

# African-American Women in the Movies: An Historical Overview

New York saw its first motion pictures in 1890.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the influence of film has become so pervasive that it is almost impossible to think of an area in any American's life that remains untouched. The rise of the film industry occurred during times of phenomenal growth of the nation's economy, political power, and self-consciousness. It is no surprise that this form of media, as have other forms, has had a mutually reinforcing relationship with our collective consciousness, our images of the self and of the other. While there are movies that alter the way their audiences perceive a situation, issue, or person, there are also movies that reinforce the status quo, which affirm for many the verity of their beliefs.

Long before any type of media were in existence on this continent, there were races of people dealing with interacting with other racial groups. This was true when there were vast expanses of land buffering groups of Native Americans, and it has evolved through the centuries as an acute, omnipresent point of contention among many in our society today. The tremendous booms in population over the past several decades, the resulting cramped living and working spaces, and the rushed, no-time-to-work-through-a-problem mentality that permeates our culture only serve to aggravate existing problems.

As interaction with individuals different racially from oneself has become an essential part of everyday life, film has carried on this mutually reinforcing relationship with society. Films depicting Eurocentric, negative images of non-white, non-Europeans have been the rule rather than the exception. These depictions reinforce Eurocentric prejudices—not only how European-Americans view African-Americans, but how African-Americans view themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Grun. *The Timetables of History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York, etc.: Simon & Schuster, 1991, p. 446.

One of the earliest examples of this type of “negative and demeaning representation” of African-Americans was Edwin S. Porter’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1903), based upon Harriet Beecher Stowe’s book of the same name.<sup>2</sup> This was the first major film presentation of a stereotype named for the same book: “toms” are one stereotypical representation found in hundreds of films produced in the United States most obviously during the first part of this century. Other stereotypes of African-Americans which are dominant in films are “coons,” “mulattoes,” “mammies,” and “bucks.”<sup>3</sup>

Most roles in which African-American women have appeared can be divided into three categories: leading characters, supporting characters, and stereotypical characters. The latter can be further divided into tokens, specialty (those whose appearances lend credibility to the setting of the film), and specialty numbers (specifically song and dance numbers).<sup>4</sup> These are not mutually exclusive categories; a character can, for instance, be both the lead and stereotyped--Uncle Tom is a prime example. These roles have evolved somewhat throughout the film age, from a point when there were virtually no leading African-American characters that were not stereotypical, to a point when there are occasionally some non-stereotypical leading characters in both white-produced and black-produced films.

The African-American as servant (always a supporting role, usually stereotypical) was a particularly prominent role during the 1930s. After the addition of sound to films had been made, African-Americans were beginning to find roles as servants to the (white) stars to be readily available work for aspiring performers. These roles were devoid of individuality, dignity, and depth, and generally fell into one of two categories: the loyal sidekick “seemingly existing with no other purpose in life than to please or reassure their white employers,” or a scatterbrained comic type who “performed a funny antic or ‘hilarious’ piece of dialogue and then disappeared from the film.”<sup>5</sup> The perpetually happy, trouble-free existence of the African-American servant in these films sustained the hopes that were flagging in white middle class homes across the United States during the Great Depression.

The female servant roles were those of the mammies. Hattie McDaniel is perhaps the most widely recognized face in early twentieth-century African-American film characters. McDaniel was a strong woman to be reckoned with in such films as *Alice Adams* (1935), *China Seas* (1935), and *The Mad Miss Manton* (1938).

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<sup>2</sup> Annette Kuhn and Susannah Radstone, eds. *Women in Film: An International Guide*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1990, p. 332.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Maryann Oshana. *Women of Color: A Filmography of Minority and Third World Women*. New York & London: Garland, 1985, pp. ix-x.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Bogle in *A Separate Cinema: Fifty Years of Black-Cast Posters* by John Kisch and Edward Mapp. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992, p. xxi.

Louise Beavers and Butterfly McQueen were also mammy-typecast performers. They were friendlier than Hattie McDaniel's servants, and were utterly non-threatening. Whereas the pleasure in watching McDaniel for the white middle class was in knowing she was "safely being kept in her place," regardless of any hostility she might show towards the idea of working for them, Beavers' and McQueen's characters were silly enough to not have to be taken seriously at all.

Not every role for an African-American in the 1930s was of a servant, though there were few exceptions. In *Imitation of Life* (1934), Beavers and Claudette Colbert play, respectively, a black and a white woman, each unmarried and each with a child, who meet by chance. Beavers' character shares a family pancake recipe with Colbert's, and the two become a rich team selling the mix for it—Colbert's character offering to share with Beavers' a 20% interest in the company. Beavers' character declines her friend's offer and says all she really wants is to stay by Colbert's side. Donald Bogle writes, "In one haunting sequence, the two women—by now the best of friends and still living together once they have struck it rich—retire for the evening. The white woman goes upstairs. The black woman descends to the basement level."<sup>6</sup> Thus the film still did not stray far from the African-American-as-servant image. This is a perfect example of a harmless mammy-type, also known as the Aunt Jemima, played by Beavers. Gary Null writes, "Louise Beavers played...a black-mammy figure, devoted submissive, and wise enough to 'know her place.'"<sup>7</sup>

One film that made an enduring mark on some sectors of society was a hallmark ending to the 1930s: *Gone with the Wind*. This romanticized view of the Civil War era ignores any real issues, and instead focuses on the relationship between Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler. "Slavery is depicted as some sort of benign state. None of the principal black characters—Mammy, Prissy, Pork, Uncle Peter, Big Sam—appears to have any thought whatsoever of rebelling or, heaven forbid, of seeking freedom."<sup>8</sup> Hattie McDaniel portrays the willful Mammy, who, vocal and confident, seems to run the entire plantation single-handedly. McDaniel became the first African-American performer to win an Academy Award, as Best Supporting Actress.

A few non-servant roles began to be seen in the 1940s. Lena Home "became the first black woman to be fully glamorized and publicized by her studio, MGM. She never played maids. But she did not become a full-fledged dramatic star either." She usually ended up in short nightclub scenes in films starring white performers—if those scenes were not cut.<sup>9</sup> Hattie McDaniel played the mother of a wrongly accused killer in *In This Our Life* (1942). Unfortunately, however, neither of these rose to big-star status, though Home's career has been steadily above average.

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<sup>6</sup> In Kisch & Mapp, pp. xxiv.

<sup>7</sup> In *Black Hollywood: The Black Performer in Motion Pictures*. New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1975, p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> Bogle in Kisch & Mapp, p. xxvi.

<sup>9</sup> Bogle in Kisch & Mapp, pp. xxix.

Butterfly McQueen and other African-Americans began to refuse offers to play insulting, racist roles. For most, this meant the end of their film careers. White filmmakers wanted to perpetuate the images they held of blacks, and roles that were not stereotypical were few and far between, from either white or black filmmakers. In the greater social context of World War II, and with the literary world spawning such works as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, this reality is even sadder.

The 1950s were the dawning of a painfully slowly breaking day for African-Americans in film. Dorothy Dandridge's early portrayal of a schoolteacher in *Bright Road* (1953) was part of the beginning of African-Americans being shown in professional roles. Stereotypes were not rare by any means, however. Black cast films became an arena for demonstrating rhythmical talents, and these were so popular that they became big money makers for the studios producing them, all of which tended to keep African-American performers in these types of roles, restricting the number of roles in which they could be seen in professional and/or deeper characters.

Dorothy Dandridge's portrayal of a factory worker in *Carmen Jones* (1954), broke out of the African-American-as-entertainer mold. This role won Dandridge the first nomination of an African-American for a Best Actress Academy Award.<sup>10</sup> It was also a perfect example of another stereotype that has to this day stuck with African-American women: whores and sirens. Dandridge's bad-girl Bess (*Porgy & Bess*, 1959) and Eartha Kitt's *Anna Lucasta* (1959) are early images of women as temptresses.<sup>11</sup>

Light-skinned blacks had a heyday in the 1950s. Memorable faces like Natalie Wood's (*Kings Go Forth*, 1958) appeared, often in racially confused roles such as the "tragic mulatto" — tragic because of the white blood tainted with black, often trying to pass for white.<sup>12</sup>

An early 1960s film, *Raisin in the Sun* (1961), portrayed black family life in a dignified, non-stereotypical manner--not a common sight prior to release of this film, and frankly, not so common since then. Issues of interracial relationships, addressed occasionally in previous decades, became more popular themes in 1960s films, perhaps with the strong push for civil rights and integration in schools and certain workplaces.

The trend of the 1970s was overwhelmingly the blaxploitation film — films that clearly portrayed stereotypes, but new ones, often created by black filmmakers. The stereotypes of women were largely just explosions of the femme fatale/temptress/whore stereotypes of the past few decades, but the stereotypes of men became personifications of black power, avenging itself upon its oppressor,

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<sup>10</sup> Null, p. 169.

<sup>11</sup> Null, p. 172.

<sup>12</sup> Null, p. 176.

with the women “treated as mere sex objects, part of the superficial fantasy lives of the heroes.”<sup>13</sup>

Sometimes, women played heroic roles. *Coffy* (1973) and *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) were early examples. Null describes the two:

*In Coffy, a particularly violent movie, the main character (Pam Grier) is a nurse who seeks revenge on a dope pusher. The film concentrates on violence, and the main character's sex is merely a gimmick. Cleopatra Jones, however, was a far superior movie. Starring Tamara Dobson as a secret agent, it seemed to owe something to the popular Avengers TV series, made in England, which featured a woman karate expert who was also a special agent. Miss Dobson uses spectacular tactics to defeat her enemies, who are headed by a white female drug pusher (Shelley Winters), and she is spectacular in her beauty. If black movies have hardly begun to elevate women to real character roles, at least the white-dominated ideas of beauty are gone. At last, very dark-skinned, African-looking women appear on the screen to prove that the slogan “black is beautiful” has become an integral part of black culture.*<sup>14</sup>

Leading roles occur more now than they used to, though still far less frequently than do supporting roles. African-American filmmakers alter the way in which audiences see their subjects—or reinforce their preconceived notions. Spike Lee, one of the best-known names in the business, began making movies with only African-Americans appearing, and having them appear in African-American cultural contexts, rather than the Eddie-Murphy-and-Richard-Pryor-making-it-big-in-White-Man’s-Land genre of the 1970s and 1980s. Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986) revolves completely around an African-American woman—her thoughts, her dreams, her problems, her hopes. Lee’s films are “a blend of the type of entertainment and social concern that a filmmaker like Oscar Micheaux believed in: mass entertainment by black artists for the black audience.”<sup>15</sup> Though Lee’s films are too threatening for some (notably upper-class whites), they have enjoyed critical and popular acclaim among both whites and blacks. Lee is now recognized as a major filmmaker in the United States, and shows that thoughtful films starring blacks, about blacks, set in the hearts of black cultures, can be commercially successful—which means the public is watching them.

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<sup>13</sup> Null, p. 216.

<sup>14</sup> Null, pp. 217-19.

<sup>15</sup> Bogle in Kisch & Mapp, p. xxxiii.