned Academy-Award-winning producer Louis de Rochemont and director Alfred Werker for casting white actors to play Black characters in the film *Lost Boundaries*, based on the true story of an African-American physician. The film won the Cannes Film Festival award for best screenplay.

In a letter to *Los Angeles Daily News* dated 2 August 1949, she challenged Werker, who, in a previous article, claimed he didn't cast African-American actors in the film because 'the majority of Negro actors are of the Uncle Tom, Minstrel show, shuffling dancer type of performer.'

Washington said she was 'appalled and not a little fighting mad' over his remarks, noting that neither Werker nor Rochemont had ever considered African-American actors to portray the Johnson family.² 'There are many Negro actors and actresses who are consistently turned down for plays and screen fare on the excuse that they are too fair, too intelligent, too modern looking, etc. I know, because I am one who falls into this category,' she wrote. Washington noted that in *Imitation of Life* she had played the role of a 'neurotic, sensitive, fair Negro girl', adding 'But did Alfred Werker give me an interview for either of the two female roles in *Boundaries*? He did not. He simply was not interested in learning what he evidently did not know; that there are many legitimate Negro actors and actresses who are far more intelligent than Werker proves himself to be.'

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s she actively participated in the Cultural Division of the National Negro Congress and the Committee for the Negro in the Arts, which both promoted racial equality and

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2 Letter in Fredi Washington Papers, [microform], 1922–1981, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

the eradication of racial stereotypes in all forms of American culture. She also wrote regular columns, 'Freda Speaks' and 'Headlines and Footlights' for *The People's Voice*, a weekly paper founded in 1938 by Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Jr., who was for a time married to her sister, Isabel.

Washington's activism was not limited to the entertainment industry. She actively participated in boycott campaigns and picket lines organized by Powell on 125th Street to pressure Harlem stores, utility companies and bus lines to hire African Americans. Washington also worked behind the scenes in the entertainment industry, serving as a casting consultant for the 1954 film *Carmen Jones* starring Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte, and later for George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* performed on Broadway in 1952, and released as a film in 1959.

Washington's first marriage to Lawrence Brown, a trombonist in Duke Ellington's orchestra, ended in divorce, but she remarried Anthony Bell, a Connecticut dentist, in 1952. From 1954 to 1980 Washington worked at the Stamford, Connecticut branch of Bloomingdale's. The stage and screen legend died in 1994 at the age of 90. In 2008 *Time* magazine listed *Imitation of Life* among Hollywood's twenty-five all-time greatest films about race. *Time* critic Richard Corliss said Washington 'had a face, figure and natural elegance made for movies' but added, 'Washington's dusky gorgeousness in "Imitation of Life" must have scared Hollywood bosses even as it tempted them.'³

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3 Richard Corliss, 'Top 25 Movies on Race,' *Time*, 4 February 2008, <http://entertainment.time.com/2008/02/04/the-25-most-important-films-on-race/slide/gods-step-children-1938/>