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## Black Hollywood: The Stereotypes, Erasure, and Social Inclusivity of Black Entertainers in Hollywood, 1930-60s

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**Black Hollywood: The Stereotypes, Erasure, and Social Inclusivity of Black**

**Entertainers in Hollywood, 1930-60s**

Senior Project submitted to the Division of Arts

of Bard College

By

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The period between the First and Second World Wars spurred a unique perspective on Hollywood and its output of white-dominated films. The social consciousness of racial prejudice and marginalizing black talent shifted gradually that by the 1960s, the black film star became an inevitable outcome thanks to the emerging new black actors and actresses who fought for more screen time and character depths. These new roles both transformed certain black actors and performers into new cinematic personas but also rewrote the formulas of Hollywood genres typical for black stereotypes.

The marginalization of black performers and actors in Hollywood reflected the social atmosphere of the American population being segmented by the color line. The color line, enforced heavily by the Jim Crow South and easily used to discriminate throughout the country, involved the limited spaces African-American talents were allowed to perform. Whether they were a servant, clown, criminal, or any other subordinate to white characters, the images Hollywood reproduced to entertain the decidedly white mainstream audience reinforced racial discrimination. These images asserted specific stereotypes that categorized the roles black men and women and the spaces in where they were allowed to operate.

I will focus on the stereotypes exclusive to black performers and actors that were constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed from the 1930s-60s. The most persistent stereotypes retain core traits that often debase cinematic black characters. The most common stereotype names, as nonfiction writer and researcher Donald Bogle lists, are the “toms,” “coons,” tragic mulattoes,” “mammies,” and “bucks.”

While there are other stereotypes that exist as well, the focus on these five terms are the most sustainable in the era I wish to examine. As researched by Bogle, the stereotypes enforce a

systemic marginalization of black talent that profited on their apparent subjugation. The tom, coon, and buck are usually reserved for black males, and the tragic mulattoes and mammies categorize black actresses to the point of near invisibility. The tom stereotype, which describes a willing submissive Negro that endears white characters (and thus the audience), originated from the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its following screen adaptation. Black artists that feature attitudes regarding the tom figure vary in roles from Bill “Bojangles” Robinson in *The Little Colonel* to arguably Sidney Poitier in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* or *The Defiant Ones*.

Often in comedies, a coon submits to amused audiences with screwball antics or acting naïve and quaint. The comedian Stepin Fetchit wholly personified these coon characters while profiting successfully, which established him as one of the earliest black superstars. Lastly, the black bucks depicted blacks as nothing but physically strong but intellectually limited specimens. As first depicted in D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, as shown in these photos,<sup>1</sup> the idea of the buck which ironically was played in blackface by a white actor, reinforced the stereotypical innate animalistic behavior virile sexual prowess that black male bodies possessed.



The prominence of black males in these distinct stereotypes implied how the physical and mental capacities are exaggerated to differentiate the “relatable” white characters.

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<sup>1</sup> *Birth of a Nation* (1915)

Meanwhile, the stereotypes of the tragic mulatto and the mammy refer to how the black woman's sexuality, or lack thereof, is approached in relation their proximity to the white protagonist. The tragic mulatto was less used in certain cases based on the complexion of the black actress, but it negatively connoted the lighter-skinned character's sexuality with unhappiness and misfortune. Lighter-skinned actresses often played temptresses or jezebels with uncontrollable sexuality to their male counterparts. Actresses that embodied the tragic mulattoes in several movies were Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge, most notably in *Cabin in the Sky* and *Carmen Jones*, respectively. The mammy based every matronly role and trait onto African-American actresses with servile duties. In many of the actress I have studied, the actress Ethel Waters, Louise Beavers, and Juanita Moore played variations of this stereotype in *Cabin in the Sky* and both versions of *Imitation of Life*. Unlike the tom, coon, or buck, the mammy was the source of derision for the African-American spiritual and domestic part of their culture.

More than the stereotypes that sustained throughout its cinematic guises were the talents that embodied them consciously and unconsciously. My focus on performers and actors who constructed their star personas on screen and took on the traits will begin with the idea of the "Negro as entertainer" within the film's narrative. The subjects that I will mention adopted the traits that, to some officials, are regarded as obscenely stereotypical but may have been notable for their own unique talents. The "Negro as entertainer" coincides with the musical genre, which exploited the cultural touchstones that was strongly correlated with black culture--jazz, swing, blues, and dance.

Throughout the 1930s and '40s, the Hollywood musical remained a popular genre to show audiences the innovative use of images, sound, and dance combined. While Busby Berkeley dominated the song-and-dance form, the utilization of black performers popularized the ascent of

jazz and swing music around the 1930s-40s. The marginalization of black actors consisted of appealing to the majority white audience and the choice of editing those scenes with Negroes or the Jim Crow South demographic doubly erased the need of “colored” actors needing to be in the spotlight. With a lack of dramatic roles to follow up, black actors with singing and acting skills could try parts in musicals, a genre that gave the excuse to “explain why African-Americans would (or should) perform music.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite Hollywood’s tendencies to regard black talent as expendable, the rise of jazz and swing music highlighted a few of the forms of black folk art that was being exploited. The distinguished African-American philosopher W.E.B. Dubois championed both high art and folk art, which based its origins in the black spirituals, or “sorrow songs.”<sup>3</sup> The long-standing tradition of passing on the exclusively black gift of story and song adapted into more visual storytelling as soon as the use of sound and image conjoined perfectly in the field. The integration of real musicians actually performing the numbers through instruments and dance within the narrative evolved to one the tenets of the Hollywood musical genre. Of course, the question of how the African-American community shared the “gift” through black folk art, namely jazz music and dancing, complicated the messages visualized on screen.

Seeing the presence of black performers on screen spurs a double-sided outcome for representation. Jazz musicians, dancers, and singers were one of the most heavily portrayed roles for black film performers. On one hand, the popularity of jazz, blues, and swing music within an integrated population demanded jazz musicians should be seen throughout the nation via the

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<sup>2</sup> Knight, Arthur. “Introduction.” *Disintegrating the Musical: Black performance and American Musical Film*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002.7. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Knight, Arthur. “Introduction.” *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002.5. Print.

silver screen, creating more jobs for the marginalized performers. On the other hand, the fragmentation of black artist only singing and dancing within a limited framework became stock and stereotyped by the studio and mainstream press. In effect, the presence of jazz artists requested a venue for them to perform in the film's narrative, whether they were critical to it or not. Performers like Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Lena Horne could hold the screen for a matter of minutes before the camera turned back to the actual plot.

The power of integrating black performers in a majority white production turned into a double-edged sword that could only be altered if and when the studios allowed more screen time and depth in these supporting players' roles. Hence, the answer to showcasing more of the black talent brought on the experiment of the all-black musical. Throughout the post-Depression era, the musical genre introduced a fantastical escape from the turbulent world wars, but the studios willingness to produce musicals with a cast majority of African-Americans reimagined how folk art was seen. Eight known studio musical with an all-black cast were produced from 1929-59. Those musicals, in chronological order, included: *Heart of Dixie* (1929), *Hallelujah* (1929), *Green Pastures* (1936), *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), *Stormy Weather* (1943), *Carmen Jones* (1954), *St. Louis Blues* (1958), and *Porgy and Bess* (1959)<sup>4</sup>.

The musicals I will explore examine the poverty and prosperity inherent in the African-American wish for social mobility. The film—"Cabin in the Sky," "Stormy Weather," "Carmen Jones," and "Porgy and Bess"—feature the various communities formed by blacks in the turn of the century, outside the influence of white supremacy. Although the films share common backgrounds regarding the portrayal of rural life, the cultural expressions and exchanges of

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<sup>4</sup> Knight, Arthur. "Indefinite Talk." *Disintegrating the Musical: Black performance and American Musical Film*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002.126-27. Print

songs, and the social mobility of Negroes throughout the Great Migration. Under the banner of the New Negro movement, the films depict fantastical worlds that dare to observe how the black community operates with no white agents. Perhaps the niche setups of these musicals alienated more mainstream audiences or their apparent racism in major regions of the nation, but the receptions to these films were mired in bent liberal leanings. Although some of their aesthetics pass the test of time, I noticed how the themes and genre trappings emphasized certain stereotypes among black actors and actresses.

Vincente Minnelli's *Cabin in the Sky* was the fourth all-black MGM musical released chronologically, which followed a few tropes within this subgenre. As one of the early works of the distinguished musical film director, Minnelli's stylization perfectly showed an exaggerated ideal of rural African-American living. The rural locale implies that black life consisted of a simpler, hard-working set of individuals who were not bothered with the industrialization of the twentieth century. Incidentally, there are no hints of white folks intruding in this idyllic scenery, which also implies how the land of the earth is populated and dictated by Negro inhabitants. *Cabin in the Sky* featured the divine fighting between heaven and hell over a corrupted man's soul. Little Joe Jackson (played by Eddie "Rochester" Anderson) is a hapless married gambler whose wife, the earthy and pious Petunia (Ethel Waters), begs to stop his un-Christian gambling. In this case, the plot revolves around the Negro folk's fears of judgement in the face of their maker.

In order for the emissaries of God and Lucifer to claim the soul of Joe, they must test his fidelity to Petunia by inviting the temptress Georgia Brown (Lena Horne). The emissaries of God, dressed in Civil War garbs and behaving in military-like unison, put the almighty fear of repentance in the pathetic Joe. In contrast, the emissaries of Lucifer are comically dressed as 1940s lowlifes like loan sharks and gangsters. Their power is not particularly threatening but



seductive in Joe's simple eyes. As he forgets the encounter of his metaphysical judges, Joe is an unwilling subject of man's tendency to be righteous or sinful. The moralizing tale in "Cabin in the Sky" is no different from the moralistic stories embedded in these musicals.

These musicals, with the exception of *Stormy Weather*, paint in broad strokes regarding what is viewed as good or sinful to the black individual. For men, the participation in vices like drinking, gambling, womanizing/philandering, and even murder comes so easily and tempts the male protagonist to act less civilized. Little Joe's gambling and boozing is a catalyst for his immortal soul to be contested as the ultimate prize in a wager between the emissaries of God and Lucifer. While Minnelli's portrayal of these fictional characters is limited to the portrayal of rural African-American life, he does not condemn Joe or the other sinful inhabitants who celebrate life through dance and music. Even Petunia expresses her frustration through spirituals in church. Every facet of the black folk's lives is celebrated in a joyful and fun way, not despair or heavy repentance.

Music and dance surrounds the cinematic black livelihoods in almost any venue or location that is appropriate to the characters. Churches, nightclubs, and bands are especially known for spectacular performances where movies that were non-musicals showed the musical talents of black performers in limited screen time. Those venues still exist in all-black musicals, but they are essential to character and plot in the film rather than backgrounds that simply excuse black performers to participate in white-dominated spaces in film. *Cabin in the Sky* is especially self-aware of the existence of churches to play spiritual and gospel-influenced songs or the utilization swing and jazz in nightclubs. The imagination for studios and directors to think beyond the "Negro as entertainer" for black characterizations, the all-black musical provides an uninterrupted bubble of exercise for black artists to do what they know best.

The marriage of the fantastic and the mundane in the lives of African Americans shows the lean toward magic realism as symbolism. Minelli's musicals always bent toward expressionist stylizations to highlight the more surreal and fantastic elements in the films, which suspends the belief of any essential explanations of the realism in 20<sup>th</sup> century African American life. The heightened aesthetic in *Cabin in the Sky* gives a comforting knowledge to the audience that the stakes are relatively small-scale in the metaphysical and material realms visualized. Of course, the marriage between fantasy and realism connotes to the perfect dualisms inherent in all-black musicals, like sin/virtue, man/woman, and most importantly, sound/image.

Marriage contains many meanings in the all-black musical. In the most basic definition, marriage is an institution between man and woman who establish the foundation of the family unit. The antebellum South seldom allowed enslaved blacks to marry one another, destabilizing the basic institutions of the nuclear family. The 20<sup>th</sup> century representation of the African American marriage either depicts two successful Negroes who either remain content in their perceived low-maintenance status lifestyle or struggle to socially climb to a more prosperous future. Musicals like *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* allow their respective couples to choose these lifestyles and end happily.

With the nuclear family being an obvious conclusion to the marriage of the man and woman, it is odd that the musicals are not shown to have the establishment clear for children and an extended family. Instead, the black community represented in the films work as a family who help, discipline, house, and feed their own. Similar to the classic African saying, "It takes a village to raise a child," the community refers to how African Americans adapted to the modern industrial age by creating a self-sustaining society, segregated from the Jim Crow-era Southern

whites. Marriage, in the post-Depression era, encapsulates the inner struggles and florid romances of the coupling between man and woman.

If these musicals presented the marriage as more modern and unconventional for the intended black audiences, then should the same be said for the assignment of gender roles? The following films I have seen would say that is unlikely. The sexual politics seem more antiquated as the years pass; however the private lives of black women are regarded just as legitimate to their male counterparts. I mentioned how black women usually fit into Bogle's rigid classification of either mammies or tragic mulattoes, but the integrationist politics transformed the black actress into more legitimate sex symbols.

The black female screen diva contributes to the story of musicals in the form of desirable sirens. Segregated politics were an obstacle in marketing how black women could be packaged as sex symbols whose talents laid in singing and dancing. Actresses like Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge had to be marketed as the reductionist title of the "black Marilyn Monroe," "black Jean Harlow" and others to target African-American consumers who would like entertainers of their own race. In many cases, the actresses participated in these cultural representations offered to them in nightclubs or movie roles. To accommodate the Jim Crow South's segregated theaters, the presence of black entertainers, especially women of color, would easily be edited out of the film. The cost was insignificant because the actresses occupied a fraction of the screen time that their white counterparts did. The filmed performances of these screen divas were already limited because of their limited roles, but the intersection of race and commerce and gender put the odds of erasure higher.

There are also updated depictions of black men and women working in blue collar jobs on screen, usually as factory workers, sharecroppers, nightclub owners, pimps, and other crime-related roles. The sight of self-sufficient Negroes in jobs benefitting society undoubtedly paralleled the real-life upswing of non-white people receiving factory and government jobs in the late 1920s-40s during the world wars. The working class woes creep up from time to time in musicals, usually from the men like *Carmen Jones*' Colonel Joe, played by Harry Belafonte, and *Stormy Weather*'s Bill played by "Bojangles" Robinson. Bill Williamson (Bojangles Robinson), in the beginning, spends his leave from WWI in Harlem, New York with a friend. As soon as he sets his eyes on the gorgeous club singer, Selina Rogers (Lena Horne), he aspires to be more prosperous than his rival Chip Bailey so that his career as a star tap dancer "gets [him] to be *somebody*."<sup>5</sup> Bill's aspiration correlates to the long-held belief of the returning world war black soldiers that thought they could fulfill their dreams as soon as the war ended; however, the dreams of real-life black soldiers did not all live the strong rags-to-riches fantasy Bill Williamson fortunately experienced.

In the case of working class women, the woes are more domestic or romantic, usually concerned with their male partners' life of vice or emotional hang-ups with women. Selina Rogers in *Stormy Weather* leads a successful job as a dancer and singer (true to Horne's inherent talents), but her career focus is almost secondary to how she is viewed as a romantic partner for Bill, the film's protagonist. Petunia in *Cabin in the Sky* does not express a lot of sexuality for her love of Little Joe, and her piety to God and church pronounces a more sexless earthiness.

The lone woman who shows more independence in these musicals is the titular protagonist of *Carmen Jones*. Carmen's short-lived stint working in a military base is too constricting for her

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<sup>5</sup>Stone, Andrew L. *Stormy Weather*. 1943

much colorful and independent personality, especially in contrast to her female colleagues and lascivious male co-workers. While a job is less on her mind than romance with the previously engaged Colonel Joe, she does not immediately want to be tied down with just being a housewife. Interestingly, the former two examples I gave live through their hardships with men and reunite with their intended partners. Carmen, sticking to the fate of the tragic mulatto, suffers by being killed by her jealous lover in a fit of anger of her not conforming to his desires. Whether director Otto Preminger saw Carmen's sexuality as a threat or anomaly that he could not forgo a tragic punishment is debatable; the tragedy is already foreshadowed by Oscar Hammerstein's lyrics in his reinvention of the Italian operetta by Bizet.

Of course, the advancement in careers for African-Americans during the Great Depression and after shifted the attitudes among blacks about staying and working in the rural areas and migration regionally, nationally, and internationally. The prominence of black soldiers in World Wars I and II prompted the few narrative of the noble soldier who sacrifices his life for his admittedly racist country. International travel via military and even entertainment circles like musicians gave more opportunities for work that movie studios and other American institutions refused them. *Stormy Weather* and *St. Louis Blues*, which gave Nat King Cole the chance to act in a biopic of Will Handy, eschew the prominence of folk songs in the idyllic rural South for Northern, Western (Hollywood) or international fame on stage.

Unlike the majority of all-black musicals that set their songs within the parameters of a closed, predominantly black community, the setting in *Stormy Weather* itself in the urban nightclubs in New York City. Moreover, the stories involved a predominantly black cast that filled roles of dancers, lovers, nightclub owners, barmaids, singers, war veterans, and migrant

workers. *Stormy Weather* engages the audience by having its characters performing as a profession for working African-Americans, especially veterans from the world wars. The

There is an image of Bill Williamson, who slums his business as an extra drummer in the set pieces of Chip Bailey's exhibitions. Bailey represents the result of the 1940s Afro-American progressing in their field of work. As the owner of Selina's nightclub, he has the power to hire Bill and get him in this demeaning African drummer costume. Of course, the audience sympathies are with the humble and hard-working Bill, who takes his lick in order to attract Selina's attention. The film's examination of show people grants them illusory attitude that these actors are not inhabiting character parts but are playing "themselves" as entertainers for a more sophisticated black, or integrated, audience.

While the plot of *Stormy Weather* is kept slight, the musical makes no bones about its objective of showcasing numerous black artists where segregated nightclubs, and in reality the studio system, may not have given them a chance to present their talents. Compared to other musicals, *Stormy Weather* uses the actual names of its jazz musician cameos, where talents like Fats Waller, Cab Calloway and Katharine Dunham star as themselves.

The all-black musical usually features a medley of jazz, swing, gospel, and blues—genres that have a foundation in black culture. W.E.B. DuBois noted that the black art forms, namely dance and music, developed in the United States as a tool for expression and a connection to African roots. The "black folk art" that DuBois believed in should be preserved as precious and as sacred as black people are to family and church. DuBois' philosophy is an ironic alarm on how the precious black folk art form, like jazz and blues, is commodified by the Hollywood studio system in the representation on screen in all-black musicals.

The musical genre not only exhibits the black performers creating and improvising new styles of dance and music but also demonstrates how physical movement is to the black artist displays their techniques on camera. Sounds and images are important to the movie musical, but movement of the body has a precious trait for black performers to show versatility and liveliness to what can be seen on screen as undeniable energy. The effect of how they move emphasizes the tempo and wavelength the audience has to see the technique is generally innovative for the time the all-black musical, such as *Stormy Weather* and *Cabin in the Sky*, premiere in theaters. Under Dubois's definition of the black folk art, the relationship between the body and music are instrumental in expressing the deep cultural soul of 20<sup>th</sup> century black music. When they are not supervised under the oppressive white gaze, the black performers in the musicals show their art to the willing audience that adores the choreographed movements that dazzle.

## **Capitalism and Oppression in *Imitation of Life***

The stereotype of the mammy and the tragic mulatto are not only exclusive to musicals, and their significance to other genres reify the controlling images that simplified black women. The weepy melodramas, or "women's pictures" as they were called, highlighted the struggles of everyday (white) women who balanced their professional, romantic, and domestic lives. The melodramas I will focus on are two versions of the same title, *Imitation of Life*. Adapted from a novel by Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life* details the economic prosperity of a white widow, accompanied by her lone daughter and their black caretaker and her biracial daughter. The first movie version premiered around the 1930s, the time of the Great Depression, which had a notable value to the underdog theme of actress Claudette Colbert's character climbing the social ladder.

In the 1930s version, Beatrice Pullman co-opts her new maid's pancake recipe and her physical image to build her cooking empire. At first, the struggling widow Pullman takes sympathy toward Delilah (Louise Beavers) and her light-skinned daughter, and then she decides to let them live in her admittedly middle class house. Bea's goodwill allows the film to tell the story of an unconventional family unit consisted of two adult women on the opposite color line who take different roles in raising their children. In Bea's case, she is the breadwinner of the family, which usually is partaken by a husband in the 1930s. Delilah, the black mother who is also one of the foremost examples of Bogle's catalogue of mammy characters, embodies the almost superhuman domestic role for both Jessie and her own daughter, Peola.

The division of labor between Bea and Delilah emphasizes the binary of the middle class, where the white woman can get ahead professionally but a black woman stays in domesticity. In spite of her late husband and the lack of resources to continue his pancake business, Bea must display an extraordinary business sense and negotiate finances and utilities with doubtful, condescending men. In a few consecutive scenes with the various businessmen, Bea charms her way with the financiers using wit, persistence, and uncanny way to bend the truth. In an apt dialogue with a financier who moments ago negotiated strongly to get more money from her in exchange for ovens:

**Financier:** *"When I came to collect you talked me out of that!"*

**Bea:** *"All I had was talk."*<sup>6</sup>

The dialogue is portrayed humorously, but it underlines how easily Bea negotiates these male-dominated spaces for business. The capitalist tale offers no vital conflict with Bea in

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<sup>6</sup> Stall, John M. *Imitation of Life*. 1934



denying her motherly duties in substitution of her professional ones; instead, her conflict eventually comes to the choice of delaying marriage with Steve Archer, a handsome bachelor, for a more satisfying relationship with her adult daughter Jessie (Rochelle Hudson). John M. Stahl celebrates the professional prowess of Pullman at the expense of exploiting the ignorant Delilah.

True to stereotype, Delilah's round, dark-skinned body exhibits an earthiness and spirituality that is undoubtedly noble to a fault to her white benefactress. Delilah's mammy tendencies involve caring for her real daughter and her benefactress's daughter, exchanging folksy advice with Bea about her domestic and romantic life, and showing ignorance to Bea's position as an entrepreneur and other fields outside of the home. In fact, a scene highlights Bea's superiority complex, covered in a friendly but mocking tone, when Delilah is urged to smile at the behest of her charge:

**Bea:** *Delilah, smile.*

**Delilah:** *Ma'am?*

**Bea:** *Smile. You know, smile.*

(Delilah gives a smirk.)

**Bea:** *No, no. A great, big one.*

**Delilah:** *Oh, yes'm!*

(Delilah gives a great smile.)

**Bea:** *That's it. That's what I want.*<sup>7</sup>

Then, the following begins the co-opting of her face as the trademark for “Aunt Delilah’s Pancake Mix.” The Aunt Jemima imagery reinforces the folksiness and claim of authenticity to the homemade, mass-produced product, conducted by white business people. In exchange for Delilah’s labor and compliance, Beatrice mocks her good maid into not knowing what she accomplished for the good of the new restaurant.

The friendship between these two women is clearly skewed in favor of Bea’s rise to economic prosperity and self-sufficiency. The division of the color line is seldom mentioned in Stall’s version to produce a more uplifting tale of women’s melodrama.

If the relationship between the adult women remains skewed, then what happens with Peola and Jessie? The development of the daughters is stressed in a moment of childlike curiosity to hostility when Jessie chides her surrogate sister with having her colored doll. Peola throws a tantrum and runs away crying to her and her mom’s room. Delilah admittedly resents her daughter’s aversion to her blackness but recognizes that it is unfair that her skin color is randomly persecuted. Whiteness is a perceived goal for the light-skinned daughters in *Imitation of Life*, a journey for which the non-white mother/daughter pair possess the most thematically rich climax in both versions. Adult Peola (Freda Washington) consistently rejects her blackness in order to fully assimilate in the white upper class world, where her Jessie and Bea successfully reside.

The non-white mother/daughter pair of Delilah and Peola is relentlessly distressed because of Peola’s desire to create a life ‘passing’ as a white woman. The casting of Freda Washington, a

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<sup>7</sup> Stall. John M. *Imitation of Life*. 1934

light-skinned African-American Hollywood actress who had just as limited access in her business as her character, framed the narrative as a pointed realization of how white audiences identified with Bea and Jessie in their discomfort to categorize Peola as a passing woman. Although Peola is accepted by her unconventional white caretaker and her daughter, the concern regarding Peola's biracial identity hits harder between her and Delilah. If anything, Bea and Jessie's comparative concerns with their black counterparts parallel their own nouveau riche status, thanks to Bea's co-opting of Delilah's pancake recipe.

In both versions of *Imitation of Life*, the light-skinned daughter displays unsympathetic behavior in defiance of her black mother in an effort to pass in white mainstream society. Peola, played by the biracial Fredi Washington, lives under the confines of the basement, a humiliating venue that secludes her and her mother from the salons and dinner parties hosted by her white surrogate mother, Bea. Although her goal is understandable in assimilating as a white woman, her extreme measures of cutting ties from Delilah mark her as a bratty girl. Delilah's disbelief of her daughter's actions make her plea desperately, "I'm your mammy child. I ain't no white mother!"<sup>8</sup> I presume the audience at the time sympathized with Delilah's motherly need to connect with Peola, who makes an unfair ultimatum that ends their last sighting of each other on a bad note.

When audiences saw *Imitation of Life*, they often conflated Washington was that her character and real personality, thanks to her actual biracial identity and the struggle to balance the two cultures she shared. With the black community's addressing the film's failings to accurately deal with its racial aspects, the character of Peola was a victim of the racial climate and limited articulation of biracial identity.

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<sup>8</sup> Stall, John M. *Imitation of Life*. 1934.

In contrast, the 1959 Douglas Sirk version of *Imitation of Life* casted white actress Susan Kohner as the grown-up daughter to the film's mammy figure, Sara Jane. Equal focus on both families occurs in this version, often to mixed results. While Louis Beavers played Delilah with a folksy "dem and dose dialect,"<sup>9</sup> and conveyed a more disciplinarian tone, Juanita Moore's Annie Johnson assumes a saintly, soft-spoken and impossibly good-natured mother to the bratty Sarah Jane. The dismissal of Sarah Jane's heritage takes on a more physical punishment in the form of her new boyfriend, to whom she has lied about her blackness. This results in her boyfriend's violent outburst when he discovers the truth. Sirk makes no illusions to his audience about the melodramatic story, but his usually static but serene cinematography turns to bolder colors to reflect the assault Sara Jane is given.

With both film versions attempts to adapt Hurst's novel, the expectations of comparing them come down to the racial aspects interpreted. John M. Stall's adaptation is the more earnest and triumphant of the themes of economic mobility and female empowerment on behalf of Bea Pullman. Since the Stall adaptation premiered around the Great Depression, the empowered attitude the film adopts in Pullman's journey to the upper class is less cynical than the Douglas Sirk version. Within the unconventional model of the Pullman family unit, Bea takes on the role of a breadwinner, usually reserved for the paternal member. However, Stall does not codify any obvious physical masculine traits; instead, the heroine's apparel transforms from more modest dresses in the beginning to more elegant, expensive gowns. The film does not de-feminize the ambitious 1930s widow but only adds to her material excesses.

If anything, the stark difference between the two adaptations lies in how the director's attitude toward the white mother, the main protagonist from Hurst's novel, is handled in relation

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<sup>9</sup> Bogle, Donald. *Brown Sugar*.

to their balance of their professional and private lives. Both Stall and Sirk begin their respective films with a clear understanding that Bea/Lora are flawed mothers. Beatrice struggles to dress young Jessie in new clothes after she gives her a bath while a telephone call beckons her to answer to a business correspondence. Leaving Jessie alone in the bathroom prompts the daughter to fall in the bathtub once more in trying to get her rubber ducky, in which she calls her “quack-quack.” Sirk’s film starts with Lora already neglecting Susie, where the former struggles to find the latter at the Coney Island boardwalk. These incidents in the beginning foretell the oncoming issue of these white working women in reconciling their failures in being more responsible mothers. Incidentally, this struggle to hold the mothers to tend to their daughters while being a working woman resolves itself with the presence of the matronly black characters of Delilah/Annie.

Do these inciting incidents in both films ostracize the protagonists? It is fair to say that Stall gives more sympathy to Bea Pullman than Sirk does to Lora Meredith because of the directors’ respective attitudes toward the protagonists’ naked ambitions. Bea Pullman obviously owes her success of the idea of the pancake recipe to Delilah, the figure with the more culinary skills, but her offer to make Delilah her partner is met with confusion and denial from the latter regarding the move up the social ladder. When Bea offers Delilah her side of the profit of the pancake mix business, the latter woman refuses any hand-outs from Bea. Delilah makes a counteroffer with the proposition to save her side of the profits on her funeral, where she is piously “secure in the knowledge of heavenly reward”<sup>10</sup> when she dies. This scene seems to excuse Bea of any accusations of cheating her black caretaker, but the skewed power dynamics still hold up, and the protagonist, along with the 1930s audience, occasionally mocks Delilah of her folksy language.

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<sup>10</sup> “Imitation of Life: Style and the Domestic Drama.” [www.ejumpcut.com](http://www.ejumpcut.com)

On the other hand, Sirk invests Lana Turner's protagonist with just as much self-centeredness as her precedent surrogate, but she is not criticized as much of being mean-spirited to Annie Johnson, just selfishly ambitious. In Sirk's melodrama, ambition is treated as a jaded feeling that nearly isolates Lora from her own daughter and makes her near-sighted from privileges she mistakes to be burdens imposed on her. Whether she knows it or not, Lora is less of a nurturing mother than Annie is, as the older Susie heavily announces to her near the end. Annie's almost superhuman generosity denotes a more sympathetic but ultimately naked portrayal of a mammy. Unlike Delilah, Annie does not gain a folksy twang or a "dem and dose" accent that usually points signs at her ignorance.

## **Interracial Encounters**

The integrationist politics after World War II arrived more in the foreground as the issues became more popular to discuss on screen and in real life. The limited roles afforded to the black talent were heavily criticized as sound was mixed in the motion pictures. As Jim Crow became the norm for Hollywood to act under when they had Negro actors and performers on screen, the choice of how they populated these spaces segregated them from their white co-stars. The period between WWI and WWII, including the Depression, featured the revolutionary activism for overturning separate-but-equal and Jim Crow laws. Integration was not particularly favored as a unilateral solution for black and white stars to have equal narrative importance.

Beginning with the all-star black musicals, from *Hallelujah* to *Stormy Weather*, showed the progression of the narratives of how blacks could be portrayed in the eye of the most culturally important institution in the United States. The separatism worked to the narratives of these

fantastic narratives in the musicals, acknowledging the talents of what many writers and philosophers coined the New Negro movement. The onslaught of jazz and swing music and dance supplanted the usual motion picture orchestral music heard around the silent films of the early 1910s-20s. Black music broke down the conservative sounds of that era and found new life in movie scenes that played up the hip, urban sounds of the new genre erupting initially from the cultural mecca of black arts of the 1920s---Harlem, New York.

The Harlem Renaissance imparted the innovative ideologies instilled in musicians, writers, and thinkers the different but relevant arguments regarding the value of black art in a white supremacist, Jim Crow-codified nation. Thinkers like W.E.B. DuBois and Charles S. Johnson voiced different opinion on what spreading black art from New York to the west would be best for Afro-American representation. DuBois believed in asserting the black race's representation as a positively intelligent and creative one, similar to propaganda during the war. To counter Hollywood's mostly negative representation by white (and sometimes Jewish) culture creators, including D.W. Griffiths, the anti-racist movement should tend with artists of creating uplifting portraits of black life. Griffith's quintessential film *The Birth of a Nation* created a hagiography on the Civil and Reconstruction era whose message implied "racial amalgamation on the South to improve inferior black genes through forced interracial marriages."<sup>11</sup>The Renaissance deemed this new movement a resistance from the mass-produced film portrayals that offered skewed representations of black lives.

While Hollywood struggled and often failed to correct any racist misrepresentations of Afro-American men and women, black critics used their publications lionizing the studio systems racial ignorance. The few writers who criticized the institutional racism in the studio

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<sup>11</sup> Tyler 5

system were not particularly insiders of the Hollywood machine but critics of publication like the *Pittsburgh Courier* or the *Los Angeles Sentinel*. Leon Washington, editor of the latter newspaper, challenged the norms Hollywood practiced by giving employment to large numbers of Negroes through such ‘Uncle Tom pictures.’”<sup>12</sup> The tom stereotype essentially boiled down to the non-threatening, self-effacing and pleasing to whites of their superiority both refers to the stereotype on film but also to the actors and actresses who placated to performing in this and other types of roles. The radical demands for better representation indirectly pointed unkindly to those Harlem and Broadway entertainers who migrated to Los Angeles and increased the black presence on what they thought were irrelevant musicals, antebellum South nostalgia epics, and comedy clown roles.

Of course, there were defenders of the studio system, many of whom were aware of their place in the racial hierarchy in Hollywood but attempted to do the best to better characterize their typecast roles and to defend their admittedly profitable careers. While several factions of the black intelligentsia cornered the organizations like the NAACP for their insistence to work with Hollywood studios, the position of Hollywood carried more cultural cache during World War II. To rally support for the armed forces during the Second World War, Hollywood used propaganda via newsreels and the standard narratives dealing with trench warfare.

Special interest groups were assembled to support the war effort in the Pacific Theater. One of these groups developed the Hollywood Victory Committee, which comprised of black stars like Mantan Moreland, Louise Beavers. Hattie McDaniel and Eddie Rochester, helped with the morale in Hollywood over the war effort, especially to the segregated black troops. The Hollywood Victory Committee (HVC) and the Office of War Information (OWI) enlisted small

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<sup>12</sup> Tyler 66



campaigns and stymied any crises to reduce the commentary of racial unrest in the film industry. The potential of these interest groups were lobbied hard in the face of protesters and critics speaking out at the racist hierarchy, but as several of the committee members, including comedian Moreland, believed—the actions they enacted would hopefully make black talent “stop showing [them] as clowns.”<sup>13</sup> The intersection of the entertainment and military culture during World War II and beyond picked up when white and black allies partnered together to dismantle the segregationist policies of the United Service Organizations Incorporated (USO).

The USO tours, founded in February 1941, embodied the patriotic fervor for Hollywood entertainers, both white and black, to boost the morale of the service men and women. At first, the USO’s official policy did not seek to desegregate the troops at home base and overseas. The policy read like this:

*“In some communities separate facilities are necessary. Sometimes this is required by law, either as separately operated clubs or as extensions from white clubs. However, when separate facilities are used, USO has been successful in its efforts to make the Negro facilities meet general USO standards in attractiveness, equipment, and furnishings.”<sup>14</sup>*

The USO were supposed to destabilize the racial strife in any segregated war zone or army bases but were never focused on possible racial integration for the military units. Its service to black military men and women were seen to recuperate the bonds between the often ostracized group and whites in dangerous regions. Fraternization between black and whites, especially ones of the opposite sexes, was restricted. Any violent or sexual urges from black men to the white

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<sup>13</sup> Tyler 66

<sup>14</sup> Tyler 141

community had to be quelled with diversions supplied by the USO: sports, games, food, religious programs, dances, and arts and crafts.

Jazz, jive and jitterbug dancing played a crucial part in mainstreaming what was once called “Negro slang,”<sup>15</sup> according to Cab Calloway. Within the American military, black and white concert and band leaders started the G.I. Jive culture, which was adopted when songwriter Johnny Mercer wrote the popular song “G.I. Jive.” Popular music erupted throughout the segregated military ranks, and the band leaders who played for the troops had to keep up with the times. White and black jazzmen brought their love of the jive culture when they were drafted into the armed forces. Jazz, swing, jitterbug, and zoot suits found their way in the zeitgeist and reached a common cultural plurality that gradually undermined the color line within the ranks.

Since Hollywood and Broadway were the cultural epicenters of the United States, the USO called forth actors, comedians, musicians, and singers to uplift the morale in the armed forces. While jazz dominated G.I. Jive culture, black entertainers found a new outlet to showcase their talents. Whereas white stars like comedian Bob Hope, crooners Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra, and bombshells Marilyn Monroe and Betty Grable had great demand and better pay, black stars like Cab Calloway and Lena Horne grabbed admirers from both sides of the color line. Horne was especially committed to fight for the Double V program, which dedicated the fight for desegregation both overseas for war veterans and draftees and in the homeland. When the USO failed to sponsor the program, she paid her own way to perform for the unrecognized African-American G.I.’s. Horne saw how the USO often prioritized white G.I.’s over blacks, and one incident at Fort Riley, Kansas saw her sing for German P.O.W.’s in front of black American troops. In any case, the Jim Crow statutes under the USO did not prevent the actress/singer from

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<sup>15</sup> Tyler 160

being “genuinely lovingly received by the men of both races.”<sup>16</sup> However segregationist the USO shows were, G.I. Jive culture represented a milestone for Hollywood to reflect in their films.

*Stormy Weather* is one of the few films that highlight, however slightly, the black G.I. experience. Bill Robinson’s character returns from duty in World War I and seeks a new way to make living. His friend introduces him to the extraordinarily rich Chip Bailey, who already has eyes on Lena Horne’s character Selina Rogers. The casting of Horne may not have anything to do beyond her talent as an actress and club singer, but her real-life exploits in uplifting black G.I.s has a particularly compelling thread when she is the inspiration for Bill’s desire for social mobility. Before they meet each other, Bill presents himself as humble and unambitious. He takes job after job throughout the country but is tempted by his calling as a gifted dancer. The migrant worker period touches on the great migration period where African-Americans moved from the Jim Crow South to the North and the West for better job opportunities. Traveling westward allows Bill to be a showcase and become a dancing sensation.

The film’s admittedly thin plot allows the chance to show the expansion of Hollywood’s untapped black talents. Hollywood and Broadway, along with less commercial avenues in the entertainment industry, are springboards for the underappreciated black artists to expand their names across the nation. The admission of the military and exposure to the entertainment industry both demonstrate the ability for the African-American men and women to push the social boundaries in 1940s-50s America.

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<sup>16</sup> Tyler 181

## ***1950s---Black Stars***

If certain musicals like *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* instill a visual grammar that highlights the specific movements that creates a stirring magnetism to the performers, then *Carmen Jones* has a much deescalating feeling in watching the main cast. Otto Preminger's first musical adapts the Italian opera *Carmen* into an all-black showcase, created from lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein. Compared to the aforementioned films, *Carmen Jones* dubs a good number of the actors' voices with trained opera singers to maintain the feel of an actual operetta. The dubbing creates a dissonance for actors like Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte, whose main couple must express their dying love when regular words fail them. Bringing a foreign musical genre like opera, which was not created by or predominantly performed by African-American singers/actors, to the all-black musical illuminates an interesting visual and audio experiment that does not quite work for the most part. Dandridge as the titular character lip-synchs Hammerstein's lyrics, which heavily feature stereotypical accents and dialects for the country-set Negroes.

Moreover, *Carmen Jones* fails to combine the strengths of past musicals of utilizing physical movement in the numbers. In many shots, Dandridge and Belafonte are isolated when they deliver their singing lyrics, emphasized in close-ups or spacious two-shots. Throughout the film the actors attempt to find the passion in their relationship, but the lack of any physical movements fails to engage in the immediate moment that emphasizes their emotions, like lust or jealousy. Preminger shoots many close-ups of the actors whenever they have to sing, which makes their dubbing more obvious. The lip-synching actors often look more mechanical in

delivering the tempo, but the synchronicity is not particularly there. This is not to say that the performances are all failures.

*Carmen Jones* contains moments that transcend the leaden lyrics to true musical synchronization. Whenever the numbers move away from the operatic solos to more jazzy musical numbers, the atmosphere is livelier because the male and female bodies are energetic and natural. The nightclub scene when Dandridge is with Pearl Bailey and her male bosses focuses the performative gestures that they navigate to get more material wealth from their equally opportunistic male bosses. Ironically, the scenes that feature the characters putting on some sort of performance, out of desperation or love, strengthen the actors' performances. When Carmen is introduced in her first scene in the military mess hall, she flirts around the cafeteria for an ideal sex partner in the both the single and coupled men. Movement is articulated more clearly in Carmen's cafeteria number singing (music number) than other numbers where Carmen or Belafonte's character, the straight-laced-turn-smitten Joe, stare either into the horizon or each other's eyes to declare their amorous emotions in Hammerstein's lyrics.

Author James Baldwin noted that *Carmen Jones* influenced many white audience's opinions of African-American culture. Despite its aesthetic achievements and boundary-pushing narrative of leading African-American actors, *Carmen Jones* brought back a pathological stigma attached to black sexuality. Baldwin said that the film's conflicted message on the "Negro's amorality and their embodiment of sexuality while calling itself enlightened by the all-black cast' is presented as an abnormality."<sup>17</sup> Dandridge and Belafonte, aside from being physically stunning and having boundless sex appeal, are shown in the movie to have an excessive sexuality that strengthen the doomed relationship in the narrative. Of course, Preminger unconsciously

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<sup>17</sup> Knight, Arthur 161

recreates the tragic mulatto figure onto the protagonist and associates her sexuality as the source of her death. Colonel Joe, bound by duty and maintaining a good, innocent engagement with the girl-next-door type, Cindy Lou, becomes jealous and brutally violent, another stereotype reshaped in the movie, when the free-spirited Carmen plays the objectified trophy of a boxer.

After its premiere, Dandridge had been on an unprecedented streak of being a late-night sensation, especially for a colored woman. Dandridge's stardom seldom reached the same heights when she played Carmen Jones and received her first Academy Award nomination for Best Actress, a milestone for black cinematic history. Like her other colored peers, Dandridge could not escape the way Hollywood typecast her even after her nomination made the town. She played several other variations of a doomed, frail woman in other lesser works, but her career almost hit a stop when she collaborated again with her previous *Carmen Jones* director Otto Preminger in the controversial *Porgy and Bess*.

The intersections of Dorothy Dandridge and Sidney Poitier in the latter half of the 1950s and 1960s marks an interesting period of Hollywood establishing the first African-American male and female superstar. Their prestige, talent, and looks gave way to a period that did the bare minimum of recognizing black talent. Unlike his contemporary Harry Belafonte, Poitier did not have a natural singing voice to distinguish himself as a multi-hyphenate talent. His failed attempts to lip-synch in Otto Preminger's other black cast musical, *Porgy and Bess*, marked him as an anomaly who could not placate audiences with singing and dancing. Dandridge could act, sing, and dance, and her stardom hedged on all three talents in the last two all-black musicals, but *Porgy and Bess* failed to capture the same heat as *Carmen Jones* did.

Poitier's journey to stardom survived after his ill-advised stint in *Porgy and Bess*, and he made a career of playing more upstanding Negro characters opposite more established white actors and actresses. Poitier's dramatic chops and undervalued levity shined in films like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, *The Defiant Ones*, and *Lilies on the Field*. Poitier's turn in *Guess Who* as the qualified doctor and older lover of the daughter of a rich white family in San Francisco examines the accusations and misrepresentations that mainstream audiences were aware of in relation to interracial relationships. Poitier often became the lone representative for the black race in 1950s and 1960s Hollywood cinema that he became a standard 'tom' character when he played the less threatening, morally upstanding and dignified black man. In a sea of white faces that dominated screens, Poitier's characters and star persona had him fight the social structures that dared to pin him as a less dignified Negro.

In conclusion, the last year of the all-black cast musical cast aside a unique and marginalized demographic that gave the musical genre new variety. The rise of the first black superstars near the half of the twentieth century revitalized the positions African Americans used to play, but the stereotypes embedded in the earlier, less socially progressive eras reshaped themselves in new forms, especially for Sidney Poitier. The main stereotypes that have been examined—the tom, coon, mammy, tragic mulatto, and brute---became enmeshed in the clichéd character and plot motivations of Hollywood movies that they were likely to resurface in new conventions when black entertainers were on screen.

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