In 1928 King Vidor, one of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s most successful directors, finding himself between projects, decided to spend some time in Europe. Having directed a number of important and successful silent films for the studio—most notably *The Big Parade* (1925), a tremendously popular World War I epic, and *The Crowd* (1928), a study of the life of an average man in the large urban environment of New York City—Vidor returned home when the studio asked him to direct his first sound film. Despite his initial predictions that “sound pictures [would] do away entirely with the art of motion pictures,” Vidor soon began to see the possibilities that the new technology presented and was especially excited that sound would make it possible for him to direct a film that he had long wanted to make.\(^1\) Synchronous sound, in which the dialogue or singing corresponds with the movements of the actors’ lips, had only begun to make its way into American feature films since the 1927 release of Warner Bros.’ landmark film *The Jazz Singer*, itself very much about complex processes of racializing religion in America.\(^2\) Just as the projection of constructions of race had been part of the development of the silent motion picture, as D. W. Griffith’s 1915 *The Birth of a Nation* had ably demonstrated, so the addition of sound had been bound up in conjunctions of religion and race from the outset. Vidor had in mind something that would contribute both to the new “talkie” technology and to the portrayal of racialized religion. He recalled in a memoir years later that the idea for this movie had been with him for a long time: “For several years I had nurtured a secret hope. I wanted to make a film about Negroes, using
only Negroes in the cast. The sincerity and fervor of their religious expression intrigued me, as did the honest simplicity of their sexual drives. In many instances the intermingling of these two activities seemed to offer strikingly dramatic content.” Having been unable to convince MGM to permit him to do such a film in past years, Vidor was excited that the availability of the new sound technology would strengthen his argument, and he began making concrete plans. Aboard ship returning to the United States he drew up a list for the studio of elements “suitable for an all-Negro sound film,” foregrounding religion: “river baptisms, prayer-meetings accompanied by spirituals, Negro preaching, banjo playing, dancing, and the blues.” Vidor's desire to make this film was so great that, in attempting to overcome the resistance of the studio to the idea of an “all-Negro-cast” film, he pledged to defer receiving his salary in order to defray the film’s production expenses; in exchange he would receive a percentage of the film’s net profit. Once Vidor received permission to go ahead with the film, the studio allowed him to exercise a large measure of control over all phases of production. Consequently, the final product was largely the result of Vidor’s wishes and decisions, with a few significant exceptions of intervention from the studio and the censors. The studio’s willingness to allow Vidor to proceed paid off: the film received many favorable reviews, earned a spot on the Film Daily and National Board of Review’s lists of the ten best pictures of 1929, and garnered an Academy Award nomination for Best Director for Vidor. When interviewed almost thirty years later, Vidor listed Hallelujah and The Crowd as his two favorite films.

The story that Vidor chose for his first sound film focuses on Zeke, the eldest son in a large family of sharecroppers, his rise to renown as an itinerant revivalist, and his fall resulting from the seductive lures of a woman he converts and baptizes after she indirectly brings about his brother’s death. Despite the attempts of his parents, both devoutly religious, to keep him from falling prey to temptation in the city, Zeke succumbs. After considerable tragedy, Zeke returns to his family and to the idyllic life of the rural South. Although Hallelujah would differ in scale and in subject matter from his earlier works, Vidor presented himself as uniquely suited to write and direct such a film precisely because he considered himself an authority on “the negro.” In interviews leading up to the film’s release Vidor insisted that he had created the story from his own observations of southern black life, and he argued forcefully for its authenticity. He told a reporter, “I used to watch the Negroes in the South, which was my home. I studied their music, and I used to wonder at the pent-up romance in them. . . . The story is based on events with which
I was familiar as a boy at home in Texas.” When the picture was finally released, the studio’s promotional material also emphasized Vidor’s qualifications to direct this “authentic” rendering of black life, asserting, “Mr. King Vidor, who was chosen by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to direct this film, is a native of a Southern State, and from his childhood, his background has been that of the cultured Old South in its days of glory. Knowing the negro, he has chosen a simple theme for ‘Hallelujah,’ a theme centered upon an humble negro farmer and his family, their lives and joys and sorrows. He has caught the rhythm of their existence and has reproduced for the first time, a section of humanity so little understood by those who do not know this colorful race.” For his writer, Vidor selected the white screenwriter Wanda Tuchock, and Ransom Rideout, a black playwright and studio writer, added dialogue at the studio’s request. The studio also listed Harold Garrison as assistant director on the film. Vidor described him as “a Negro bootblack at the studio. He had a stand set up and we called him Slickum. We made him second assistant director in charge of the Negro cast.” Garrison’s role seems to have been to act as an intermediary between Vidor and the large numbers of local extras engaged on location and perhaps to oversee the travel of the lead cast members on Jim Crow railroad cars to the location shoot in Memphis, Tennessee. And while Vidor insisted that the film’s story was grounded in his experiences, it should be noted that it recapitulated the familiar tale of a child moving away from family ties to pursue his or her own path and then returning to a newly defined relationship with the family. Warner Bros. had made particularly productive use of this formula in its 1927 film The Jazz Singer. Vidor understood that the studio feared that white southerners would interpret the release of an all-colored-cast film as a political statement. In numerous comments to the press during the production period the director attempted to dismiss any connection between his film and campaigns for civil rights for African Americans by articulating a set of small goals and insisting that he had no intention of having an impact on American politics. Nevertheless, Vidor saw himself as providing some sort of service to African Americans by making them the subject of his movie and rendering them as “real.” Louella Parsons, a Hollywood gossip columnist for the Hearst newspapers, reported that “Mr. Vidor hopes to make a race picture just as ‘Nanook of the North’ was a race picture, and above all, he wants to show Negro life as it really is and without a mission or problem to solve.” Vidor insisted that the film would be a small, focused, emotional study in contrast to the large-scale pictures he had done in the silent cinema, and he reassured the studio and potential white viewers that such a “factual” representation need not involve any statement for social change.
Just as Vidor claimed to have no interest in politics in producing this film, he asserted that he did not intend to make a religious statement, although he did understand the medium of film to be, in many ways, a mode of spiritual expression. “All my life I have been interested in the science of being: ontology,” Vidor said many years later. “And this fascination has kept pace with my professional dedication: film making.” He continued,

Perhaps films can help us learn about life and living. Does the chance to watch shadows of ourselves in the speaking dark of a movie house explain cinema’s great attraction? . . . Must I, as a director, continue to see films and life as an antinomy? Why must I painfully shuttle back and forth between the real and the unreal? Life is one. I must try to meld the science of being and the aesthetics of cinema. Only by doing this can I hope to evolve a comprehensive and viable philosophy of film making. . . . How else are we to express our humanness? How else are we to express God?17

Although Vidor did not put this discourse into play during the production and publicity phases of the film, his perspective on film as an expression of the divine must certainly have informed his approach to Hallelujah, one of the few films in his body of work to take on religious issues.

It seems clear that, from Vidor’s perspective, multiple authenticating mechanisms combined to support and justify this production. First, he relied upon his belief that the cinema affords the filmmaker privileged access to profound ontological questions, to the very nature of being. In Hallelujah, Vidor explored the ontological contours of “the Negro,” relying on what he understood to be the fundamentally racialized nature of being. Second, he emphasized the importance of his own specialized knowledge of African American life, acquired through his empowered position as a white male observer, in ensuring the authenticity of the production. The question of the authenticity of the film’s representation of black religiosity would surface time and again as the censors evaluated the film, as various publics viewed and commented on it, and as many African Americans objected to its rendering of “Negro life as it really is”—that is, to the imaginings of a southern white man who insisted that “the Negro” was a singular entity and that he had privileged insight into something essentially “Negro.”

The black press devoted considerable attention to the progress of the production of Vidor’s new “talkie,” to the director himself, and to the actors who would appear
in the film. The *New York Amsterdam News* was particularly interested in the film’s progress because it was in New York that Vidor concluded his national search for “new” talent for this film about southern black life. Indeed, in October of 1928 the *Amsterdam News* reported that the former slave Harry Gray, a member of its own janitorial staff, had been selected to play the part of Zeke’s father in the film. Three other lead members of the cast—Daniel L. Haynes, a well-known stage actor who played Zeke, Honey Brown, a dancer at the Club Harlem who was to play Chick, and Victoria Spivey, a popular blues singer who played Missy Rose—were also signed in New York.18 All of the black press coverage during the production period made clear the tremendous hope of many African Americans that the film might reshape screen images of blacks and thereby influence their social and political possibilities, indicating a profound faith and investment in visual culture despite the history of uses of film in support of white supremacy.

Two aspects of the production stood out as particularly heartening for many black commentators and as indicative of film’s potential to help reshape American life and culture: first, that it was to be a sound picture and, second, that its story would focus on black religious life. In some cases the press linked the two issues, as in the *Amsterdam News*’ conjecture that, “since Hallelujah is to have dialogue and vocal sequences, it is quite likely that the actors will sing all the well known spirituals.”19 The coming of sound, many black observers thought, would finally allow black actors to appear on the screen in dignified ways. Attention to the vocal skills of black actors, one line of argument proposed, would necessarily shift focus from the physical, aggressively embodied, and often comedic approach to representing blackness in the silent cinema. Eva Jessye, a writer at the *Baltimore Afro-American* and *Hallelujah*’s musical director, emphasized the film’s shift from the stereotypical characterizations of blacks exclusively as “joker, comedian, servant, fool” to more complex characterizations, in part because of its reliance on a range of black musical styles.20 Ruby Berkley Goodwin, an entertainment writer for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, opined, “Much depends upon the Negro pioneers in this field of art. Interviewing some of them, we are convinced that the race will be well represented. Their voices blend perfectly in the spirituals and folk songs of the Negro. Their voices, soft and intonating[,] are suited perfectly for screen-sound reproduction.”21 Reviewing *Hearts in Dixie*, Fox’s 1929 all-colored-cast film that also had a religious story, Robert Benchley evaluated the film in the context of imagining the possibilities of sound films, which before the release of this movie he had considered uncertain. “With the opening of ‘Hearts in Dixie,’” he wrote, “the future of the talking-movie has taken on a rosier hue. Voices can be found which are ideal for this medium. It may
be that the talking-movies must be participated in exclusively by Negroes, but, if so, then so be it. In the Negro, the sound-picture has found its ideal protagonist.”

Those critics who focused on the ability of the talking pictures to provide a showcase for African American culture also hoped that the new technology would necessitate the end of blackface performances in film, imagining that “black voices” would require actual black people, even though cases like the radio show *Amos ’n’ Andy* proved otherwise. But many commentators, though investing tremendous hope in sound technology, were also realistic about the prospects for change and seemed prepared for the possible continuation of traditional patterns. Not long after the release of *The Jazz Singer*, the *Pittsburgh Courier* predicted that silent films would soon be a thing of the past and wondered whether sound would portend a change for black actors. The piece continued with what was, perhaps, an apocryphal story about race, class, region, and American speech:

A humorous story is told of how the “talkies” are playing havoc with the old actors. It is said that Farina [Allen Hoskins of Hal Roach’s *Our Gang* comedies] was tried out in the “talkies” with the expectation that he would use the broken English suitable to the characters he portrays in the silent drama. However, Farina was born in Boston and has had the best of tutors, so when he opened his mouth his English did credit to Fifth Avenue’s most polite social circles. On the other hand, it is said that when Adolph Menjou, the evening clothes idol, was tried out in the “talkies” his English was so atrocious it was suggested that Farina be allowed to do his talking while Menjou worked and Menjou be allowed to do Farina’s talking while Farina acted. Such is the upset the “talkies” have caused in the cinema world.

What the outcome of this “upset” would be was not clear in 1929 when Vidor began production of *Hallelujah*, but the adding of sound and the possibility that spirituals—widely taken to represent African Americans’ most profound contribution to American culture—would have a prominent place on the sound track augured well. Appearing in the context of the large-scale urbanization of southern blacks and the tremendous expansion of vibrant black cultures in Chicago, Detroit, New York, and other cities as a result of migration, *Hallelujah* touched on issues of concern to African Americans, most particularly the religious meaning of urbanization and modernization. Vidor seems to have understood that a great deal was at stake—not just for African Americans but for all Americans—in the shifts of population, ideology, and sense of self brought on by the Great Migration of the early twentieth-century.
eth century. The North, figured as it had been during slavery days as the promised
land in which African Americans might finally experience the benefits of citizen-
ship, held an exalted place in the imagination of African Americans in this period.
Almost two million African Americans fled the hardships of the rural South, some
opting for urban areas in the South and others moving to major cities in the North.
Although the majority of African Americans remained in the South, the symbolic
importance of the migration north was profound. It was in the context of these thriv-
ing urban environments that new religious, social, political, and artistic movements
developed in the years following the First World War.

Framed by rapid demographic changes and by the emergence of “the New
Negro,” Hallelujah’s representation of southern black religious life could not help
bearing the burden of intense scrutiny. Those black intellectuals who were part of
the New Negro movement saw themselves as heralding the arrival of a new race
spirit. Alain Locke, professor of philosophy at Howard University and the chron-
icler of the movement, wrote in 1925:

With this renewed self-respect and self-dependence, the life of the Negro
community is bound to enter a new dynamic phase, the buoyancy from within
compensating for whatever pressure there may be of conditions from without.
The migrant masses, shifting from countryside to city, hurdle several genera-
tions of experience at a leap, but more important, the same thing happens spir-
itually in the life-attitudes and self-expression of the Young Negro, in his
poetry, his art, his education and his new outlook, with the additional advan-
tage, of course, of the poise and greater certainty of knowing what it is all
about. From this comes the promise and warrant of a new leadership.

While elitist in many regards, Locke’s project did not facilely relegate African Amer-
ican folk culture to the dustbins of history with the emergence of the New Negro.
Instead, he saw black culture as inevitably benefiting from these developments and
undergoing an attendant liberation. Locke compared what he took to be the emo-
tional and psychological development of African Americans in this migration
period to the stages of transformation of black religious music: “Recall how sud-
denly the Negro spirituals revealed themselves; suppressed for generations under
the stereotypes of Wesleyan hymn harmony, secretive, half-ashamed, until the
courage of being natural brought them out—and behold, there was folk-music. Sim-
ilarly the mind of the Negro seems suddenly to have slipped from under the tyranny
of social intimidation and to be shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied
inferiority.” And he further argued that this gradual and insistent emancipation amounted to a spiritual release.

Where the New Negro movement emphasized and facilitated self-representation and agency in picturing African Americans, however complicated and contested this process might be, the marginal status of blacks in these early Hollywood films necessarily meant that the images produced were largely out of their control. The way African American religious leaders, expressions, and institutions would appear in the Hollywood imaginary would be largely the result of a series of negotiations between white men in Hollywood and in the various agencies that managed the products of the industry. Vidor seems to have understood himself as working against the progressive political stance embodied by the urban “New Negro,” and in talking about the film he positioned himself with what he imagined to be the authentic—and necessarily southern—folk Negro. In comments on “race psychology,” Vidor asserted that “[t]he Negro of the North always wants to see himself as a poet. He is not content to see himself as he is pictured in ‘Hallelujah.’ Even the polished Negro of Carl Van Vechten possesses, under the surface, the rhythm and abandon, the love song and laughter of those in a primitive state.”

Clearly, for Vidor, African Americans had little agency in formulating their culture and identities and instead were the products and property of white men like the author and photographer Carl Van Vechten and himself. In Vidor’s view whites were more authorized than blacks to adjudicate the authenticity of blackness, and his insistence on this point would become central to the evaluation of _Hallelujah_ by many interested parties.

The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA), the body responsible for regulating the content of Hollywood films, found much of Vidor’s story proposal far too explicit in its portrayal of the fall of a preacher. At this point in its history the MPPDA operated under the guidelines of the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls,” which prohibited, among other things, “willful offense to any nation, race, or creed” and “ridicule of the clergy” in any film produced by members of the association, “irrespective of the manner in which they are treated.” Colonel Jason Joy, the head of the MPPDA’s Studio Relations Department at this time, wrote to his staff that he had informed Vidor and the MGM producer Irving G. Thalberg that the story raised a number of problems in relation to the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls.” Joy’s initial discomfort with the scenario also had to do with Vidor’s plans to include a scene of a crap game and the use of the word _nigger_. The MPPDA’s caution about using the term _nigger_ in the script did not, apparently, have an impact on Vidor or Thalberg. It fell to the film’s black actors to force the issue. _Hallelujah_’s musical direc-
tor, Eva Jessye, wrote an exposé published in many black newspapers shortly after the film had been released in which she addressed the question of the script’s language. She wrote, “[S]ince the ‘Hallelujah’ cast was all Negro, it is difficult to understand why it was necessary to use any references whatever to race. Yet, it was done, and what is more, with utter disregard for the feelings of the cast, they were handed scripts that any worthy Negro would resent.”

Jessye noted that the term was used in the script to describe various characters, as well as in dialogue to be delivered by the actors, and that the terms darky and pickaninny also appeared throughout. Jessye was incredulous that the actors were to expected to deliver lines like “I’m a bad nigger” and reported that the members of the cast “were solid on the stand to do nothing by word or action that could be taken as a reflection on the black race.” They were successful in resisting the use of such terms in their dialogue, and the final print of the film contains no such language.

Although the MPPDA did not appear to have pressed the issue of derogatory language in the script, other questions arose about the film’s content that concerned the censors. Once the film had been completed and Jason Joy sat down with Thalberg to screen it, he began to feel uncomfortable with other issues regarding the representation of blackness as fundamentally connected to sexuality and religion. He was particularly nervous about the film’s explicit representation of “a strong negro [Zeke] exhibiting passion,” which he was sure whites would find objectionable. Joy understood this to be a problem in particularly gendered ways, explaining in a memo that “the passion shown by Chick, a small negress, will not be deleted because of its treatment.” Joy feared that the image of a black man expressing desire would encourage such expressions in actuality and necessarily lead to the rape of white women. Negresses, however, (and particularly small ones) could justifiably be portrayed as sexual agents in this view. Images of black women as hypersexual were readily available in popular culture and worked against any factual evidence of sexual assault of black women by white men. Images of black male hypersexuality, on the other hand, while also readily available and often invoked to sanction lynching, could not be usefully deployed in this particular instance, according to Joy. For Vidor, however, sexuality was a constituent and necessary component of any representation of black religion, an understanding that Joy obviously did not share.

Joy also found the film’s uses of religion discomfiting. That the film associated Zeke’s work as a revivalist with that of “real” ministers might offend “the religious people of the country,” he thought. This association was made clear, according to Joy, in a scene in which Zeke preaches at a revival and begins by saying, “The text of my sermon will be . . . ” In addition, in the first scene in which we see Zeke as a
preacher, he and his family arrive in a small town to conduct a revival. They disembark from a railroad car that has the words “Ezekiel The Prophet” painted on the side (see figure 1). Zeke, wearing a silk robe, rides on a donkey at the rear of a parade of children waving small American flags and singing “Great Day, the Righteous Marching.” Joy found this image particularly disturbing, since it could easily be read as “emulating Christ’s journey into Jerusalem.” Joy did, however, hold out the possibility that the story could be made acceptable to “the religious people of the country” and that, in contrast to the main thrust of Vidor’s story, black religion could be presented as “real” religion. He told his staff:

I advised them [MGM] it might be less objectionable if the negro preacher and evangelist was not portrayed as a weak character, succumbing to temptations in various forms. The story as now written makes the preacher’s son the weak character and I have advised MGM that I believe too much prominence is now given to the religious importance of the son; that this criticism may be avoided by making it evident in the picture that the father is the real leader and minister and that the son is merely a zealous convert used by the parson as part of his shown [sic].

Although Vidor never modified the story to displace Zeke as the central character, Joy would soon be appeased on a number of counts: Vidor revised the synopsis, emphasizing to Joy’s satisfaction that the father remained an appropriate clerical model (at least, as we shall see, for a black preacher) and later removing references to Zeke as “the black Jedus” [sic].

Other people at the MPPDA who evaluated the script and the completed film asserted that African American religion had at best a tenuous connection to real Christianity and expressed discomfort with the possibility that the film might leave a more positive impression of it with viewers. Vidor’s representation of black religiosity used available stereotypes enough to make sense to and placate the censors, however. Although the MPPDA required minor changes in the script, the association ultimately approved the project on the grounds that it provided a “realistic” portrayal of African American life. Lamar Trotti, one of the MPPDA censors, made authenticity the focus of his evaluation of the project in a letter he wrote summarizing his initial impressions. Trotti wrote:

I hardly know what to say about “Hallelujah” by King Vidor. If the characters were whites, I would think very definitely that Vidor was treading on very
dangerous grounds—that of a renegade parson running off with a strumpet, seeing her die, brutally murdering her lover. But such is the influence of my rearing in the South. I can’t get excited about this in the lives of negroes. We think such things happen, everyone seems to accept them as natural and no one bothers about them. Religion for negroes is regarded as a joke in the South. Baptizings in the rivers are circuses, and people go for miles to see them. They aren’t taken seriously at all by whites. There is an old saying down there that a negro with hair in the palm of his hand has religion. Apparently the others haven’t. So I am a bad judge of what the effect of the picture would be. The story seems real enough. If the characters were white it might be likened to Elmer Gantry, but there is no thought that Zeke is a hypocrite. He is just a weak nigger in the toils of a black Deborah.39

Despite the initial resistance from the censors, as well as some from the studio, Vidor was permitted to proceed, and by many accounts he succeeded in his attempt to produce a “realistic” story about black life and religion in the South. An evalua-
tor for the MPPDA who saw the film at its premiere at the Embassy Theater in New York City wrote, “This film is full of the religious customs of the uneducated negroes, camp meetings where they roll on the floor and wave their arms and do all sorts of crazy things, baptisms in the river, where they act like crazy people; and many other curious performances which although true to life will not be understood by anyone who doesn’t know negro customs fairly well.” In many cases, the alleged realism of the film’s portrayal of African American religious display served as the most potent justification of its racism. When, for example, the Canadian province of British Columbia rejected the film for distribution on the basis of its conjunction of religion and sexuality, a studio representative suggested that the MPPDA argue in the film’s favor on its merits as a “sincere portrayal of negro religious rituals.”

One of Variety’s reviewers argued that the film presented “a camera reproduction of the typical southland with its wide open cotton spaces, where the good natured, singing negro continues to eke out a bare existence. . . . It brings realistically to the screen how he lives in nondescript surroundings with continual evidence of illiteracy that even remains unpolished when becoming hysterically religious.”

In Hallelujah Vidor sought to provide a definitive statement on the black race, its psychology and its religious practices. His approach incorporated existing traditions of representations in popular culture of black religion as simple and instinctive and therefore appropriate for the childlike Negro. For Vidor, a focus on religion was fundamental to his portrayal of black life. In addition to using commonplace images of black religion, Vidor amplified these images by insisting on the connection between religion, race, and sexuality, presenting black religion as extraordinarily embodied, fundamentally sexual, and available as a spectacle.

Hallelujah is a gorgeous film that provides viewers with vivid landscape sequences. Vidor’s commitment to preserving the art of cinema while incorporating the new sound technology that so often in its early years limited camera movement (because the equipment had to be encased to muffle the sound) produced an extraordinary example of what sound film could become. His interest in using many sequences of outdoor location shots led him to begin production before having finished casting the film or having worked out all the technical issues of how to record the sound for these shots. The available cast set out for Memphis so that Vidor could film scenes that included black farmers bringing in the cotton crop, a river baptism, and one of the final segments that involved an elaborate chase through a swamp. In many ways, then, the visual elements remained of primary concern in this important early sound film. While the postproduction dialogue sound may seem poorly rendered from our
perspective, one of the film’s greatest achievements was its ability to maintain the visual richness of silent film while taking advantage of the various vocal talents of its actors.

Vidor’s insistence on the need to include outdoor scenes had a great deal to do with the particular story he was telling. It seems clear that for him any representation of “the Negro” required deliberate attention to the natural world. Black people are inextricably connected to the land in this view, and Vidor frames the film with two segments in which farm families pick cotton in the fields. He follows the first of these with a scene in which the Johnson family, having brought in their annual crop (to the tune of “Cotton, Cotton, Cotton, Cotton”), prepares to send Zeke (Daniel L. Haynes) and his younger brother Spunk (Everett McGarrity) off to the cotton gin and then to the city to sell the crop (see figure 2). Each member of the family makes sure that Zeke knows what items they would like him to bring home—all small things like candy, chewing gum, a dress, and spectacles.43 Zeke’s family is close knit, and family members seem to have little care for the world beyond their small community. In beautifully filmed shots Vidor begins the film by creating a strong sense of connection among the members of the family and between the people and the land. The studio’s publicity for the film prepared viewers to understand the story in this way: as one piece of promotional literature asserted, “American life has changed, has become a standardized industrial spectacle; but the negro of the Southern United States, though no longer a slave, is unchanged. He is still a part of the moist earth and growing crops, one who sings for joy when the sun shines and the sky is blue.”44 In the world of this film, tragedy strikes when one of these simple, unchanging people leaves his or her natural habitat of the rural South.

After introducing the viewer to the family, Vidor establishes a nexus of religion, race, and sexuality and draws the film’s main characters in relation to this complex construction. Early in the film we see Zeke, his parents, and his siblings gathered for dinner after a day’s labor during which they have completed bringing in the cotton crop. Gathered around a rough-hewn table in the yard, Mammy (Fanny Belle DeKnight) and Pappy (Harry Gray) listen to one of their six children read aloud from Exodus 20—the Ten Commandments. In opening the scene in this way, Vidor situates the Bible as the standard of conduct, one that viewers should easily recognize, allowing them to identify with this family in important ways. Soon enough, however, the characters’ actions complicate and dismantle the relationship Vidor has established between the members of this family and a strict interpretation of biblical precepts. Similarly, subsequent events in the film’s story will undermine the moral authority of Pappy and Zeke, the film’s two central male characters. As the scene...
proceeds, we come to see how little Pappy can assist others in holding to the standards of the Ten Commandments. Shortly after dinner the family receives visitors. Adam and Eve and their children approach, and Adam asks Pappy whether he is available to perform a wedding ceremony.

PAPPY: To marry you? Ain’t these eleven children yours?
ADAM: That’s right. We thought it was about time for us to make it more permanent [sic].
EVE: That’s right. (giggle)
PAPPY: Seems like you made it mighty late to get round here to get married. The damage is all done.
ADAM: But could you fix us up anyhow?
PAPPY: Well, it’s never too late to do the will of the Lord.
EVE [bowing]: That’s right, that’s right.6

FIGURE 2.
Zeke and Spunk in the foreground, taking the family’s cotton to the gin in Hallelujah. From the author’s collection.
When Mammy congratulates them on finally getting around to "doing the right thing," Eve ties the decision to marry to her sense of herself as a respectable woman, insisting that she has always been respectable and wants to avoid any implication otherwise. Pappy and Mammy give some indication of discomfort with Adam and Eve’s perspective on marriage, and Pappy agrees to assist them in doing God’s will, but there is no sense during this exchange that the couple have recommitted themselves to upholding the Ten Commandments or that they intend to raise their children according to its standards. While this scene incorporates these rural black folk into the grand Christian narrative of human sin and redemption, the film’s racial essentialism locates this particular Adam and Eve in a local context in which black sexual desire and expression seem to overcome rational religious understandings.

Vidor appears to be particularly interested in whether what he takes to be the essential moral character of blackness can be accommodated to American national identity. Zeke, Mammy, and Pappy become central to his exploration of this issue, and his conclusion requires the characters to remain located in the strangely utopic cotton fields of the deep South, laboring happily as sharecroppers but having no contact with whites. In this view, urbanization and cultural transformations that move blacks away from the countryside can only be damaging because these processes might lead African Americans to imagine themselves as other than a primitive subculture within American society. Even though Mammy’s remark, in response to Eve’s situation, that “’taint what you was, it’s what you is today” implies the possibility of progressive development and transformation, the film’s overall thrust contradicts this perspective. Hallelujah’s central argument is that the character of blacks is fixed and irredeemable despite their best efforts to act in ways contrary to that fundamental racialized nature. With the initial exchange between the couples and Mammy and Pappy’s easy acquiescence to Adam and Eve’s request, Vidor makes clear the relative and compromised nature of Pappy and Mammy’s moral standards, quickly undercutting the earlier reading of the Ten Commandments. Nevertheless, the parents remain at the top of the film’s moral hierarchy, and Pappy stands as a strong model of the kind of man that Zeke could become.

We soon witness Zeke’s moral descent resulting from his conflation of religion and sexuality, another of the film’s significant themes. As Adam, Eve, Mammy, and Pappy prepare for the wedding, Zeke follows Rose (Victoria Spivey) into the living room. By this time the viewer has already learned that Mammy and Pappy adopted Rose with the hope that she would eventually marry Zeke. This is all we know of Rose, who remains a cipher in the film, as Vidor gives the audience little access to her character through dialogue. The visual presentation sets her against
the vivacious Chick, casting her as simple and plain (see figure 3). When Zeke enters the room, Rose, who is sitting at a small organ, begins to play the wedding march. We see Rose from behind as she sways from left to right on the stool, clearly enjoying the music and delighting in the occasion. As Zeke advances toward her, Rose, unaware that Zeke is behind her, completes the song and leans toward the window to listen to Pappy performing the ceremony. Vidor cuts to a close-up of Zeke’s face as he approaches Rose from behind. He breathes heavily, and the expression on his face is clearly one of desire. We see Rose listening, still unaware that Zeke is in the room. Then, in a particularly intense sequence, Vidor shoots from Zeke’s point of view and we see his hand reaching out to Rose’s shoulder. Innocently, Rose turns around and looks in the direction of Zeke’s face (which we still do not see). At first she seems happy to see him, but alarm soon registers on her face. As Vidor cuts to a wider shot of Rose sitting and Zeke standing, we hear Pappy outside explaining to the bride and groom that marriage is like mystical union between Christ and his church. Just then Zeke insists that Rose kiss him, and as she stands up and begins to back away he grabs her and draws her to him. As Rose begs Zeke to let her go, he pulls her close and kisses her, and, while she is clearly uncomfortable, she does not struggle. Zeke suddenly backs away from Rose and clutches his chest, looking shocked at what he has done. When they are called to come outside to celebrate the conclusion of the wedding ceremony, Zeke apologizes to Rose, saying, “It looks like the devil’s in me here tonight.” Rose readily forgives him.

The scene is characterized by a number of powerful juxtapositions between marriage understood as a sacred institution and the desire for illicit sex. As we have already seen, Vidor introduces the encounter between Zeke and Rose with Adam and Eve’s announced desire for a wedding ceremony despite their having been together long enough to have produced many children. Pappy conducts the ceremony under a tree in the backyard, no doubt a reference to the tree in the Garden of Eden, given the deliberate selection of the names Adam and Eve. The sanctification of the couple’s relationship, one already marred by illicit sex, takes place in the shadow of the symbol of the fall of humanity. Vidor may also have been subtly referring to the ascendancy of sexual desire over the sanctity of marriage in his positioning of Zeke and Rose in relation to one another. When Rose sits at the organ with her back to Zeke, an inverted broom leaning against the wall divides the frame, with Rose to its left and Zeke to its right. The broom is a potent symbol in African American history. Denied legally recognized marriage ceremonies, enslaved African American men and women frequently conducted a ritual to mark their commitment to one another that involved jumping over a broomstick. Vidor’s use of an inverted...
broom in the frame emphasizes his view that sexuality compromises these characters' religious commitment.

The viewer cannot help continuing to question Zeke’s faith even as he undergoes a transformative experience in the aftermath of the death of his brother, Spunk. In setting out this part of the narrative, Vidor emphasizes his sense of the simplistic and literal nature of black religiosity and its conjunction with the relentless pull of sexuality, placed in the context of the inevitable sinfulness of the urban context. When Zeke takes the family’s crop to town to sell, he sees Chick (Nina Mae McKinney) singing and dancing for a group of men and is immediately attracted to her. Also called “High Yella,” a reference to her “high yellow” or light skin color, Chick recognizes Zeke as an easy mark and, in the tradition of the stereotype of the treacherous “black Jezebel” and the treacherous mulatta, sets in motion the events that lead to Spunk’s death. In an effort to impress Chick, Zeke begins to flash the money he made from selling the crop, and Chick and “Hot Shot” (William E. Fountaine), her partner in crime, draw him into a game of craps in a local saloon. Zeke soon loses the money. Zeke and Hot Shot begin to argue over the money, and when Zeke takes out a switchblade Hot Shot counters with a pistol. In the struggle that ensues, the gun discharges, killing Spunk, who has just entered the saloon in search
of Zeke. Zeke brings Spunk's body home to his inconsolable parents, and the family and neighbors gather for a wake.

During the wake Zeke has a profoundly moving religious experience that opens up the possibility of genuine spiritual and moral transformation for this central character. He cannot bring himself to mourn with the others and instead lies on the ground outside, weeping. His father joins him and tries to console him, insisting that he has not come to judge Zeke and reminding him that God forgives. Zeke asks his father for help, and Pappy, telling him that God has sent an angel to show him the way, points to the sky and describes the angel's snow white robe and chariot. When Zeke looks up to the sky, Vidor cuts to a shot of clouds with rays of light streaming through. Then, as the light from the sky illuminates the two standing with their arms outstretched, Zeke preaches a spontaneous sermon about God’s love and forgiveness:

The Lord done showed me the light.
The Lord done revealed the truth of his creation.
I done laid my brethren down in the ground but the ground can’t hold my brother.
No, Pappy, the ground can’t hold him.
The Lord is stronger than the ground. The Lord is the ground.
The Lord is the sky and the heaven and the moon and the sun. The Lord is the earth and all the living things of the earth.
The Lord in [sic] his Kingdom.
There ain’t no more pain. There ain’t no more sorrow. And there ain’t no more death.
So why do we wail and grieve?
Oh my brethren . . . I give you back to the Lord.
The Lord is the beginning as well as the end.
Come with your sorrows and leave in his joy.
Come with your defeat and leave with his victory.
Come, oh come with your sinfulness and leave in the goodness of his joy.
Come, oh come, oh Lord.
Come to that land of green pastures and clean waters. Come to the Lord.
Amen.

Zeke's sermon demonstrates a deep understanding of Pappy's teaching about God’s forgiveness and has the potential to set the stage for a profound transformation in the character.
In many ways, this scene in which Zeke experiences God’s power is extraordinarily potent. Daniel L. Haynes delivers a compelling sermon in a traditional black preaching style, with great emphasis on rhythm and tone in chanting, and the performance is emotional and sensual in ways that mark it as genuinely felt. Indeed, Vidor signals the power of the sermon by intercutting shots of mourners who, sensing that something deeply religious is occurring, come out of the wake and gather around Zeke. At the same time, Vidor chose to film the scene from a distance using no close-ups, thereby limiting the viewer’s ability to use the main characters’ facial expressions to evaluate their emotional tenor. He takes the same approach to the two other scenes in which Zeke preaches, at once allowing an unadulterated moment of thoughtful religious expression and diminishing its potential power through what is perhaps a deliberate distancing of the viewer. Vidor uses close-ups most often in *Hallelujah* to indicate sexual desire, showing the characters as wildly overcome and animalistic in their passions, and rarely to facilitate access to other aspects of the characters’ interior emotional lives.

In addition to emphasizing a view of black religion as simplistic and emotional, the film insists upon the blending of religion and sexuality in the scenes where we see the characters participating in religious ritual, leading the viewer to conclude that, for African Americans, these two are inextricably linked. When Chick is baptized after being converted under Zeke’s preaching at a revival, for example, she interprets her religious experience in sexualized terms and in terms of her relationship to Zeke rather than to God or Jesus. As she is being dunked in the river, she cries out, “I have been a wicked woman. Oh, I’ve been a wicked woman but I’m sanctified now. Hallelujah. All because of you, brother Zekiel. Keep me good, keep me good, don’t let me sin no more.” And later, when Hot Shot ridicules her conversion, she tells him that her soul has been “washed in the spring of the Lamb,” to which he responds that she’s been “washed in fires of the devil.” Chick objects to Hot Shot’s attempt to convince her to continue in the con game with him and insists that no one will “keep [her] from the protecting arms of Brother Zekiel.” At her baptism Chick becomes completely lost in religious ecstasy, and, to the dismay of his family and followers, Zeke carries her out of the water and into a nearby tent. He is clearly affected by his proximity to Chick and by her sexualized moans. Vidor cuts to the interior of the tent as Mammy enters. We cannot see Zeke and Chick, but we can hear her persistent moaning. The camera cuts to Chick lying on a cot, moaning in religious and/or sexual ecstasy, and Zeke embracing her and wildly kissing her neck. Mammy sends Zeke off, now ashamed of himself, and chastises Chick, calling her a hypocrite and telling her that she’s got more religion than is good for...
her. From this point on, neither Zeke nor Chick can seem to separate sexual expression from religious experience when they are in each other’s presence.

Irving G. Thalberg, MGM’s production head, understood how important Chick’s unrestrained sexuality was to the narrative and did not agree with Vidor’s initial choice of Honey Brown, a dancer from New York’s Club Harlem, for the part. When the cast and crew left hastily for location shooting in Memphis, Tennessee, in October of 1928 to get footage of the cotton in the fields, Vidor had no doubts about having cast Honey Brown, who, he said, “stood out like a sore thumb” from all those he had seen in his national search. But when Thalberg saw the first rushes—prints of each day’s takes—he became convinced that Brown was not sexy enough to carry off the part. He telegraphed Vidor immediately, writing, “Terribly disappointed in Honey Brown. She has lots of pep but very little if any sex. Great for first part with comedy scenes but am afraid audience would laugh at her in sex scenes and question whether they should believe sincerity of story which is strong sex attraction between Chicky and boy.” Vidor defended his choice and argued that he found Brown to be beautiful, sexy, and talented enough to handle the part. Thalberg, who had the authority to overrule Vidor’s decisions, wired back to explain his reaction, asserting that “my chief objection to Honey Brown is certain ugliness particularly around her mouth, her flat chestedness, and her upper lip has very outstanding hair line.” Thalberg’s decision stood, and the substitution of Nina Mae McKinney satisfied him with regard to her ability to engage the viewer with her sexuality (see figure 4). He voiced concerns about the fact that McKinney’s hair was straight but remained satisfied that this “problem” could be easily fixed. Clearly, Thalberg had in mind not only a particular image of female sexuality but also a racialized one that required that McKinney not to appear too white—that is, not to have straight hair or skin that was too light. At the same time, however, the film locates sexual desirability in the lighter-skinned Chick as opposed to the darker Missy Rose.

The most interesting and profoundly articulated section of the film in which Vidor wedads African American religion to sexuality takes place at the evening Jubilee revival following the baptism (see figure 5). The set for the revival is a large, open barnlike structure with a stage at the front on which Zeke and his family stand. The room is darkened, but the available light casts shadows on the walls. Zeke preaches a short sermon promising to fight the devil on behalf of his people. Following the sermon the people begin to sing “I Belong to the Band.” They form a circle and move slowly around the room counterclockwise in a fashion reminiscent of a ring shout, a southern African American ritual of communal worship. We hear the sound of women wailing as it becomes clear that Chick is standing at the center of the crowd, deeply involved
in the emotion and physicality of the worship. Chick thrusts in time to the music with her arms raised, moving up and down, bending her knees. Following a close-up of Chick dancing ecstatically, Vidor cuts to a medium close-up of Zeke looking down at Chick from his position on the stage, his eyes wide with desire. Vidor then repeats this exchange, following with a close-up of Rose, and later one of Mammy and then of Pappy, all clearly suspicious of Chick’s intentions (these are the only close-up shots in the film that do not indicate sexual desire). Chick moves toward Zeke, stands directly in front of him, and grasps his leg as he attempts to control himself. Chick motions with her head for Zeke to join her, and he steps down from the platform, bobbing up and down in the same manner that Chick has been. Zeke and Chick are now at the center of the circle, bending their knees in time to the music and moving in a clearly sexual manner. At one point, Chick looks at Zeke intensely, takes his hand, and puts the base of his thumb in her mouth, emphasizing the sexual nature of this worship. Eventually, Chick leaves the building with Zeke following close behind, and the two run off into the woods. This scene serves as the culmination of a number of scenes in which Zeke and Chick commit themselves to resisting sexual temptation but find that religious experience leads them, inevitably, to sexual expression.

FIGURE 4.
Nina Mae McKinney as Chick in Hallelujah. From the author’s collection.
Through the character of Chick, Vidor provides a relentless pull on Zeke that draws him away from his home and family. From the first moment he sees her wearing a dress with a pair of dice on them, singing "Shuffle Along" and dancing before a crowd of entranced men, he sets off on a path that moves him to risk everything he has to be with her. Zeke is drawn to Chick from the start, but the attraction becomes irresistible once she embodies a sexualized religiosity as well. Missy Rose, chosen by Zeke's parents as an appropriate wife for him and never dressed in anything other than what appears to be a burlap sack, can never compete with Chick's lures. Indeed, Zeke proposes to Rose simply in an attempt to "get the devil off him," and after she declares her love he abandons her. Vidor and Wanda Tuchock, one of the film's writers, emphasized the dramatic differences between these two women in their continuity synopsis draft, writing of the baptism scene, "Chick is in Zeke's line, and he feels a strange thrill when his arms support her and her arms cling about his neck. These arms are soft yaller [sic], while Missy's arms are black. Chick's soft body seems to cling to Zeke, and her lips are very red, and her breath is warm upon

Figure 5.
The Jubilee revival scene with Missy Rose at the center, flanked by Mammy and Pappy, in Hallelujah. Courtesy John Kisch, Separate Cinema Archive.
his cheek. He tries to release himself and finds the girl is holding him fast—and then he doesn’t try to get away.”53 After her conversion and baptism Chick does sing religious music instead of the show tunes of her earlier performances, indicating an attempt to reform, but delivers a decidedly sensual version of “Give Me That Old Time Religion” as she prepares to attend the Jubilee revival. She is available and open to the devil’s work in accordance with the conventional gendering of sin, but her racial location, which sexualizes her in unique ways, amplifies this and makes her profoundly dangerous for Zeke.

Music is an integral part of the film’s insistence upon African Americans’ conflation of religion and sex in ways that marginalize them in the American context. Music inaugurates and accompanies much of the religious frenzy and, outside the religious contexts in the film, helps to present the characters as carefree children. At the same time, however, the film’s music is often extremely compelling and enriches the high-quality visual elements. As a folk musical, Hallelujah seamlessly integrates music into the story, relying on contexts in which people might naturally sing—at work in the fields, performing household chores, at religious services, and so on.54 With the exception of “At the End of the Road,” written by Irving Berlin, most of the film’s music comes from African American contexts, particularly traditional spirituals, blues, and folk music, arranged and conducted by Eva Jessye. In an article published some months before the film’s release, Jessye argued that music would be central to the film’s power and took special pride in the variety of “Negro music” included and in her work as arranger and conductor for Baltimore’s Dixie Jubilee Singers, featured on the sound track.55 The sound track also contains a segment in which Chick sings W. C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues.” Many black commentators on the film noted the effective use of spirituals. W. E. B. Du Bois, in his review in the NAACP’s The Crisis, longed for even more traditional music instead of the Irving Berlin “theme-song” but conceded that “the world is not as crazy about Negro folk songs as I am.”56 Berlin’s song, “At the End of the Road,” which tells of happiness and redemption in the future, anchors the film’s presentation of music, and in some ways the film positions Berlin’s interpretation of “jazz” or of black music as equally if not more authentically black than the spirituals.57

Spirituals and the blues function in expected ways in the film to draw a contrast between religious life and worldliness, as well as to authenticate Hallelujah’s portrayal of black life. The film contains extremely moving moments in which Mammy sings traditional folk songs or sings extemporaneously, underscoring the potential of the folk musical to tap “the transforming power of memory.”58 Early on, Mammy sings “All the Pretty Little Horses” while rocking each of her small children to sleep.
in turn. Later in the film, Mammy vocalizes her distress as she senses something amiss (she will soon learn of the death of her son), chanting, “Lord, have mercy on my soul.” At the same time that folk songs and spirituals lend an air of dignity to some of the characters, the coupling of the spirituals with “tom-tom” drums signals the danger of sexuality. Indeed, the first sound one hears as the film begins—even as the screen remains black—is that of a distant drum, marking the characters and narrative to follow as primitive and likely unable to be redeemed or elevated.

At the film’s conclusion, Zeke returns to his family, having served time on a chain gang for murdering Hot Shot, Chick’s former partner. This conclusion sees Zeke through a variety of transformations and reinstates him in his former role in the family, albeit in a more mature and more responsible form. After running off from the revival, Zeke and Chick spend months living together while Zeke works as a hand in a sawmill. Chick becomes extremely bored with her life by the time Hot Shot appears and offers her escape. When Zeke finds out that Chick has left with Hot Shot, he pursues them, bringing about Chick’s death as she falls from a carriage and then strangling Hot Shot. In the final version of the film, the scene in which Zeke works on the chain gang is brief, meant to indicate that he has been punished and paroled in preparation for reintegration into the family. When he arrives back at the cotton farm, singing “Goin’ Home,” his parents welcome him, Rose forgives him, and his mother immediately offers him chitterlings and spare ribs.

Over the course of the film Vidor moves Zeke from his life as an artless farm laborer who has little access to the outside world, through the dangers of the urban environment, and back to the simplicity of the farm. Along with these geographic shifts, his religious life is transformed from a home-based experience that seeks to adhere to biblical moral standards, to the revival in which he is particularly interested in his public persona, to a return to his rural roots. The film insists that Zeke’s life as a revivalist is inappropriate for him and for his family because it moves them beyond their social and theological capacities, and Vidor signals the discrepancy largely through costuming. When we first see the family in their appropriate context they are dressed simply and seem comfortable in their clothing, but when Zeke becomes an itinerant revivalist he and the other members of the family wear new formal clothes that do not seem to fit them, just as Zeke cannot conform to the role of “Ezekiel the Prophet.” Given Vidor’s understanding of the limited possibilities for character development for African Americans, it is not surprising that he used class markers in his costuming of the characters to assist the audience in evaluating Zeke’s odyssey.

The original story outline and script drafts contain a much longer and complex
sequence charting Zeke’s redemption in which the members of the chain gang work on a levee in a flooded river under the watchful eyes of the black prison guards. As the water rises the prisoners’ lives become endangered and Zeke pleads for a guard to release them from their chains so that they can get to safety. The guard refuses, but eventually Zeke wrestles the keys away and, after taking a moment to rescue a small dog, helps the men find refuge on a mound in the river. In a story synopsis, Vidor and Tuchock described Zeke’s emotions at this point, asserting that “[h]is sense of leadership returns and, lifting his arms aloft, he voices fervent prayer to the Lord. The others are fired with Zeke’s spirit and join the praying, and presently the waters cease to rise! They are saved!”61 In this version of the story, Zeke would have regained a strong sense of himself as a religious leader and would have returned home with more than simply a song on his lips. It seems that Vidor filmed this sequence but chose not to include it in the final cut, leaving the completed film without this more complicated version of Zeke’s transformations as a result of his encounters with Chick.62

The visual, musical, narrative, and ideological elements of Hallelujah combine to create a powerful result. Vidor interpreted all of these elements featured in the film—a racially compromised moral sensibility, sexualized religious expression, and emotional musical display devoid of deeper theological content—as fundamentally part of the nature of “the negro race.” This emphasis on a fixed racial nature and on racial psychology allowed little room for transformation or progress. Vidor emphasized his vision of the unyielding and invariable simplicity of blackness and of African American religion in many of his statements to the black and white press prior to the film’s release. In one interview he described how easy it was to work with the cast because “[i]n the emotional scenes the players lived through the episodes; they truly didn’t act them. They felt them. . . . A Negro is a natural actor, singer, and a born mimic. Any group of them naturally can sing and dance in harmony. They are born that way.”63 In another interview in which he again described the cast as not acting but simply experiencing the emotions of the scene and “pray[ing] themselves into a sort of frenzy,” Vidor emphasized the danger this presented to the largely white crew, who risked “infection” and the loss of reason when surrounded by black people who could not, in his reckoning, discern the difference between drama and reality. The crew tried to maintain its critical distance, he assured readers, but he concluded that “[o]f course, the fact that they [the black actors] are speaking and singing all the time makes this influence even more potent than otherwise.”64

After the film was released, Eva Jessye countered Vidor’s claim of the set as dom-
inated by the true religious frenzy of the black cast members. In her accounts of the film’s production published in the black press, Jessye wrote of the intense preparation the cast members undertook for various scenes and interpreted their strong responses when being filmed as the result of their professionalism and preparation. “Surely no cast ever fell more heartily into their respective roles,” she wrote. “Haynes would brood for hours in order to get himself into the solemn mood required for the religious scenes.” She also asserted that her own training and dedication to the job contributed to the realistic sense of the film’s religious scenes, as well as easing Vidor’s job. She wrote that in the wake scene, for example, she had instructed the members of her choir and the extras who appeared in the scene how to move and to interject prayers and songs at various points. “It required exactly twenty minutes for a perfect take, instead of the entire day, as had been anticipated. An amusing thing in connection with this was the fact that the director thought the individual singing bits were accidental. They were done so easily and naturally that he did not realize that these bits had been carefully planned for dramatic effect.”

Vidor’s assessment of the actors as essentially untrained, naturally emotional and religious, and unselfconscious about their performances also stood in marked contrast to their biographies and to the coverage of their careers in much of the black press. From the initial announcement that Daniel L. Haynes would have a major role in the film, the Amsterdam News emphasized his experience in the New York theater as understudy to Charles Gilpin, one of the best-known actors in America at the time, and to Jules Bledsoe in the Florence Ziegfeld production of Show Boat. In addition, the fact that Haynes had earned a degree from Morris Brown University in Atlanta and had taken courses toward a master’s degree at the University of Chicago was an important part of the black press’s presentation of this new film star.

In the Baltimore Afro-American, Eva Jessye, the film’s musical director, chronicled Victoria Spivey’s rise from poverty in Houston, Texas, to a career as an Okeh Records recording artist, emphasizing the financial sacrifices her mother had made for her daughter’s music lessons. Spivey’s self-presentation focused on the amount of work she had put into her career up to this point, telling Jessye that “[g]rit, pure grit is the thing that counts in trying to get ahead. Whatever you want, if you want it bad enough to work hard enough and wait long enough, you will surely get. Spend your time trying to improve rather than envying and talking about somebody else. Luck? I don’t believe a word of it. There is a Power that keeps watch and knows our worth to the last inch. There is no withholding of just deserts or overpaying. We get just what we deserve.” Harry Gray was not a professional performer, so the papers could not focus on his acting or singing experience as they did with Spivey.
and Haynes, for example. A profile by Ruby Berkley Goodwin in the Pittsburgh Courier highlighted the harsh conditions and hard work of his early life under slavery, his career as a preacher, and his philosophical bent. Goodwin wrote that she asked him “about his English, for he spoke as a scholar, with the wisdom of the old masters.”

According to Gray, he had met “an intellectual bum,” and, in exchange for drinks, the man taught him about “science, art, history, and anthropology.”

Such interviews in the black press with members of the cast of Hallelujah offset some of the impact of Vidor’s statements prior to the film’s release and permitted African Americans to continue to invest their hopes in the film.

In many ways Hallelujah lived up to the expectations of a variety of black commentators on film, religion, and politics, and many of them praised the film as art and as a moving and vivid portrayal of aspects of black life. In his review in the NAACP’s journal The Crisis, W. E. B. Du Bois hailed the film as “a great drama” and argued that the kind of African American religiosity portrayed—the faith of “a deeply superstitious people”—must be understood as having developed as a universal human response to tragedy and disaster.

Du Bois also emphasized the universal human appeal of the story and noted the potentially positive consequence of the film’s effective use of documentary-style sequences of black laborers. For Du Bois, this kind of attention to the daily reality of black life was of great importance, and he was not alone in his evaluation of Hallelujah’s significance.

Illinois Congressman Oscar DePriest, speaking to a Harlem audience after the film’s segregated premiere—at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem and the Embassy Theatre downtown simultaneously (see figures 6 and 7)—announced, “We are standing on the threshold of civil and cultural emancipation in America. Tonight we have seen how far our race has progressed culturally and artistically since the Emancipation Proclamation.”

Daniel L. Haynes, one of the film’s stars, wrote, “I cannot say what our race owes King Vidor and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer—there are not words forceful enough for that. ‘Hallelujah’ will, as Moses led his people from the wilderness, lead ours from the wilderness of misunderstanding and apathy.”

Other reviewers emphasized that, whatever the shortcomings of Hallelujah, it was a significant advance over earlier representations of African Americans in film. A New York Age editorial declared that because the film seemed “to present the Negro as more of a human being, with a full assortment of human frailties and a few simple virtues, it may be accepted as a distinct advance over the former conception of him as a butt and a jest, a role that was growing a trifle threadbare.”

Most of the praise from African American quarters emphasized the talents the actors displayed rather than the film’s story or direction. In a
marked contrast to Vidor’s insistence that the members of the cast did little more than be their raced selves, black and white critics, whether reviewing the film favorably or not, lauded the performances as thoughtful and sophisticated.

Many of the white reviewers recognized the quality of the performances but also discerned the film’s attempt to delineate the fundamental nature of blackness through an exploration of religiosity. A reviewer for Variety provided an extensive psychological analysis of the film’s story, grounded in and fully accepting of racist stereotypes:

Simple emotions, primitive situations of love, lust, jealousy and remorse. . . .
To these credulous children of cotton the devil is a real person, ever present, and violation of God’s edicts brings bad fortune.

Students of Freud will read into the revival shindig a close affinity between religious frenzy and sex impulses. This is intelligently presented when the hot mamma in a fever of sudden repentance for her former sins is, all unconscious to herself, consumed with desire for the strong, manly preacher.
Vidor has poured himself into this picture, designed as an epic of the negro. He has packed in a lot of glamor and action and humanity. If the picture is limited, its boundaries are inherent to the subject.

The *New York World*'s reviewer characterized the film as “a fine and simple record of the most emotional race on earth,” and Creighton Peet of the *New York Evening Post* concluded, “Instead of looking at ‘Hallelujah’ as an exposé of a quaint aspect of this our America, I think we should settle down to the fact that the Negro is as different from the rest of us as we are from the Russians, the Germans or the French.” In interpreting the film in this way, the reviewers took the cue of the studio’s promotional material that declared, “Because this epic of the screen, which you are about to witness, concerns a people almost buried within another people, it is necessary that certain things be understood. This picture concerns a simple folk, whose standards and emotion, though of this era, are based upon those of their savage ancestors.” Such responses to the film understood Vidor’s exploration of black religion to support the view of African Americans as unfit and unable to ever join the ranks of “us”—Americans.

Despite the widespread acknowledgment that Vidor had accomplished a great deal with his first sound film and that the release of an “all-colored-cast” film produced by a major studio was a historic event, many commentators and reviewers—black and white—remained deeply uncomfortable with what they understood to be the broader implications of this particular rendering of black religiosity. Earl A. Ballard, “a race writer,” commented that “[w]hile the photoplay has served to give vent to the innate ability as actors to the principal characters who have won favorable comments from the critics of the daily press, it is a flagrant and misleading mockery of the race’s religion. Some say it is blasphemous and had any other race been involved, never would have passed the Board of Censors.” John T. Sherman of the *New York News* insisted that “[w]hile ‘Hallelujah’ gives great opportunity for the race artistry, it undeniably pictures the group as moral morons and religious barbarians.” One black New Yorker who attended the film’s segregated premiere objected to the *Amsterdam News*’ support for Vidor’s work and emphasized the disjuncture between the self-representation of many African Americans in the period and Vidor’s representation:

After the picture was well under way on its opening night, it was clearly to be seen that the superb acting of the cast was being overshadowed by the amount of spirituals, meaning weeping and wailing, and the weak, the low [in] spirit

"'Tain’t What You Was" • 47

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were dominating the picture. When one sees "Hallelujah," stripped to the bone and laid bare it is not hard to imagine why Harlem is the largest Negro City in America, why Chicago, Philadelphia, and Baltimore and the others are increasing in Negro populations. "Hallelujah" is the answer. Of course the good editor of The Amsterdam News might not wholly approve of the above statements, but from close observation from the sixth row [. . .] the applause given only when the cast was acting is proof enough of just what Harlem in general thinks of this picture.82

"Progressive Harlem," this writer insisted, did not respond favorably to this film, which he took to be merely southern racist propaganda. A Cincinnati Union editorial summed up the sentiment of some African Americans about the film, noting that the paper had "received many criticisms concerning the picture 'Hallelujah' from colored people who have wondered how any intelligent Negro could advocate its being exhibited."83

Eva Jessye, who criticized many elements of the film publicly after its release, defended the presentation of religious enthusiasm as realistic and as simply one of a variety of expressions of human excitement about life. She wrote:

There has been a lot of bitter comment on the part of Negroes concerning this "shouting" scene. Many foolishly contend that it was exaggerated. Many say that it is a reflection upon the race. Opinions may differ, but facts are facts. That shouting scene is a mild duplication of what takes place nightly in many Negro churches. I was raised up among shouters and have seen that very thing in my hometown, Coffeyville, Kansas, with my own relatives leading the gyrations. You can see shouting equally uncontrolled in certain churches in New York City—so why pretend244

Significantly, Jessye’s defense sought to counter the sense, commonly expressed in criticism of the film, that, while uneducated, backward black southerners might accept Hallelujah’s representation of African American religion without question, educated, modern, northern urbanites would not. For Jessye, “shouting” was but one way some African Americans expressed their religious fervor, and neither region nor educational background had an impact on the “temporary abandon to the power of religion.” Clearly, she was interested in preserving the variety of African American religious expression even in the context of urbanization, and she wrote that she refused to be ashamed of this aspect of black culture.85
Many African Americans were not sure that they wanted the attention to their religious cultures or the imaginings about their religious practices that Hollywood devoted in this period. A reviewer from the Chicago-based Associated Negro Press (ANP) pondered the exigencies of commercial culture and the uses to which images of African Americans had long been put, comparing the situation in Hollywood to a slave economy. “It is understood that Mr. Vidor feels bad about the Negro’s reaction to his picture. He should not. He has made a picture that is expected to sell. He should be willing to understand if the Negro is a bit sensitive about going on the block.”

This commentary on what African Americans understood to be the high stakes involved in filmic representations of black people and black life cuts to the core of the concerns of African Americans at the time about the treatment of African American religion in the Hollywood imaginary. The ANP reviewer’s discomfort with Vidor’s film did not stem entirely from a belief that it presented inaccurate images. Indeed, the author conceded that some of the content was “true to life,” but he objected to the commodification of a particular rendering of blackness in service of an argument for white superiority and black inferiority. Many African American public figures in this period—W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, and others—were also contending with what to do with various “true-to-life” but, for them, problematic aspects of black culture. A major component of the projects of many black intellectuals in the early twentieth century involved positioning black folk culture (and many traditional black religious practices that are a part of that folk culture) as a valued part of the African American past that should be carried into the future as history and tradition rather than as the primary cultural orientation of a new, modern and more urbanized culture. Zora Neale Hurston, who often disagreed with Du Bois and Locke about precisely how to value black folk culture, was also attentive to Hollywood’s uses of African American religion. She criticized black leaders for what she took to be their unqualified gratitude for the increased presence of black characters in the movies. Such praise, she argued, so “flattered [white authors and producers] that they actually believed they were authorities on Negro religion.”

Hollywood imaginings of African American religion, along with representations in literature and music, became especially contested ground as black intellectuals negotiated their varied relationships to black folk cultures and did so in relation to mainstream popular culture’s commodification and re-presentation of elements of that culture.

White reviewers who accepted the film as “a camera reproduction of the typical southland” and black reviewers who found it difficult to understand the objections of many African Americans to the film frequently emphasized what they understood
to be unreasonable expectations on the part of black audiences. One white film critic saw the protests as characteristic of “certain racial groups” to “squawk” whenever what they saw on the screen did not conform to their image of themselves. He continued, “One of the hardships in picture making is the certainty that race sensitiveness will result in uproar if any of the many peoples is presented in any save flattering colors. The latest of these manifestations comes from certain uppity Negroes who write letters to newspapers protesting that ‘Hallelujah,’ the very excellent picture made by King Vidor for M.G.M., is unfair to the black race.” He concluded that the protesters were “merely emulating the Latins, the Irish, and certain of the Chinese.” Romeo Doughtery, the New York Amsterdam News’s entertainment editor, defended the film to black viewers who preferred films whose stories focused on the black elite, such as those produced by the independent black film director Oscar Micheaux. Doughtery chided such people for desiring what he took to be false images. “Like in some of the productions of Oscar Micheaux they would have us arriving at Villa Navarra in the Rolls-Royce we do not own, and there until the wee hours of the morning trip the light fantastic and in our spare moments doing our durndest to act like Mr. Eddie for whom we must crawl out the next morning with rag and duster.”

Regardless of the position that African Americans took on this film, it seemed clear to all those who entered the public debate that more than just the assessment of a movie was at stake and that any representation of African Americans on film could have social and political consequences. In the North, white exhibitors feared that large numbers of African Americans who wished to see the “all-colored-cast” films would go to theaters in areas outside “their own neighborhood houses,” mingle with whites, and inflame racial tensions in cities newly bursting with southern black migrants. In the wake of the film’s release, a convention of film exhibitors in the Southeast voted to forego showing any Negro pictures, and participants devoted special attention to MGM for its production of Hallelujah and its plans to release other films with black characters.

The template that Hallelujah set for representing African American religion in Hollywood sound films involved insisting on a fundamentally simplistic and imitative theology, a relentless association between the imagined hypersexuality of blacks and their religious expression, and the deployment of religion to characterize African Americans as essentially carefree, morally irresponsible, and apolitical. Music, an essential component of the template, often allowed for the most complex moments of expression in the film but also often served to signal the carefree laziness of southern black life. All of the “all-colored-cast” films produced from the
late 1920s through the mid-1940s that use religious contexts avail themselves of many of these elements set forward in King Vidor’s work. For the most part, the intense focus on sexuality found in Hallelujah drops out, and the films emphasize instead religion as a window on the fundamental incapacity and permanent childlike status of African Americans. The filmic techniques the studios employed to promote this perspective did not, in general, follow the style of Hallelujah’s hyper-realistic, ethnographic approach but turned instead to very stylized, fantastical settings that relied on dreams and dreamlike contexts for their narratives. We turn next to examine this stylistic shift in Hollywood’s presentation of African American religion in the 1936 Warner Bros. film of Marc Connelly’s 1930 play The Green Pastures.