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Fugitive Plots: Adaptation, Storytelling, and Choreography in *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather*¹

Elena Igartuburu

- ¹ *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), Vicente Minnelli's directorial debut in musical film, and *Stormy Weather* (Andrew L. Stone, 1943)—produced by rival studios—MGM and 20th Century Fox, respectively—are the two only all Black cast musicals made within the studio system during World War II. Although they were released within a period of three months and, there is a nineteen-year time span in their institutional recognition as part of the canon of American film, or “America’s film heritage” according to the Library of Congress National Film Registry’s classification. *Stormy Weather* was included in the National Film Registry in 2001 while *Cabin in the Sky* was added in 2020. By introducing them into the institutional canon, they *officially* became “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant” (“About This Collection | Selections from the National Film Registry | Digital Collections | Library of Congress”): *Stormy Weather* is defined as “not the most imaginative of scripts or direction” while *Cabin in the Sky* is praised for Minnelli’s directorial genius and its “glittering cultural record of outstanding African American artistic talent of the era” (“Brief Descriptions and Expanded Essays of National Film Registry Titles”). The disparate evaluations vis-à-vis the nineteen-year gap between the films’ inclusion the Registry highlight their differences in form, norm, and storytelling.
- ² Previous scholarship on *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* has followed a variety of approaches. Some critics analyze the films as musicals and assess their individual contributions to the genre and their articulation of Black modernity (Basinger; Naremore; Osumare). Formal analyses often center the role of adaptation (Cooksey). Yet others highlight the role of music in the representation of African American culture (Knee) and the choreographic work displayed in the films (Genné). Contemporary approaches suggest queer readings (Gerstner), emphasize the role of female performers (Dahl; Gavin), and observe how current productions re-examine the

racist stereotypes and structures in these films (Das). Further approaches, such as the one proposed by Shane Vogel, in his article “Performing ‘Stormy Weather’: Ethel Waters, Lena Horne, and Katherine Dunham,” consider different iterations and citations of the song that gives title to the film. However, as Arthur Knight argues in his book *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film*, Black musical performance in Hollywood film remains understudied despite a growing corpus of scholarship on the subject. I argue that comparing the films considering narrative structure and the representation of African Americans in the context of the Black Atlantic yields relevant insights into a period of filmmaking when all Black casts were scarce and representations of race often stereotyped. Analyzing the films comparatively reveals complex negotiations involved in the making of the films and the role of dance and choreography as signifying practices that destabilize hegemonic representations of African Americans or the depiction of Black culture on screen. Changes in hegemonic culture and the film industry are revealed when comparing the production history, the agency of African American performers, and the multiple levels of meaning these two films present. In fact, *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* introduce narratives about Black experiences into the meaning-making and meaning-reproducing machine that was—and is—the studio system and cinema at large; narratives that resonated well beyond the national boundaries of the United States with other Afrodiasporic communities.

- 3 In her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Christina Sharpe highlights practices that may destabilize hegemonic representation, practices she calls Black visual/textual annotation and redaction (117). The circulation of images of Black people and Black culture is, too often, out of the hands of the subjects of those very images which often reify existing hierarchies and stereotypes. They might, however, as Sharpe argues, travel with “supplemental information” that hints “toward seeing and reading otherwise; toward reading and seeing something in excess of what is caught in the frame; toward seeing something beyond a visuality that is... subtended by the logics of the administered plantation” (117).
- 4 Film scholars Gerald Mast and Richard Dyer consider the political potential these excesses to disrupt sociocultural norms as characteristic of the genre of the musical (in Knight 16). As musicals, *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* feature supplemental information that creates multi-layered narratives and visuals that exceed what is caught in the frame and problematize the racial economy of the studio system.
- 5 Throughout this paper, I deploy the terms maroon or fugitive signifying practices to refer to the practices whereby African American actors and choreographers imbue these films with stories and histories that reach beyond the frame and will also focus on the practices of reception that make meaning in this context. Fugitive practices establish connections between the fictional reality of the film and the world beyond it to challenge the imaging and imagining of African Americans beyond the logics of the plantation—understanding this logic metaphorically and metonymically as a structure of power that continues to marginalize and oppress Black people. Although Knight uses the term “fugitive performances” (Knight 2) in his introduction to *Disintegrating the Musical* to refer to the profusion and liminality of Black musical performances in studio era musicals, I argue that, in all-Black cast musicals, these performances are central, and it is their meaning that is elusive. The fugitive character of their meaning invokes,

in fact, experiences and histories that exceed the U.S. context, making the films accessible at different levels for different communities.

1. Fugitive Practice and Maroon Aesthetics

- 6 Fugitive signifying practices are particularly strategic in an era in which, as Knight notes, the musical genre becomes a key medium for the representation of African Americans. He argues that musicals and their use of Black performers shed light on “the circumstances under which, the mechanisms through which, and the debates around how African Americans and blackness can be seen, heard and understood at all” (13) in a Hollywood that aimed to construct a homogeneous body of consumers. Considering the racial, financial, and cultural economies of circulation in and of the musical, these fleeting significations diminish the industry’s control over meaning-making in otherwise standardized narratives. Sylvia Wynter, cultural critic of film and the African diaspora, also contends that mainstream cinema establishes a public language and a constant set of signifying practices. As a public language that depends on the community of reception, filmic signifying practices inscribe freedom within “the ideal mode of the middle-class subject whose behaviors are optional because regulated by the prescriptive Free Trade telos of ‘bettering their condition,’ is therefore both normalized and universalized by means of the ‘ideological mechanism’ of our present discourse of aesthetics” (Wynter, “Rethinking ‘Aesthetics’” 7). Inscribing African Americans in the studio system and its stories is, as Knight points out, coherent with the rationale of Hollywood as a capitalist business that needs an ever-expanding group of consumers. Such integration, Wynter would argue, provides moments of aesthetic and narrative disruption and freedom, creating cross-cultural significations, as films are received by different communities.
- 7 At the level of storytelling, *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* feature tales of progress that function according to the ideological promises of imperialist capitalism. They link freedom to economic growth and class mobility, bluntly ignoring the reality of segregation in the 1940s. However, the dream of class mobility and freedom is always trumped and/or turned into a fantasy, thus keeping Black characters in check and virtually immobile within the order established by the logics of the plantation, most blatantly in the use of references to minstrelsy, and racist archetypes like Uncle Tom and the mammy. By recalling the logics of the plantation, at aesthetic and narrative levels, as the main structure governing Black lives, these films inscribe a history that exceeds African American experience. Maroonage is a signifying practice that connects practices of resistance from the Black Atlantic through the afterlife of slavery. Considering maroonage as part of the aesthetics and storytelling in these films centers networks and layers of signification that interrupt and challenge the forward or upward arc of the traditional capitalist telos of improvement. Fugitive plots and aesthetics necessarily turn into unexpected directions, revealing subversive potential in subterfuge, deception, and artifice.
- 8 The tension that exists between telos and aesthetics in these films fulfills a fugitive logic that challenges that of capitalism. Wynter proposes that
- given the role of *defective Otherness* analogically imposed upon the peoples and countries of Africa and the black [sic!] diaspora by the representational apparatus of our Western world system, central to which is that of its cinematic text,... the challenge... will be that of deconstructing the present conception of the human,

Man, together with its corollary definition as *homo economicus*; to deconstruct with both, the order of consciousness and mode of the aesthetic to which this conception leads and through which we normally think, feel and behave. (Wynter, “The Cinematic Text after *Man*” 388)

- 9 Maroonage as an aesthetic practice is always in tension and in dialogue with dominant ontologies, creatively proposing alternative paths (Vaughan; Cooper). Excess is characteristic of aesthetic maroonage and functions as an interruptive mechanism that alters hegemonic orders of consciousness and aesthetic modes of representation through multiple and stacked adaptations, syncopated storytelling, and choreography.

2. Adaptation and the Archive

- 10 The production history of these two films is imbued with excess. *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* are the result of a series of adaptations. In its film form, *Cabin in the Sky* crystallizes the Faustian plot of Lynn Root’s short story “Little Joe” and the *Cabin in the Sky* stage musical, released in 1940, which was performed 156 times on Broadway. *Stormy Weather* brings together a loose adaptation of the actual life story of its main actor Bill “Bojangles” Robinson—Bill Williamson in the film—and of the song that serves as its title. In addition, both films adapt Black street dances such as Charleston and the Lindy Hop, tap dance musical numbers, and the performances of renowned African American performers including musicians Fats Waller, Ada Brown, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington, and dancers Katherine Dunham and the Nicholas Brothers duo.
- 11 The extensive work of adaptation from live performance to screenplay and screen-friendly sequences, however, is not always smooth. For instance, the final sequence in *Stormy Weather* becomes a 17-minute-long revue featuring different performances without any driving narrative or plot. These non-narrative passages are citations of previous texts and performances: Root short story, the 156 performances of the stage musical, in the case of *Cabin*; Bill Robinson’s life, his performances, and those of the other actors and performers in the film, in the case of *Stormy Weather*. These intertextual and intermedial references make the films palimpsestic archives—to use Gerard Genet’s terminology (1997)—where citations are visible, although ghostly or spectral presences, which make explicit histories that might otherwise remain unaccounted-for.
- 12 Such haunting is articulated as a logic of recycling. In his survey of song adaptation, Mike Ingham contends that musicals recycle well-known songs “exploiting the popularity of the form and the familiarity of the songs more for the benefit of commercial entertainment” (334). In these films, recycling occurs not only at the level of song or choreography: actors migrate from the performance stage to the film set; characters are transported from one medium to the other whose previous lives echo in the latter. In this sense, adaptation coheres with the exploitative logics of capitalism (re)circulating Black lives, performances, and stories as objects to be consumed once and again. However, Ingham also offers that adaptation contributes to creating a “more equal dialogue and arguably contributes more to its afterlife” (338)—an idea supported by Linda Hutcheon (*A Theory*) and other adaptation theorists who proclaim the dialogic character of this practice. Although the process of adaptation here is exploitative, it also creates horizontal conversation and cross-cultural re-interpretation of several narratives. *Cabin in the Sky* introduces Blackness into the Faustian myth, thus ironically

appropriating a Eurocentric narrative and, as Knight argues, pushing it through comedy to the point of incoherence (151). This incoherent adaptation challenges, as Wynter proposed, current aesthetic modes and orders of consciousness. *Stormy Weather* adds intramedial—Ethel Waters’s song performed by Lena Horne—and intermedial—from song to film—adaptations to what will be a growing pool of versions and interpretation of the song. Although translating performance into film risks undoing something that is usually fleeting and fugitive, bound to the moment and circumstances of its performance, by becoming one of many adaptations, these films are in conversation, whether it happens horizontally or not, with other cultural products and interpretations.

- 13 Beyond what is visible in the films’ palimpsests, adaptation erases part of their archives. The original choreography for the stage musical *Cabin in the Sky* was designed by the Georgian choreographer George Balanchine and African American Caribbean dance scholar Katherine Dunham. Although this choreography was not used in the film, it certainly inspired many of its dance numbers (Genné 113). The same way Balanchine and Dunham’s choreography was never credited in *Cabin*, Ethel Waters—the original singer of *Stormy Weather*’s title song—was never acknowledged. In fact, 20th Century Fox engaged, amongst others, Lena Horne, who starred in *Cabin* together with Waters. However, Waters herself was not given a role in *Stormy Weather*. As Lorgia García-Peña argues “the pervasiveness of the ‘The One’ model is all too familiar to women of color professionals working in competitive fields in the United States and other Global North countries” (n.p.). The model of “The One” fosters a competitive environment along racial and gendered lines and presents “The One” as someone invited into a given field while underscoring their uniqueness as a signifier of unbelonging and exclusion. In the films, The gendered and racial character erasures in casting decisions questions adaptation as a solely benign practice.
- 14 However, whether the show of Black excellence reproduces or rather challenges plantation logics and the capitalist promise of class mobility is worth questioning. As Knight states, these films were successful in establishing the first Black movie star, Lena Horne (148). Horne achieved stardom signing a standard contract with MGM, but her career declined after these films were released. The lack of success of the films among Black critics might have contributed to this. *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* were expensive productions. If Hollywood’s move to integrate Black audiences and widen its range of consumers had been a failure, economic logic follows a diminished interest in the production of Black-cast musicals and the dismissal of their stars. Horne, in this scenario, becomes a casualty of a capitalist system that perceived these films as a “liability” (Knight 149) and a poor investment.
- 15 Ultimately, the films contribute to the invisibility of Black women’s work, cohering with the exploitative logics of capitalism. In addition, in the case of *Stormy Weather*, the lack of credit risks effacing—or, at least, avoids making explicit—the transcultural connections implicit in Dunham’s choreography, whose dance technique was influenced by her anthropological research on Caribbean dance. Although adaptation opens the films to possibility, thinking and reading these films beyond their character as genre films is truncated in gendered terms. Black women’s presence and absence haunt the films and speak to and of the circulation and commodification of Black culture as spectacle and the role assigned to women in Hollywood’s regime of the visual.

3. Interruption, Incoherence and Social Realignment

- 16 Plot interruptions and moments of incoherence caused by the inclusion of musical and dance numbers are an essential generic feature of the musical's undermining of the suspension of disbelief. Traditionally, suspension of disbelief is a sort of contract whereby the audience accepts certain amount of incoherence regarding plot, time, space, and action. In fact, Knight argues that musical films use (or abuse) of this practice in their "kind of perfect imperfection, direct indirection" (148) in his analysis of indefinite talk in *Stormy Weather* (110). In addition, *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* use these strategies in two different ways to contest what at first sight would be narratives of social realignment that sustain the racial, economic, and social status quo. On the one hand, the narrative plot is interrupted by the insertion of musical numbers. These scenes showcase Black excellence as they feature performances of well-known artists who appear as themselves rather than embodying a fictional character. On the other hand, having performers play themselves instead of fictional characters breaks the fourth wall and establishes a certain continuity between the world of the film and the world of the spectator. This creates moments of slippage between reality and fiction through connections between these two separate worlds. As these films blur the distinction between the possible and the imagined, they offer potential to change everyday ontologies, as Wynter offered.
- 17 Distortion of ontological boundaries is essential to the main narrative structure of both films. In *Cabin in the Sky*, the main plot is framed as a dream or delirium. Little Joe is fatally wounded in a fight over his gambling debts, but he gets a second chance in life that leads him to his descent into hell and an ascent to heaven. The quest includes a series of moral tests: the Devil gives Little Joe wealth and a lover to prove that he is not a good man. Little Joe repents and reunites with his wife Petunia, and he eventually wakes up to find out his quest has been nothing but a dream.
- 18 *Stormy Weather* is a romantic tale of truncated upward mobility. After fighting abroad in the war, Bill Williamson returns to find himself jobless. He plans to go back to the South and work in the cotton fields, but in New York he accidentally meets the sister of a deceased friend and soldier, Selina Rogers, and her partner Chick Bailey, both singers. Selina remembers Bill's dancing talents and encourages him to find work in the entertainment industry. Bill travels to New Orleans and tries to become a dancer but all his attempts fail, and he ends up in debt. At the end, he meets Selina again and after a back-and-forth of economic and romantic twists, they start a relationship.
- 19 Despite its allegedly unoriginal plot, *Stormy Weather* presents a complex structure that features stories within stories within stories. The film begins with Bill teaching dance to a group of children. There, he launches into telling them the story of his life that transitions into a flashback that becomes the main narrative. However, this main narrative is plagued with interruptions: sometimes the film returns to the moment of storytelling with Bill and the children; at other times, the film introduces other stories through musical numbers. These interruptions do not constitute independent fragments but are rather beats to the melody that is the narrative structure of the film. The syncopated and polyrhythmic configuration displaces the traditional structure in which Bill's storytelling will be merely a framing strategy. The fact that, towards the end of the film, Bill's flashback and storytelling merge back into a single narrative

moment in which Cab Calloway shows up to fetch Bill to take him to a show, disrupts that order. The frame becomes the main storyline and vice versa. From there, the film spirals into a series of worlds within worlds. At the show, Selina Rogers sings the title song “Stormy Weather.” The performance takes place on a stage featuring a wall with a window. Before the performance, Bill sits at a table, dressed in a tuxedo and holding a card announcing the “Special attraction: Miss Selina Rogers and Miss Katherine Dunham and her dancers” (*Stormy Weather*). On stage, the window, contrary to all stage logic of the time, becomes a real window into the street where it rains, and people stand and walk. The window, central in Selina’s performance as she constantly walks to and from it and looks through it, takes the audience to yet another world. After the vocal part of the performance, Selina looks out the window and the camera follows her pensive gaze to the world outside the window. On the street, a series of pimps and prostitutes stand under the rain, featuring among them Katherine Dunham. As Dunham stares into the camera and then into the sky, the camera transports the audience to yet another world-stage (or stage-world). Enveloped in fog, a simple stage features Dunham and her dance company as they execute a choreography that blends ballet with Afro Caribbean isolations from Haitian ritual dances. The dancers are dressed in exotic but not necessarily African-inspired attires. In fact, the dresses are reminiscent of outfits fashioned after modern dance garments. The hybrid character of the choreography and its aesthetics contrasts with all previous numbers. From the cakewalk to the Lindy Hop and various tap dance performances, all prior dancing had featured styles traditionally associated—and considered proper for—African Americans. However, Dunham’s inclusion of Russian and French techniques challenges the standards of racial propriety while the Afro Caribbean isolations and articulations add a level of sensuality to her dance, also not considered adequate for display (*Cabin in the Sky* cut out a scene in which Lena Horne’s character sang while taking a bubble bath). This modern, sensual, and elevated choreography stands in contrast to the revue-like fragment that follows. The elevated and experimental aesthetics of Dunham’s piece diverge from the tap dance number that follows. Tap dance is, in fact, inserted between two outstanding performances: that of Katherine Dunham and that of the Nicholas Brothers whose acrobatic choreography shines against the previous number. Nevertheless, Dunham’s number screams its incongruity within the film as a whole and marks a necessary departure from the stereotypes and normative representations of African Americans and Black culture in the rest of the film.

- 20 The story behind the addition of Dunham’s dance annotates the story of resistance and micro agency that the dance itself redacts. In *Free to Dance*, a documentary about African American dance released in 2005, Black dance scholar Halifu Osumare recounts how director Andrew L. Stone intended to have Dunham and her company perform their sequence dressed as pimps and prostitutes. However, Dunham rejected the idea and was able to levy her own take on the scene.
- 21 Such acts of resistance are also part of the production history of in *Cabin in the Sky* where actress Ethel Waters, who plays Little Joe’s wife Petunia, disapproved of the original script, and refused her participation until her suggestions regarding the main male character and the portrayal of religion were implemented. These women were able to hold their leverage in negotiating their own visions of African Americans on screen due to their role as public figures and celebrated performers outside the film.² These production histories provide ways or reading and seeing otherwise that acknowledge the labor that went into imbuing the representation of Black characters

and Black culture in these films with the respect the performers were able to achieve. In addition, these histories call into question ideas of success and stardom, calling for a realignment of capitalist and gendered orders of consciousness.

4. Black Atlantic Connections

- 22 The heavy presence of stereotypes in these films reveals the limits of agency. Knight discusses that the reception by Black critics in the United States was rather negative (Knight 150, 156-7). In addition, *Stormy Weather* raised controversy before its release when its music director William Grant Still quit the film over 20th Century Fox's mistreatment of Black people. The African American weekly *New Journal and Guide* applauded Still's resignation and wished that "Lena Horne and Bill Robinson would protest about the picture as Bill Robinson did *Tales of Manhattan*" (*New Journal and Guide*, Feb 13, 1943). The reference to Robinson's protest regarding *Tales of Manhattan's* racist and stereotypical depictions of Black characters signals a larger circuit of actors and other film workers struggling for fair representation. The fact that Waters was also an actor in *Tales* furthers and ties in the circulation of a consciousness of Black people's rights to and need of non-racist representation on screen. In *Stormy Weather*, the modernist aesthetics of Dunham's choreography and Waters's suggestions achieved a "more internally dignified and reflective" Black identity (Osumare 11), the discursive encumbrance of racist archetypes in the films is impossible to ignore. This fact is particularly noteworthy in the case of *Cabin in the Sky*. In a 1983 letter to the editor of *The New York Times*, Joseph Schrank, one of the two scriptwriters for the film, claims to have consulted with the NAACP for the script and that they received a letter "congratulating [them] on the treatment of this black fable, which avoided cliches and racial stereotypes" (Schrank). Despite this claim, *Cabin in the Sky* was not received warmly by Black critics (see above), a fact that articulates the distance and clash between different receptions of the film.
- 23 This side of the production history exemplifies that the circulation of images of Black people in the United States was not controlled by African American actors, but exerted by an economic system that commodified these images within narratives that perpetuated the existing status quo. The lack of control over one's own performances and cultural products is clear in the case of Ethel Waters, who was the first performer of the song "Stormy Weather" at the Cotton Club in Harlem in 1933. Although Waters starred as one of the main characters in *Cabin in the Sky*, she was not invited to participate in *Stormy Weather* where Lena Horne performs the song. In addition, the version Horne sings is a standardized, *tamed* version, as Shane Vogel argues in his 2008 study of the circulation of the song. This version capitalizes on African American vernacular sounds through "the rise of race records and the 'Negro vogue' of the 1920s" while erasing the history of adaptation, experimentation, and heterogeneity proper of the dissemination of Black music in the nightclub circuit (95). However, considering the performance in the film as a citation of the first performance of "Stormy Weather" (the song) at the Cotton Club as Vogel argues, adds to the multiple annotations already manifested for/in the film.
- 24 Vogel concludes his article on *Stormy Weather* by stating that
- [t]he performances echo each other, moving from the literal to the abstract and expanding the standardizing forms that contain them. Behind the film, we find the

cabaret performance. Behind Lena Horne's signature song, we find Ethel Waters. And behind Waters, we find the mixed elements of black and Jewish musical diasporas, just as behind Dunham, we find the substance of Black Atlantic movement. (109)

- 25 Nonetheless, I am interested in returning to the concrete, if not the literal, in relation to the presence of the Black Atlantic in the film, which occurs at two levels. On the one hand, minstrel-like performances evoke the memory of slavery and the Atlantic trade. On the other hand, glimpses of the transnational circulation of contemporary Black peoples and cultures echo Harlem Renaissance discourses of Black internationalism and solidarity while simultaneously anticipating the pan-Africanist American Cultural Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.
- 26 While minstrelsy is a racist performative practice that draws on stereotypes, its presence in the film visualizes the violent legacy of slavery. As minstrel-like performances are juxtaposed with other performative practices, they provide a critique of these cultural forms as perpetuators of plantation logics. In *Stormy Weather*, the cakewalk at the beginning of the film simultaneously evokes community-building practices—a social dance competition where a cake is the prize—together with racist stereotypes. The complex layering of meaning is furthered by aesthetic and choreographic choices: Black dancers choreograph the literal shape of a cake which attire is reminiscent of the little Black Sambo, however they turn to reveal that the caricature is on their backs, and, behind it, there are real Black dancers.³ The cake metaphor functions here at several levels. The scene layers references and meanings that create a compound image which surprises and challenges archetypes through aesthetic excess.
- 27 The tactic of unveiling is used in the blackface performance that takes place in the context of Bill's demise—he does not have enough money to pay the performers or his friend, Gabe, who is a disastrous con artist. Prior to the performance itself, the performers are witnessed putting on black makeup and discussing where they have seen Gabe before, who is pretending to be an investor in the show. As the scene highlights the racial performativity of blackface, the subsequent performance on stage further plays with racial stereotypes—in the dialogue and acting—while serving as commentary on assumption and meaning. Knight calls this *indefinite talk* in his analysis of the scene (110). The long dialogue between the two actors takes place in unfinished sentences. For instance, when trying to come up with a time to meet the lines state the response “That’s a little early” comes before the time is articulated: “Any time between —” (*Stormy Weather*). The same strategy is used for the price of the car that breaks down at the beginning of the act, the cost of its repair, the place where they will go when it is fixed, the people the characters discuss. Once more, excess functions to highlight the absurdity, not only that of the dialogue but of the stereotypes displayed on stage. The critique finds its conclusion right after the act, when one of the actors finally recalls where he has seen Gabe. He states: “that angel. He ain’t no angel. He’s got a shining stand in Harlem. He shined my shoes a thousand times” (*Stormy Weather*). The film benefits from layered meaning, things that are not what they look like or pretend to be, the same way that the blackface actors are not what/how they appear on stage.
- 28 Complex and multilayered representations contain, at the same time, racial stereotypes and resistance to such stereotypes. In her book, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*, Daphne Brooks highlights the mutual construction of minstrelsy and melodrama as “technologies of the transatlantic body

spectacularize the process of cultural alienation in ways that would yield reactionary as well as resistant cultural performance strategies” (21). These two examples of minstrelsy envelop the narrative. By placing them at the beginning and near the end and in extreme contrast with all other performances—none of which feature blackface—the script leaves room to consider these numbers as critiques of racism while reinscribing racial stereotypes. These scenes demonstrate the economy of racial legibility and the empty promise of economic mobility as a way out of racial oppression.

- 29 However, if *Cabin in the Sky* is conventionally moralizing in its narrative frame (Knight 156), *Stormy Weather* rejects the narrative of economic mobility. Those characters that are well-off at the beginning of the film continue to be so, and the ones that are poor remain the same. All their efforts to overcome poverty, legal or illegal, are trumped. The Black poor as alienated from the economic system other than as exploited and spectacularized bodies continues the unchanging legacy of the slave trade. The romantic redemption of melodrama stands in stark contrast with the fate of the Black poor. Gabe enchants the female performers of the troupe until they find out that he is, in their words, a *bootblack*. However, Selina—who has repeatedly told Bill that they cannot be together because they both are pursuing their stage careers—experiences a sudden change of heart whereby she becomes her partner. While Bill was able to conquer love without climbing the economic ladder, he does so at the expense of his and Selina’s career. The possibility of financial success is shattered by their romance, which seeks to overcome or offset capitalism. The representation of their romance as authentic sets them apart from other couplings in the film whose partnership is structured around joint performances and business-like arrangements—for example, Selina and Chick Bailey, or Fats Waller and Ada Brown. Economically motivated pairings, imperative of the demands of capitalism as they are, evoke the afterlife of slavery, of bodies sold, displayed, paired, or grouped strategically to make a profit out of them. Under the purview of the minstrel-like shows, these engagements are haunted by the (in)visible white hand that yields the benefit—invisible, that is, insofar as there are no white characters in these films, but palpable in the white-governed production that was and is the film industry.
- 30 Citations of transnational African connections and solidarity contemporary to the film reach far beyond the films and their direct audience—Americans in the United States. In her study of improvisational dance, Danielle Goldman states that “classic Hollywood films frequently mangled cultural specificity in their representations of cultural others” (33). This is true of *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* where African Americans are all shown as connected, coming from, or engaged in some way with the American South. However, a closer look at the films’ storytelling structures reveals a history of travel, transmission, and reinvention of Afro diasporic cultural practices. The uncredited choreographic influences of *Cabin in the Sky* the musical in the film exemplify the mobility of this cultural economy: on the one hand, the collaboration between Balanchine and Dunham hybridized Russian, Georgian, French, and Afro Caribbean dance forms; on the other hand, Balanchine had previously worked with Josephine Baker in France, one of the most famous African American performers of African American social dances at the time. Similarly, Minnelli and Stone incorporated extended dance storytelling in their films which have become, as demonstrated by Jenny Oyallon-Koloski’s videographic essay “Endless Conversations: Reflexive Musical Clusters,” part of the filmic vocabulary of the musical genre. Different female actors in

other films will reprise Dunham's dream-like scene, slowly dancing and walking among clouds (Oyallon-Koloski).⁴ However, in these iterations the choreography is distilled of its Afro Caribbean influences, resulting in an incomplete citation.

- 31 The kind of dance storytelling featured in these films originates from the African and Afro Caribbean syntheses with which contemporary choreographers experimented. In *Stormy Weather*, the sequences where Bill retells his life story to the children are designed in the call-and-response structure traditional of African and Afro Caribbean storytelling where the storyteller's statements are punctuated by responses from the audience or some of its members. Bill is also shown at the beginning of his flashback as returning from World War I in France where he and his colleagues connected with the Paris Noir of the time, groups of African Americans residing in Paris since the early 1900s (Braggs; Fry). These Paris residents were ambassadors of jazz in Europe, which offered a freer and more accepting environment—at least, on paper—, a circuit that in turn helped jazz become a signifier of America and of a particular kind of freedom—one related World War II and the experience of African Americans who fought abroad.

5. Reception in the Caribbean

- 32 Beyond these diegetic and extradiegetic transnational connections, there are considerations of the circulation of these films in the Caribbean as countries with Afro descendant populations culturally and politically connected to the United States. The way the films were distributed articulates their ability to create different ways of reading and seeing. Not only was their advertising and reviews placed in these newspapers among local news and international updates on World War II, but their titles were cast differently in each publication. Although the title of *Stormy Weather* was not translated for its release in Haiti—it was translated for its release in France as *Symphonie magique*, in Cuba it was screened as *Morena oscura*, a translation that references dark skin: *morena* is used for Black and/or Brown women, while *oscura* reinforces the darkness of the skin color. On the other hand, *Cabin in the Sky* appeared as both the original title and *Un petit coin aux cieux* in Haiti, which references a corner or small place. Cross-cultural adaptation of the titles frames the films differently and, sometimes, as in the case of the latter, doubly, allowing simultaneous modes of reception.
- 33 The potential for engaging the films otherwise is visible in the differences in advertising and critique in the United States and the Caribbean. However, dance and music become the avenues these films connected to the audience. Malcolm X stated his love of “all that dancing and carrying on in such films as *Stormy Weather* and *Cabin in the Sky*” (in Knight 153), and film reviews and advertising in the Caribbean capitalize on dance and music as the appealing aspects of the films. In 1944-1945, 1944 and 1946, respectively, newspapers like *Panama American*, *Trinidad Guardian*, and *Le Nouvelliste* in Haiti advertised screenings of *Stormy Weather* highlighting Dunham's choreography as well as Lena Horne's, Cab Calloway's, and Bill Robinson's musical performances. In 1944, the Cuban periodical *Noticias de Hoy* released a review of the film by writer, journalist, and political activist Mirta Aguirre that highlighted the problematic representation of Black people in the film, but that stated the value of the film given “el interés de los espectáculos y por los altos méritos de los artistas negros” (Aguirre 6; “the interest provided by the spectacles and the merits of the Black artists”); my

translation). The contrast of Aguirre's analysis with that of white American and African American critics evidences the existence of distinct discourses and consciousness regarding issues of representation and inequality in postcolonial settings. Interestingly, although *Cabin in the Sky* reaches Panama in 1943, screenings are announced in *Le Nouvelliste* in 1947, leading to an inversion in the reception of the film. In addition, *Stormy Weather* and *Cabin in the Sky* are often commented on in Haitian newspapers in relation to Katherine Dunham, a cultural figure in the country given her research there and her continued relationship with the country and its culture. The fact that dance and Dunham's choreography, so obscured in or irrelevant to the U.S. reception of the film, are key signifiers in their reception in the Caribbean highlights the potential of adaptation and palimpsestic storytelling as they enhance ways of reading and seeing otherwise, and different modes of consciousness.

- 34 Similar to the imprint left by Dunham's choreography on the musical genre, dance steps shown in the films stamped everyday dance practices in the Caribbean. Goldman states that "all-black films in the 1940s, such as *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather*, affected mambo in Cuba, where dancers began to incorporate moves like lindy swing-outs and spins over rumba's pelvic movement" (34). Representation of Afro diasporic dances on film inflicted dance practice beyond the United States and beyond the 1940s. While the transnational and transgenerational legacy of the films might seem indirect, it hints at the formation of a global Black dance vocabulary. The circulation of dance moves from Africa and the Caribbean to the United States and back to the Caribbean demonstrates the complex cultural flows of the Black Atlantic and its afterlife.
- 35 The mutual influence of the everyday practice of social dances and the filmic representation of dance challenges claims of authenticity. Films cannot accurately portray dance practices that were—and are—in a constant state of change. Practices, such as social dances, that are live and alive form kinetic vernaculars (Kabir 1). As vernacular forms they are ever changing and, in the case of dance on film in particular, the representation of dance on screen greatly influences the performance of dance on the dance floor (Brannigan). In fact, the relationship between dance on film and vernacular dance practices can be understood as an act of democratization in which the body, decontextualized from traditional dancing spaces such as the stage or the studio, and making dance accessible for and to the masses (Kloetzel 33). Whereas cinematic citations of the choreography in *Stormy Weather* are stripped of its Afro Caribbean gestures, the incorporation of dance moves from this film and *Cabin in the Sky* in everyday practice feed on a dance vocabulary that is cross-culturally legible, accessible, and relevant.
- 36 The economy of circulation of dance and choreography as cultural texts and social practices that constantly negotiate improvisation and repertoire vis à vis archive and standardization contest simple readings of the films. The films blurring of the boundaries between the world in these films and everyday ontologies reaches beyond (African) American cultural reception. Instances of narrative inconsistency and interruption together with improvisation and repertoire represent moments of self-reflection in which the film reveals its own artifice. The mode of aesthetics invoked through the echoes of the Black Atlantic trickles beyond the films and modifies dominant orders of consciousness. The films exceed their own plots, producing fugitive meanings and narratives through layered and multiple signifying practices that speak

to the legacy of slavery, the hope for Black solidarity, and a necessary critique of structural racism.

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NOTES

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2. A cinematic acknowledgement of the role of Black women performers at that time is present in the recent *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (George C. Wolfe, 2020). Netflix's feature recuperates a version of the story of Ma Rainey, Ethel Waters' contemporary dubbed the mother of blues.
 3. The character from the children's book *Little Black Sambo* (1899) by Scottish author Helen Bannerman that was later made into an animated film in 1935. Since the Harlem Renaissance, the book received criticism for its use of racist slurs and imagery. Langston Hughes was one of the most relevant figures that publicly criticized the book in his 1932 essay for the *Children's Library Yearbook* "Books and the Negro Child."
 4. I thank Jenny Oyallon-Koloski for sharing an early version of her videographic essay "Endless Conversations: Reflexive Musical Clusters" which will be featured in the volume *Storytelling in Motion: Cinematic Choreography and the Film Musical* (Oxford UP) scheduled to come out in 2024.
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ABSTRACTS

Cabin in the Sky and *Stormy Weather* are two 1943 all-Black cast musicals made within the studio system. When compared they exemplify some of the changes taking place in this system regarding the representation of Black people and visualize the work of networks of Black performers and film workers with clear goals grounded on Black solidarity and unity. Using the concept of maroonage and the theories of image circulation proposed by Christina Sharpe (2016) and Sylvia Wynter (2016), I analyze the production history of the films, their origin in multiple adaptations, and their use of music and dance to illuminate the existence of micro agency within the film. I argue that micro agency moves progressive representations of Black people forward. Similarly, micro agency creates a tension between telos and aesthetics in these films that fulfills a fugitive logic that challenges that of capitalism as it is imbued in the studio system and the American imaginary presented on screen.

INDEX

Keywords: storytelling, cinema, African American, choreography, adaptation

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