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Black actresses in American films: a history and critical analysis of the mammy/maid character

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Black Actresses in American Films:
A History & Critical Analysis Of
The Mammy/Maid Character

A Thesis
Presented in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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By

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

At a very early age I became aware of the types of roles black women played in the older films. The constant images of black women (and men) in subservient roles became troubling as I got a little older. I had conflicting emotions while watching mammy/maids and other troubling stereotypical characters; I found myself frequently re-writing scripts in my head to either change the black characters and/or to include additional black female (and male) characters. It is no wonder I preferred the unrealistic all-black productions, such as *Carmen Jones* (1954), or the predominantly white-focused films where, for instance, a glamorous black woman, dressed impeccably, appeared and sang in a Night Club setting, even though she would disappear since her character had nothing to do with the plot. These conflicting emotions have not disappeared as an adult and are part of the motivation for my nonfiction writing. As a film buff, I have enjoyed covering and researching film in relationship to issues of race and gender. And I've extended this interest and motivation to this thesis project.

The focus of my thesis is on American films that feature the mammy/maid character. This character is the most common one for black women in American films. I include contemporary mammy/maid types cast as nurturers and/or buffoons, as well as the early mammy/maids. The focus is on American films made by white males, but other films are mentioned, as are a few relevant television programs. I argue that there is a long history behind the mammy/maid stereotype, predating the films, and I examine how these roles have remained consistent up to the contemporary moment. Equally important, in this thesis, I examine how the actresses who played the roles thought about and negotiated them. Except for *The Help*, the analysis ends with films produced in 2001.

In the thesis, I draw extensively on a number of scholars and authors. In the Preface to *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins (1990) addresses why she uses so many quotations:

I deliberately include numerous quotations from a range of African-American women thinkers, some well known and others rarely heard from. Explicitly grounding my analysis in multiple voices highlights the diversity, richness, and power of Black women's ideas as part of a long-standing African-American women's intellectual community. (Hill Collins 1990, xiii)

Hill Collins is a very important voice, speaking for and to black women, whether they define themselves as Feminist/Womanist or not. I draw on her chapter, "Mammies, Matriarchs, And Other Controlling Images," in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), where she addresses the controlling images of Black women in film and media, including the mammy/maid. I have also benefitted from Donald Bogle's extensive work on stereotypes of Black people in film, particularly his book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in Films* (1994). In addition, I reference other key sources by black authors, as well as non-black authors, including Michael Rogin's, *Blackface, White Noise - Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (1996).

The thesis is organized into three major chapters. In Chapter I, "Tracing the History of The Mammy/Maid Character", I explore the history of the mammy/maid character in film, revealing the origin of the character and its relationship to other stereotypical roles. In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* (1994), Donald Bogle argues that there are five basic stereotypes that depict black life in films. They are: 1) The Tom (Uncle Tom), 2) The Coon, 3) The Tragic Mulatto, 4) The Mammy 5) The Brutal Black Buck. These characters are based on stereotypical images that Americans have been familiar with since slavery.

Bogle explains that with D.W. Griffith's 1915 racist film *The Birth of a Nation*, all five stereotypes were introduced. However, some were introduced in earlier films pre-dating Griffith,

such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903 and 1914). The lead roles were played by whites in blackface, with blacks cast as extras. *The Debt* (1912) featured the tragic mulatto, played by a white woman in blackface. Director D.W. Griffith defended his film, claiming that it was not racist. As Bogle writes,

Throughout the years, D.W. Griffith defended himself as a mere filmmaker with no political or ideological view in mind. Surprised and apparently genuinely hurt when called a racist, as late as 1947, one year before his death and some thirty-two years after the movie's release, D.W. Griffith still maintained that his film was not an attack on the American Negro." (Bogle 1994, 16)

I close the chapter with a brief history of the tragic mulatto. The term "Tragic Mulatto" was first penned in Southern literature, and is a character that often comes to a tragic end in both literature and films (e.g., *The Debt* [1912], *Imitation of Life* [1934]). The tragic mulatto is the direct opposite of the mammy/maid in many ways, in both demeanor and physical appearance.

In Chapter II, I discuss some of the once well-known actresses in their roles as mammy/maids who came to fame in the first half of the 20th century. I include women such as Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers who carved out careers playing primarily the character of mammy/maid. I explore how they thought about their roles and how they responded to the critiques and protests lodged about them. Organizations, like the NAACP, often pointed to these roles as perpetuating a history of racism, black servitude to white people, and racial stereotypes.

In Chapter III, I focus more extensively on Whoopi Goldberg whose career began long after the golden age of Hollywood. She is a contemporary black actress who has had her own golden film era. Goldberg accomplished a lot within the span of six years from the time *The Color Purple* was released in 1985 to her second Oscar nomination and win in early 1991 for *Ghost* (1990). No other contemporary black actress has made as many films where she was cast as a mammy/maid type. She routinely plays care givers to whites, while also often cast as the

comic relief. For these reasons and more Whoopi Goldberg is the sole focus of *Chapter III*.

In the *Conclusion*, I show how some contemporary black women are navigating the paths of their careers in response to ongoing obstacles of typecasting. I offer examples of black women who are working behind the scenes on camera and/or creating their own projects. These are women who are contributing to projects with characters that have nothing to do with stereotypes, and are working to change the industry from the inside out. At the same time, I reflect on the enduring role and impact of the mammy/maid character on black women's lives.

In an appendix that follows the conclusion, I include a list of the black female Academy Award nominees and winners, in both the lead and supporting actress categories. This relatively short list shows that a significant percentage of black actresses were nominated for roles in which they played a mammy/maid character.

CHAPTER II

TRACING THE HISTORY OF THE MAMMY/MAID CHARACTER

As early as the 16th century, European Courtiers masked themselves as Moors (blacks). Meanwhile in America, slavery began in 1619, and within this context, the slaves were early black American performers. They sang, danced and told jokes to entertain, not only other slaves, but their captors as well. Sometimes talented slaves were hired out to traveling troupes. It is not inconceivable that slaves realized that the routines that garnered the most enthusiastic laughs were the self effacing stereotypical ones. Such behavior would “*give the people what they want*”, as the saying goes. And what racist whites wanted was for the slaves, and the characters they performed, to behave in ways that would justify their exploitation. In other words, if they were forced to perform ridiculous, ignorant people, these attributes were then projected on to them as *real* characteristics of black people.

By the early 1830s in the United States, white entertainers began to imitate blacks in black face for minstrel and vaudeville shows. Minstrel characters such as the original “Jim Crow”, played by Edwin Forrest, were featured, and this was also the advent of the mammy/maid stereotypical character. The mammy became one of the main characters whites did in blackface. Michael Rogin, the author of *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*, argues that racial cross-dressing (e.g., minstrels) was just another component of white supremacy. This form of entertainment “was the first and most popular form of mass culture in the nineteenth-century United States” (Rogin 1998, 51).

In minstrel shows, whites claimed to speak for both races. White people continued to try and speak for blacks by seeking to claim their comedic antics through exaggerating and demeaning them in blackface. At the same time, they would claim, out of fear, that (all) blacks desired

whites.

Whites of various ethnicities performed in blackface. One such group was the Irish. The Irish were frequently looked down upon by other whites. The racial slur of Nigger was flung at them and they were depicted as apes in cartoons just as blacks were. It was not unusual for the Irish to encounter job ads in newspapers as well as help wanted signs in windows that read *No Irish*. Other unjust treatment was commonplace to these immigrants. The Whigs in Britain could show some sympathy for the oppressed black slaves, but not for the Irish. None of this prevented Irish immigrants from joining in the persecution of blacks, including owning slaves. By the mid-19th century the U.S. experienced its largest immigration of Irish. Lawrence W. Levine, author of *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (2007), also notes that that both northern and southern blacks, free and enslaved, told Irish jokes. In making fun of Irish people, blacks could identify with the mainstream white population that ruled them both. The Irish “became surrogates for all the other whites against whom it could be dangerous to speak openly... (Just as for their part European immigrants could quickly feel at one with their new country by identifying themselves with the white majority)” (Levine 1997, 302).

The Irish, as other white-identified groups, were involved in violently attacking blacks, especially when incited by the press and by actions of the government. The media and government officials armed these groups with distorted information that lead them to believe that blacks were getting ahead of them economically, with rights and protection they did not have, such as not being a part of the draft. This anger of real and perceived injustices lead to the New York Draft Riots of 1863 where Irish people attacked and murdered black people (Harris, 2003). Those supporting or defending blacks, including other Irish immigrants, were attacked and threatened as well.

Jewish Americans have also endured wide spread prejudice, and yet, by the 20th century, they performed in blackface more than any other ethnic group in the country. Similar to the Irish, there were blacks who took up a dislike of Jewish people as well, because of the acceptance of anti-Semitism in America during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Blackface reached its peak in popularity after the Civil War (1861 - 1865), and Black minstrel shows also became established at that time, although these had begun in the 1850s before the war. *The African American Almanac* (2008) distinguished black minstrelsy from white; it states: “Although black minstrels inherited the negative stereotypes of blacks that white minstrels had established, the African American performer won a permanent place on the American stage, providing a training ground for the many black dancers, comedians, singers and composers to come.” Ethel Waters is one of those performers who got her start in minstrel shows. These performers sometimes appeared in blackface, as did the very young and tiny Sammy Davis, Jr. Minstrel shows were the major source of entertainment for blacks during this era. In *The Black Culture Industry* (1997), Ellis Cashmore reflects on the meaning of minstrelsy:

It’s ironic to some, theft to others, cultural syncretism to still others: the fact remains that African American culture fascinates whites and, without such fascination, its destiny might have been to be overlooked. The minstrelsy took to whites an insight into black culture that was at once satiric and reverent. While it derided blacks, it also paid them an almost unwitting respect. (39)

After the Civil War, black entertainers were put in the position of competing with white Minstrel performers in blackface for roles. Later when blacks did appear in Civil War films as slaves, the outcome meant yet more demeaning roles. For many black film critics, it is not that blacks were slaves in these films. As Bogle (1994) so aptly asks: “for how else could they be depicted?” The problem is “that the films have humiliated and debased them far beyond the calling of the script” (88).

The humiliation and debasement of blacks in films was not limited to Civil War films. For instance, the film *Affectionately Yours* (1941), featured Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen, who had also appeared in *Gone With the Wind* in 1939. It was a romantic comedy, with McQueen cast as a maid and it was a deeply humiliating role. Bogle (1994) writes,

... she [Butterfly McQueen] had to deliver what might be the most demeaning line ever uttered by a black in the movies. 'Who dat say who dat when you say dat,' she crooned. 'I never thought I would have to say a line like that, the actress later said, obviously embarrassed. 'I had imagined that since I was an intelligent woman, I could play any kind of role.' Perhaps the final irony of that line and the best tribute to Butterfly McQueen's comic talent was that her performance in *Affectionately Yours* was thoroughly disarming and considered by some critics the best in the Movie. (93)

Malcolm X even weighed in on McQueen, but in her role in *Gone with the Wind*. According to Thomas Doherty in his essay, "Malcolm X: In Print, On Screen", Malcolm X felt the film was an "inventory of negative stereotypes." In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, he recounts his experience of watching the film in Michigan when he was the young Malcolm Little; he writes, "'When Butterfly McQueen went into her act,' he replies bitterly, 'I felt like crawling under the rug'" (quoted in Doherty, 1).

In her book, *Ceramic Uncles & Celluloid Mammies* (1994), Patricia A. Turner examines the distortions that such stereotypical characters, like the mammy, reflected and that the public has come to believe as true, due in no small part to films. She quotes Catherine Clinton who argues that in contrast to the pervasive film images, the "antebellum mammies were few and far between" (Turner, 43). Turner continues:

This familiar denizen [Mammy] of the Big House is not merely a stereotype, but in fact a figment of the combined romantic imagination of the contemporary Southern ideologue and the modern southern historian. Records do acknowledge the presence of female slaves who served as the 'right hand' of plantation mistresses. Yet documents from the planter class during the first fifty years following the American Revolution reveal only a handful of such examples. Not until after Emancipation did black women run white households or occupy in any significant number the special positions ascribed to them in folklore and fiction.

The Mammy was created by white Southerners to redeem the relationship between Black women and white men within slave society in response to the antislavery attack from the North during the ante-bellum era, and to embellish it with nostalgia in the post-bellum period. In the primary records from before the Civil War hard evidence for its existence simply does not appear. (44)

Further, prior to the Civil War, at no time did more than twenty-five percent of Southern whites own slaves. Most had ten slaves or less. Black women used as house servants were a luxury for the very wealthy, because slaves were an expensive investment. Therefore, most slaves worked in the fields.

Unlike the typical screen mammy, actual house mammies were mostly light complexioned “because household jobs were frequently assigned to mixed-race women” (Turner, 44). Despite their representation in countless films, less than ten percent of black women lived past fifty and few were overweight. The films give the false impression that slaves were not only well fed, but the mammies were fortunate enough to overeat.

At the same time, Cheryl Gilkes suggests that the stereotypes showcased in minstrel shows and films like *Affectionately Yours* and *Gone with the Wind* are based on traits that some black women possess (cited by Collins 1990). She argues, for instance, that the assertive behavior of black women expressing themselves loudly and with great attitude and pushiness that is evident in the mammy/maids of Hattie McDaniel do represent (some) black women. She argues that these traits are socially constructed as negative traits because they are threatening to the white patriarchy. Thus, she suggests that these negative images of black women are created as a way to socially punish black women for that behavior.

Black women live in a society where our voices are not always welcome, heard or acknowledged. I staunchly believe that this behavior in many cases is directly related to this fact and has endured not only for decades, but for centuries. Yet the public demeanor that some black

women display in film characters, such as the mammy, do not show the whole woman. Black women have different aspects of their personalities, just like any other group. Not everyone is privy to a softer more agreeable side of black women, but, at the same time, in some films it is also a problem that the mammy/maid characters are only shown as agreeable, jolly figures.

The tradition of blackface is grounded in the mammy image according to author Michael Rogin (1998). According to Rogin, Mary White Overton, the founder of the *NAACP*, viewed the mammy as the first American mother. She is the one who often cared for the master's children, while hers were taken away. Later as a free person, the black woman worked as a domestic, still nurturing the white man's child, while her own children would go without care for most of the day. She is often portrayed as a staunch defender of the white family. The film *Birth of a Nation* is an excellent example of this narrative storyline; here the mammy defends the white man's house from Union soldiers, both black and white. In one scene, the mammy character physically attacks invading black soldiers. Not surprisingly she never accepts freedom. In this film, the mammy was played by a white man in blackface.

The love that this mammy had for her captives, and then employers, was not one sided. As Patricia A. Turner (1994) argues, the "Mammy's love for her white employers was not unrequited. Her loyalty was matched by the white public's prolonged love affair with her" (53). The Daughters' of the American Confederacy (DAC) wanted a mammy monument placed in Washington, and petitioned Congress unsuccessfully to bring this about during the early decades of the 1900s.

A close relative of the character of the mammy/maid is the character of Auntie. Black women were frequently referred to as Auntie by whites. In abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe's book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Tom is married to Aunt Chloe. She describes the mammy as

having a face that is black, shiny and round. The face is “so glossy as to suggest the idea that she might have been washed over with the whites of eggs... Her whole plump countenance beams with satisfaction and contentment from under a well-starched checked turban” (Turner 1994, 46). Aunt Chloe, unlike future mammies, was younger, with a baby of her own and a husband. She was also a white-identified character, as future mammies would be.

The most famous black auntie character is Aunt Jemima, made famous by *Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix* and other products. In the late 1880s, Charles Underwood and Chris Rutt purchased the Pearl Milling Company. Rutt attended a vaudeville show in 1889, where he heard a white singer in black face perform a song called *Aunt Jemima*. The performer wore a bandanna and an apron. The partners decided to use the name and attire for their new venture to produce the first pancake mix.

The Aunt Jemima formula was sold in 1890 to the R.T. Davis Milling Company. Mr. Davis brought in Nancy Green to represent Aunt Jemima. Green was born a slave in 1834 in Kentucky. She was hired by Davis in 1890 in Chicago at age fifty-six. Green represented the company at the World’s Columbia Exposition, also known as the World’s Fair in Chicago. The *African American Registry* explained:

Green, as ‘Aunt Jemima,’ demonstrated the pancake mix and served thousands of pancakes. Green was a hit, friendly, a good storyteller, and a good cook. Her warm appealing personality made her the ideal ‘Aunt Jemima,’ a living trademark. Her exhibition booth drew so many people that special policemen were assigned to keep the crowds moving. The Davis Milling Company received over 50,000 orders, and *Fair* officials awarded Nancy Green a medal and certificate of showmanship. She was proclaimed the ‘Pancake Queen.’ She was assigned to a lifetime contract. (1)

Green’s performance and attire at the Exposition were not for the pleasure, entertainment or approval of blacks--just as the early screen mammies and mammies were not in literature. They were constructed for white consumption and entertainment.

Green continued representing Aunt Jemima until she was killed in a car crash in 1923. *Quaker Oats* purchased the Davis Milling Company in 1925. Following Green, the majority of the women who portrayed the Aunt Jemima Green were brown with full to very full faces, and heavy set to obese. There were exceptions, such as Aylene Lewis, who was light and looked obese in the photographs, and Edith Wilson who was a light-skinned woman. Wilson was a jazz and blues recording artist. She was pretty, as some of the other Aunt Jemima representatives, and looked more like a 1920s flapper, not the mammy/maid archetype.

In 1989 which marked the product's 100th anniversary, Quaker Oats finally bowed to pressure to change the image of Aunt Jemima on their now expanded products. A spokesperson for the company said the change was to make Aunt Jemima look like a working mother. Gone were the scarf and the apron and Aunt Jemima was given pearl earrings and a perm, framing a now slimmer face. Black singer Gladys Knight appeared in Aunt Jemima commercials in 1994, with small kids. Regardless of the changes Quaker Oats made to the packaging, many black people and organizations were enraged with Ms. Knight's decision to participate in the commercials. Aunt Jemima has remained a familiar name and face on food products sold to millions in and out of America. The name and image represent much more than a simple image. They keep the image of a black female subservient, happy, and domestic alive and well. Other products sprouted up with a mammy character gracing their packages, including Luzianne Coffee and Aunt Dinah Molasses. Uncle Ben and Cream of Wheat products, both with black men on the boxes, remain on the store shelves.

There are also the *so-called* black collectibles that perpetuate stereotypes of black women and men. Patricia A. Turner refers to these as "contemptible collectibles." In the past, children played with black dolls that were made of fabric, with wooly hair, ragged clothing and thick lips of

red. In fact the Sears catalog circa 1954 featured a black doll with an outfit held up by a safety pin.

After the end of slavery, Turner writes:

American consumers found acceptable ways of buying and selling the souls of black folk. Writers, directors, and other authorities, who persist in calling these toys ephemeral objects, kitchenware, and related items *black* cultural artifacts are wrong. With few exceptions, these items were made by and for white people. (14)

Turner refers to other items as *somewhat high brow*. These items come from black and white artisans and crafts people. The mammy cookie jars and canisters continue to be a prominent part of low and high brow collections. Companies “pitch them as symbolically meaningful figurines that introduce white consumers to black history and show African-American consumers to feel a positive connect to their past.” (Turner 1994, 27-28)

Mammy canisters came to my attention in reading an *Elle Décor* magazine sometime in 2008. The cover and inside story featured white actress Teri Hatcher’s very pretty red kitchen. There on her counter were two canisters, one large mammy and one pappy. Turner draws a connection between these collectibles and post civil war black entertainers. She notes that, by the end of the 20th century, some manufacturers began to produce beautiful black dolls that were more expensive. These, she says, are the real collectibles.

Related to the mammy/maid is the character of the lighter, slimmer tragic mulatto who can also be traced back to the 19th century. The white writer Lydia Maria Child (1802 to 1880) was the first to publish material featuring such a character. Child’s short stories included *The Quadroons* which was published in 1842 and *Slavery’s Pleasant Home: A Faithful Sketch* published in 1843. Child was an abolitionist and activist, not only for blacks but for Native American and women’s rights. Child was editor of Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1860).

The tragic mulatto character also appeared in slave narratives and books by free blacks.

One example is *Clotel* or *The President's Daughter: a Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (1850) by William Wells Brown a black abolitionist. Frances Harper, also known as Frances E.W. Harper wrote 1892's *Iola Leroy*. The theme of passing, or refusing to pass, for white was frequently covered in tragic mulatto novels, and the protagonist was usually a woman.

When the tragic mulatto character transitioned to film, the focus was usually on a black woman. Quite often a white (or non-black) woman was cast as the tragic mulatto, beginning with white women in black face. Films featuring a tragic mulatto include *The Debt* (1912) and then another three films with the tragic Mulato were released around 1913. In 1949 *Pinky* featured white actress Jeanne Craine as the tragic mulatto and Ethel Waters as her granny. In the 1950s and 1960s major Hollywood stars such as Elizabeth Taylor, Natalie Wood and Yvonne DeCarlo portrayed tragic mixed race characters.

The tragic mulatto was not written with a black audience in mind. When it became a trend in literature, it was still against the law for blacks to read. Barbara Christian wrote in *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* that whites lapped up the mulatto stories in the:

... ironic way that the guilty always delight in looking obliquely at their guilt. The existence of the mulatto denied their claims that blacks were not human. While allowing whites the argument that they were lifting up the race by lightening it. Most, though knew that in lightening the black race, they were also darkening their own, hence the laws against miscegenation in many southern states. (3)

CHAPTER III

THE MAMMY/MAID CHARACTER IN AMERICAN FILMS AND THE ACTRESSES WHO PORTRAYED THEM

Within the first sixty years of the film industry, at the very least, a large percentage of black actresses had to portray mammy/maids and other domestics or slaves if they wanted to work in films. After the Civil War, Turner (1994) noted that blacks “were put in the awkward position of having to compete with blackface white actresses and actors who had established their careers by mimicking blacks” (28). Black talent was being judged by the inaccurate models set by white performers--people “who had distinguished themselves solely on their ability to caricature black folk. Thus breaking into the business meant that blacks had to exaggerate those characteristics audiences associated with blackface white performers” (Turner 1994, 28).

This chapter looks at the careers of black actresses (and beyond), born between 1891 and 1922, who played mammy/maid roles in Hollywood film. It explores their roles and their accomplishments as well as how they understood these roles as actresses trying to make it in a white dominant and often racist profession. The chapter covers most of the 20th century and begins with Hattie McDaniel.

Hattie McDaniel

Hattie McDaniel also known as *Hi Hat Hattie*, approached social equality in her film roles, but she was never allowed to obtain it (Nestey,1981). Hattie McDaniel was the daughter of an emancipated slave. Her birthdate is June 10, and is listed as occurring some time between 1895 and 1898. If this time frame is accurate, it makes McDaniel anywhere from ten to thirteen when she began performing in black minstrel road shows.

Over her lifetime, McDaniel successfully carved out a career portraying mammy/maids

with some of Hollywood's biggest stars. In *The Story of Temple Drake* (1933), she was help mate to Marlene Dietrich. She appeared in *Operator 12* (1934) with the black faced white actress Marion Davies as a tragic mulatto, and she was Barbara Stanwyck's loyal servant in *Battle of Broadway* (1938) and *Affectionately Yours* (1941). McDaniel appeared with black actress Butterfly McQueen in what Nestey referred to as another Prissy (*Gone With the Wind*) role as a maid in *George Washington Slept Here* (1942). In 1936 alone, she appeared in over ten films.

Unlike the film-based mammy played by McDaniel and other black actresses, the actual women who worked in white households were not likely middle aged or older, and they were not likely to be large. In reality, house slaves were usually light complexioned mixed race women. None of these descriptions describes McDaniel. As Patricia A. Turner (1994) aptly concludes: "Hattie McDaniel, became the first African American to win an Academy Award for playing a truly fictional character, a character shaped and molded by nostalgia merchants eager to create a past that never was" (44).

McDaniel's roles in the films did change over time; in the 1930s, the mammy/maid character had a stronger role in the family than in the 1940s. In fact, the film studios in the 1930s received complaints from the south about these films. They did not like that her characters were behaving so familiar with the white families. (Similar complaints were made regarding Eddie Anderson's Rochester in his films with Jack Benny.) In the films of the 1940s, she was not so *Hi Hat Hattie*. For instance, in the 1940 film *Maryland*, her character was too jolly and sweet, and in *Janie* (1944), *Since You Went Away* (1944) and *Margie* (1946), McDaniel's characters were much too faithful. As Bogle (1994) describes, "And perhaps worst of all, in *Song of the South* (1946) McDaniel was seen merrily baking pies and singing cheerful darky songs. Hattie McDaniel displayed a newfound Christian domesticity that was the exact antithesis of her haughty grandeur

in the late 1930's" (92).

Two films that demonstrate the difference between the 1930s and 1940s characters are *Alice Adams* and *Since You Were Away*. In 1935, *Alice Adams* was released, starring Katharine Hepburn. This is one of my favorite old films. In this film, the Adams family, including Alice, her brother Walter and their parents, is poor. Alice desperately wants to fit in with the town's wealthy young women whose parties she frequents. Perhaps she is included as a courtesy to a former classmate, because Alice is obviously not a member of their clique. She is brushed off or ignored altogether, which her brother Walter doesn't fail to bring to her attention. He does not understand why she tries so hard to befriend them. Mrs. Adams, on the other hand, desperately wants more for the family, especially Alice. This can be seen when it is clear that she hates to see her daughter try to re-do her old worn party dress to pass off as a new one.

Alice begins to date a wealthy young man, played by Fred MacMurray, who she met at one of the parties. He requests a dance with Alice through the haughty hostess. It takes quite a while before Alice invites him to her ragged house for dinner. She hides her poverty from him and pretends that the only reason the family lives there is due to her father's sentimental attachment. She wants him to believe that otherwise the Adams family would be living in the ritzier part of town with the wealthy. While Alice originally planned to walk past her house when being escorted home by MacMurray, the mailman gave Alice's secret away.

Malena (McDaniel) is hired as a domestic for the day that MacMurray is scheduled to come to dinner. Malena openly mocks Alice and Mrs. Adams as they put on airs. As Alice tries to spruce up the house, Mrs. Adams and Malena prepare a multi-course hot meal even though it is a sweltering hot summer evening. MacMurray arrives exquisitely dressed in a suit and tie, and during dinner he pats at his face with his handkerchief because he is drenched in sweat. There are

not any fans in the Adams home, including in the dining room, even though in the 1930s they were available to residents. MacMurray was not the only uncomfortable man during the dinner; the Adams men were forced to wear tuxedos. The father was extremely uncomfortable with the clothes, with the food the women had chosen, and with having a maid under foot. When asked to serve the soup, Malena asks, “But don’t you think it’s getting pretty hot for soup?... and later when she is asked airily by Alice to ‘Please take this dreadful soup away,’ McDaniel stops dead in her tracks and stares at the girl imperially, indeed contemptuously, as if to say, ‘I done tol you so.’ Used by director Stevens not only for comic relief but to point up the pretenses of the Adams” (Bogle 1994, 84). My perception is that Malena’s gibes were aimed at the Adams women only since they were the ones who were trying to put on false airs. Malena’s mocking of their behavior actually aligns her with the Adams men. Bogle (1994) describes McDaniel’s Malena as making “her dining room entrances and exits lethargically, as if she could not care less. Why should she hurry for these no-count white folks? She carries her tray in the most off-hand fashion, and when Alice speaks French to impress her guest, McDaniel is there to undercut the girl’s airs with a monosyllabic grunt” (84).

Nestey argues that by the 1940s, the sparkle and energy of McDaniel’s early performances were gone. It was during the 1940s that McDaniel made *Since You Went Away* (1944). This film is set during World War II with Claudette Colbert as Mrs. Hilton, a housewife with two teenage daughters. With the husband away at war, Mrs. Hilton takes in a boarder, and yet the family still suffers from financial strain. It is at this point that the maid, Fidelity (McDaniel), takes on another job at night in a factory to help the family.

Fidelity is totally unlike Hattie McDaniel’s Malena nine years earlier in *Alice Adams*, though the names have a similar ring. The public’s reaction to Fidelity’s second job, not for

herself, but to help the white family she worked for was that "... black audiences laughed at Hattie McDaniel. Even in 1944, her character's obvious tom quality seemed ludicrous" (Nestey 1981, 216). Bogle (1994) compares the jolly subservient McDaniel characters in the 1940s to the Homer Smith construction/foreman character (played by Sidney Poitier) in *Lilies of the Field* (1963) nearly twenty years later.

Subservient characters or not, McDaniel holds the distinction of appearing in more films than *any* other actress or actor. She appeared in over three hundred Hollywood films and she appeared in independent black films as well. In *Alice Adams* and other films, McDaniel successfully negotiated her characters place in the lives of the whites she worked for as a force to be reckoned with. She thereby secured her status as a loved actress, while she simultaneously dealt with racism in and out of the film industry.

As a celebrity in the public eye, she also encountered disapproval from blacks, including from the NAACP. This did not stop her from befriending Lena Horne in the 1940s who was considered a darling of the NAACP. Some black performers were fearful and upset at the NAACP for protesting the racial stereotypes perpetuated by these films because of what it might do for their job possibilities. Horne's father and the NAACP let movie studio mogul Louis B. Mayer know that Horne would not portray maids and she never did. Horne's triumph had a lot to do with her overall look -- her complexion, features, hair texture and slender frame. Consequently some performers viewed Horne as an uppity outsider (i.e. uppity high yeller Negro). It is unlikely a heavy black actress with broad features, such as McDaniel, could have refused to play a mammy/maid character and successfully found work during this era. Like Horne, there were other slimmer, sophisticated brown women who made such stipulations. Bogle (1994) concludes, "Whether conscious or not, Griffith's division of the black women into color categories

survived in movies the way many set values continue long after they are discredited” (15).

And yet, McDaniel invited Horne to her home to talk with her about these issues. Horne recalled that McDaniel explained to her how bad it had been for blacks in film and the visit gave Horne more perspective. According to Horne, McDaniel “was extremely realistic and had no misconception of the role she was allowed to play in the white movie world” (Bogle 1994, 96). McDaniel’s realism is reflected in her famous saying, “Why should I complain about making seven thousand dollars a week playing a maid? If I didn’t, I’d be making seven dollars a week actually being one!” (Bogle 1994, 82). This income allowed McDaniel to take care of her family in grand style.

McDaniel’s career was resurrected with *The Beulah Show* [1945-1952], first on radio and then on television. McDaniel won editorial control in the 1950s, although the victory was for a role with McDaniel cast as yet another domestic. Still, it was an important achievement for a black woman to win editorial control during this time. The role reinforced the stereotype that the NAACP had criticized McDaniel for in her film roles and so they also criticized the TV show. They had initially praised the radio show when Hattie McDaniel took over the role of Beulah in 1947 from the second white man to play the character as it was the first network radio show to star a black woman. After McDaniel, Louise Beavers and Ethel Waters took up the role. This character “remains one of the greatest performances on the motion picture industry that the three mammies of the movies should ultimately portray the same jolly, docile cook” (Bogle 1994, 66)

Members of the black population continued to be angered by McDaniel’s growing list of domestic roles. The NAACP asked questions such as: “Why are you doing this? Why aren’t you playing other parts?” (Bobbin 2001). I would dare say that most, if not all blacks, were never totally shielded from racism, even those who hailed from privileged backgrounds. It is as if the

black critics of McDaniel and other black women who played these roles envisioned the black entertainer as existing outside of systemic racism. Perhaps they thought the black entertainers had the power to pick and choose the type of roles they played, but for the most part, they did not.

McDaniel knew where she stood in Hollywood and she knew how to survive in the world of the dominant class. This is apparent by the docile tone of her letters to Margaret Mitchell, author of *Gone With the Wind*, even when it was not necessary. She had already won the role of mammy and made *Gone With the Wind* and yet still was deferential to Mitchell. The actress wrote the author for the first time just prior to the films' premiere in Atlanta, Georgia. C.B. Hackworth, in the *Atlanta Magazine*, wrote that McDaniel's intent wasn't to complain about the premiere. To support this, Hackworth (2010) quotes from a letter McDaniel had written to Mitchell:

'I hope you will not think me presumptuous for writing you,' the actress began deferentially. McDaniel's went on to praise Mitchell for writing with an 'authenticity' that echoed stories of the Old South she'd heard from her own grandmother, and, especially, for creating the character of Mammy and making her 'such an outstanding personage.' (Hackworth 2010)

Another letter from McDaniel, written on May 1, 1941, began with the same apology. In this letter, she thanked Mitchell for the role of Mammy; she wrote, "... many fine things have come my way since you created in your book the lovable character Mammy which enabled me to gain a measure of success in the field of cinema arts" (Hackworth, 2). I found nothing wrong with McDaniel thanking Mitchell for a role she felt helped her career. However, I was troubled by McDaniel's reference to Mammy as a lovable character, and I found it difficult to read about McDaniel's concern that Mitchell might think of her as presumptuous, especially since she had already covered that ground in the first letter. It is possible that McDaniel did not even realize she was behaving in that manner; it could have been so ingrained in McDaniel to present herself in a submissive manner as a means to survive.

McDaniel won an *Oscar* as *Best Actress in a Supporting Role* category for her role in *Gone*

With the Wind in 1940. Mammy was the character's sole name in the film and book. The other nominees were all white, including her co-star Olivia de Havilland. She became very emotional when giving the speech that was kindly written for her. McDaniel (and her date) were the first blacks to attend the Academy Award Ceremony, but the couple was seated at a rear table, at Hollywood's Coconut Grove Restaurant, away from the white guests.

AMC (*American Movie Classics*) first aired *Beyond Tara: The Extraordinary Life of Hattie McDaniel* in August of 2001, and it was narrated by Whoopi Goldberg, the second black woman to win an Oscar. Both had won in the *Best Supporting Actress* category, for roles in which they took care of whites and both faced criticism from the NAACP for perpetuating stereotypes in film.

In addition to the focus on her acting career, *Beyond Tara* covered McDaniel's stance against racism in the Los Angeles real estate market in the mid-1940s. McDaniel's white neighbors not only did not welcome her to the neighborhood, they wanted her out. The actress would not budge. Taking the issue to court, McDaniel won. This effectively eliminated, on paper anyway, housing discrimination as ruled by the Supreme Court. Interestingly, while McDaniel won her case fighting discrimination in housing, the NAACP made her their focus in fighting black stereotypes in Hollywood films. According to the documentary, the NAACP hurt her career.

McDaniel succumbed to breast cancer in 1952, shortly after *Beulah* debuted on television. In the documentary, Goldberg talks about how McDaniel wanted to be remembered as an "actor, star, film pioneer, a credit to her race." McDaniel also wanted to be buried in the Hollywood cemetery along side other entertainers. The owners of the Hollywood Cemetery, however, would not grant McDaniel's final wishes in 1952. The cemetery changed their policies on paper, but by 1959 only three blacks had been buried there out of 80,000 gravesites. The current owner, Tyler

Cassity, who purchased the cemetery in 1998, told *Jet* magazine: “there was so much that was done wrong here” (“Oscar Winner” 1999, 21). In 1999 on the 47th anniversary of McDaniel’s death, Cassity installed a large monument with a *view* of the famous Hollywood sign.

Louise Beavers

Louise Beavers was born in Cincinnati, Ohio and died in October 1962 at forty-nine. Donald Bogle (1994) refers to Beavers as “... the black Guardian Angel” (62). He considers her to be the most important black actress in films during this era. Beavers made it “because of her humanized domesticity... she had been carefully groomed by herself and the studio to fit into the mammy-aunt jemima category. Before her there had been no distinctive mammy figure” (Bogle 1994, 62). Beavers provided the perfect background for those depression era heroines who had to earn their own money. They had the strong, cheerful mammy/maid Louise Beavers in their corner. Physically, Miss Beavers was “a big boned, robust woman with skin that was described as smooth as chocolate, and eyes bright, large and wondrously naïve” (Bogle 1994, 62-63), and so her domestic characters were generally different from those of McDaniel’s who were more assertive. In some of McDaniel’s earlier films, it appeared as if filmmakers were trying to mold her into a Louise Beavers type, but “as a humorless, less jolly version” (Bogle 1994, 83).

The film career of Louise Beavers began when she was spotted by a movie studio agent in an amateur show. Universal wanted Beavers for a role in the fifth version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1927). They initially considered her for the role of mammy, but determined that she was too youthful looking and not heavy enough. Beavers was also not just youthful *looking*, she was fourteen, if the year of her birth is accurate at 1913. After this experience, she began to try and make herself into the appropriate size to fit the Mammy stereotype. It was a difficult task for the

actress to maintain the size, shape, and personality the studio wanted. Frequently she had to be padded for her roles. Beavers' normal weight was close to 200 pounds, but the pressures that came with being a black actress caused Beavers to lose weight during filming. She also did not have the southern accent that white filmmakers and audiences expected of their mammy characters; the studios wanted "the slow-and-easy backwoods accent compulsory to every black servant" (Bogle 1994, 65).

Like Hattie McDaniel, Beavers appeared in films alongside Will Rogers. She played a mammy in the Rogers' films *Too Busy to Work* and *Jubilo*, both released in 1932. Will Rogers is significant in this discussion because he was a white actor with hopes for an equal society. Nestebly (1981) refers to Rogers as the "conscience of the darkey's" (185). What Rogers said and wrote as a syndicated columnist in over 4,000 newspapers, as well as what he believed were one thing, but the reality of racism in the motion picture industry was another. Rogers' films did provide work and therefore a pay check to blacks, while at the same time they contributed to the perpetuation of negative images.

Among Beavers long roster of films is *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948). In this film, Beavers plays the maid Gussie who saves Mr. Blanding, an advertising executive, by suggesting the slogan: *If you ain't eatin wham you ain't eatin ham*. Once again the black mammy/maid is the one who unselfishly fulfills any and all needs her employers have as the caregiver of the family. To reward Gussie for the winning slogan, Mr. Blanding (Cary Grant) tells his wife to give her a ten dollar raise. In *Belle Star* (1941), Beavers' Mammy Lou character actually narrates the story. This was a rarity at the time. Mammy Lou threatens Randolph Colt with "You better get out of here right now white man."

Like several other black actresses who portrayed mammy/maids, Beavers appeared in Mae

West films, including in *She Done Him Wrong* as Lou's (West's) maid Pearl and in *I'm No Angel*, both released in 1933. Both co-starred with a very young Cary Grant as the mature West's love interest. Along with West and Grant is a list of black actresses. *I'm No Angel* has Beulah Thorndike (Gertrude Howard) as Tira's (West) main maid, with Libby (Libby Taylor) as Tira's hairdressing maid, and Hattie McDaniel, in an unaccredited role, as the manicurist. West was credited with adding these roles for the black actresses. Her commitment to adding the roles may be linked to how she herself, before film stardom, had frequently been cast as an Irish maid.

In the Mae West films, the black domestic character's role was cast as a contrast to Mae West; according to Bogle (1994), their "... naïve blackness generally was used as a contrast to Mae West sophisticated whiteness. Inevitably set against white carpeting, white furniture, white décor--not to mention the white Miss West--the stout black figures hustling and bustling about served to heighten the hot white sexuality of their bawdy mistress" (45). While West was certainly not a symbol of purity, she was still positioned above the black characters. Mae West the woman, and not just the characters she played and the image she projected as an actress, was viewed as the opposite of the virtuous white woman. The West characters in several of her films were well-off loose white women. Even though West played the fallen woman, Bogle (1994) argues that "black women could not possibly be rivals to Mae West's femininity and that only black women were fit to wait on whores. Because both blacks and whites were at the bottom of the social scale, Mae West could rely on her colored maids and enjoy a livelier camaraderie with them than she might with whites" (46). This does not mean that the black woman was equal to that of a white prostitute. The title of a 1902 anonymous essay – "A Colored Woman However Respectable, Is Lower Than The White Prostitute" says just that (Lerner 1992). In later years, West hired Beavers to portray her maid in her 1950s Las Vegas act.

From film to television to night clubs, Beavers career was grounded in mammy/maid roles. Beavers most famous role is that of the long-suffering mother and mammy/maid in the original version of *Imitation of Life* (1934). The film is very important in both the discussion of the mammy/maid character as well as that of the tragic mulatto. *Imitation of Life* arrived at a time when the motion picture industry had a new social consciousness with a new president in Roosevelt. This was the time of the new deal that reflected more liberal attitudes from the roaring twenties. Bogle (1994) wrote of this time that "... many of the old racial properties were starting to be discarded. *Imitation of Life* was an outgrowth of this new conscious liberal spirit. It prided itself on its portrait of the modern black woman, still a servant, but now imbued with dignity and a character that were an integral part of the American way of life" (57).

In *Imitation of Life*, two mothers, one black and one white, both with young daughters, meet. The black mother Delilah is given a place for she and her daughter Peola to stay in exchange for caring for Miss Bea (Beatrice Pullman), played by Claudette Colbert, and her daughter. Miss Bea first opens a pancake restaurant on Atlantic City's Boardwalk, managing to secure a great deal and to furnish the place cheaply. Delilah is on display in the window cooking pancakes. She is marketed as an Aunt Jemima clone. The restaurant leads to the successful Aunt Delilah's Pancake Flour.

Miss Bea gives Delilah 20 percent of the profit from *her* family's recipe. She told Delilah about their new good fortune -- "'You'll have your own car. Your own house.' She replies, 'My own house? You gonna send me away, Miss Bea? I can't live with you? Oh, honey chile, please don't send me away.' When asked doesn't she want her own house, Delilah replies, 'No'm. How I gonna take care of you and Miss Jessie if I ain't here.' Delilah adds, 'I'se your cook. And I want to stay your cook'" (quoted in Bogle 1994, 57) About the pancake recipe, Delilah tells

Miss Bea - "I gives it to you, honey. I makes you a present of it." Bogle suggests that her "submissiveness merely justifies Bea's exploitation" (Bogle, 57). I can imagine blacks in the theater yelling at the screen because of Delilah's ridiculous reaction to her own financial security, from *her* family's recipe, just as movie goers would yell at the screen featuring Sidney Poitier for risking his own freedom for the sake of Tony Curtis in *The Defiant Ones* (1958) some twenty-four years later.

Bogle (1994) argues that Beavers' Delilah is a combination of both Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom, but "magnified and glorified in full-blown Hollywood fashion" (59). He describes the Delilah character as an example of the Christian black woman. Placed in a historical perspective, he suggests that the Christianity Beavers displayed was greater than the other characters. Perhaps so, but it was lost on me and others due to the subservient behavior of Beaver's Delilah. I don't equate being a Christian black woman with being second to others, and I am sure that there were blacks, even under the most dire circumstances in 1934, who felt the same way. For many reasons, including the cast, I prefer the remake of *Imitation of Life*.

In the remake of the film, Delilah pleaded with her daughter Peola to let God have his way, as she did, by accepting her place in America as a second class citizen and not to try to pass as white. I believe that most blacks, both light and every color range of brown, understand that not all blacks who are light enough to pass (as well as those who cannot) desire this whiteness. What blacks long for are the same opportunities as whites. I would suggest, then, that most blacks would reject Delilah's assertion that God's way was for Peola to accept her station in life, rather than endorsing her desire to pass. It means they would understand that it was not whiteness she desired, but a chance for an easier way of life.

Life was not easy for black actresses in the 1930s. They were often humiliated and

Beavers was no exception. Reportedly the fair black child actress - Sebie Hendrick - who played Peola as a child in *Imitation of Life* was horrified when she found out who would be her mother in the film. She screamed, "She's black" (Bogle 1994, 64). In another instant, the studio honchos forced Beavers to pronounce Negro over and over again as punishment because she and the NAACP had won her case against the studio to have the word Nigger removed from the original script. Beavers may have wondered whether she had won. She had to have known she would encounter repercussions whether she won or lost the law suit.

It is impressive that Beavers and McDaniel had the guts to stand up for their rights. They could have been physically harmed or killed. Both would receive some measure of revenge against Hollywood, just by doing their jobs and doing them well. Critic Jimmy Fiddler for example complained that Beavers did not receive an Academy Award nomination for her performance in *Imitation of Life*. He criticized the film industry for not putting aside their racial prejudices when it came time to nominate talented actresses:

I don't see how it is possible to overlook the magnificent portrayal of the Negro actress Louise Beavers, who played the mother in *Imitation of Life*. If the industry chooses to ignore Miss Beavers' performance, please let this reporter, born and bred in the South, tender a special award of praise to Louise Beavers for the finest performance of 1934. (quoted in Bogle 1994, 64)

Beavers continued to work in the motion picture industry through the early 1960s, though not as much as she did in the 1930s and 1940s. Beaver's last film role was in 1961 in *The Facts of Life*, and her last important appearance as a maid was in her starring role in the television series *Beulah*.

Juanita Moore

Juanita Moore made over forty films, a short list as compared to Beavers and McDaniel. The 1959 remake of *Imitation of Life* is eighty-nine year old Moore's most famous role. Moore told journalist Deardra Shuler: "You know Annie was a good role for me. I have been in a lot of

pictures. However, most of them consisted of my opening doors for white people” (Shuler 2005, 3). The film makers auditioned many actresses before casting Moore in *Imitation of Life*, her most famous role serving whites; as she says, “Pearl Bailey was their first choice. But producer Ross Hunter really wanted me” (Shuler 2005, 2). In this version of the film, the black mother Annie Johnson (Moore) and her child Sarah Jane (portrayed as a child by Karin Dicker and as a young adult by Susan Kohner) was actually homeless. The two mothers meet on the beach when neither one can locate their daughter. The girls are discovered playing together. Lora Meredith (Lana Turner) is surprised to learn that Sarah Jane is not a white child in Annie’s charge, but the child of Annie and her former very light-skinned husband. Annie was divorced, while Lora was a widow.

Lora offers Annie and Sarah Jane a room, originally just for the night. Annie proved to be indispensable to Lora and she and her child became a permanent part of the Meredith household. Right off the bat, the audience is aware of Sarah Jane’s feels regarding her station in life. She complains about always being relegated to the back bedroom. This statement also lets the audience know that the two have moved around a lot and Annie has worked as a domestic before, because the black domestic generally had the back room, often off the kitchen. In addition, Sarah Jane did not appreciate the gift from Susie’s doll collection of a well dressed, cute black doll. She wanted and snatched the white one from the smaller child.

Lora Meredith realizes right away that she and her daughter were in good hands. In fact, years later, in an argument between the teenage Susie (Sandra Dee) and mother, Susie informs her that Annie has been more of a mother to her. While actress mother Meredith pursued and eventually found major success on the Broadway stage and was transitioning to film, Annie held down the home front.

When Sarah Jane is nineteen, she leaves Lora's house for her new life as a white woman. Unfortunately this quest to pass takes Sarah Jane not just physically away from the mother who loved her dearly and she loved in return, but emotionally. When Annie becomes ill, her face that once displayed her flawlessly youthful complexion, begins to appear older and tired. We see her clutch herself in the heart area and wince. Lora insists that Annie see a doctor and take it easy. Susie sits with Annie while she rests in bed and chatters away; she is there for Annie when her black daughter is not, just as Annie was always with her, when her mother was not.

Annie tracks Sarah Jane down at a New York dive night club she's working in where she is singing and dancing half clad. Annie thought she was working in a library at night. Religious Annie blew Sarah Jane's cover and told the stunned management that she'd bring in the police. The manager informed Annie that there would not be any need for that, as they now realized she was not white and they fired Sarah Jane.

Sarah Jane fled to Los Angeles, and Lora's male friend - a now successful photographer Steve - hired a detective to locate Sarah Jane for Annie. This time around Annie found her daughter working in a high-class night club as a show girl. Annie did not want to cause trouble for her daughter. She wanted to see her and to know where she was in case she ever needed anything. It was obvious that blacks were not allowed in the club by the reaction of management upon seeing Annie lurking around the premises. She sneaked backstage at the end of her daughter's performance.

Upon seeing Annie, Sarah Jane had a resigned look, as she assumed she would have to move on again. She relaxed somewhat when she realized her cover had not been blown. Annie told Sarah Jane that she wanted to hold her one last time, like she did when she was little. Sarah Jane looked as if she was longing for the same thing. She was teary eyed, perhaps remorseful, as

they embraced. Annie and daughter hugged tightly and Sarah Jane whispered “mama.” When one of the other performers entered she mistook Annie for the maid. Before discovering Annie was there to see Sarah Jane, who was using another name, Annie referred to her daughter as Miss. After Annie left, the performer made a comment, such as “I didn’t know you had a *mammy*” to Sarah Jane in a faux southern accent. Sarah Jane replied, “All my life.”

Once home, Annie soon dies. The guilt ridden and grieving Sarah Jane returns home too late. She comes running down the street pushing through the white policemen to get to her mother’s horse-drawn casket. This is the climax of the film and also the saddest and most dramatic scene of both versions. Sarah Jane cries her heart out to the closed casket, begging her mother to forgive her, telling her that she did not mean it. Once in the carriage with Lora, with Susie and Steve crying in Lora’s arms, she cries out “Miss Lora, I killed my mother.” The funeral scene is made even more mournful by the appearance of the legendary gospel singer Mahalia Jackson performing as a soloist in Annie’s Church choir. She sings as if her heart is breaking, just as Annie’s had broken over her daughter.

Having seen both versions of the film many times, I always prefer the remake. Moore’s soft, soothing well spoken voice displays a lot of quiet strength. She epitomizes the essence of the caring, devoted mother, friend, church sister and wife. She is much more than the nurturing mammy/maid to whites. Moore brought to her portrayal of Annie a dignity and pride in being her own person, independent of Lora Meredith. It was fitting that Annie was more independent than Delilah in the original version, released twenty-five years earlier. Annie also moved up in her position in the house, with a staff working under her. Superwoman Annie wanted to continue to do it all herself, even though they were now residing in a huge house outside of New York and not the small apartment. Annie provided for her daughter very well and wanted to send her to a

Colored Teacher's College, which Sarah Jane disdained. Sarah Jane wore lovely clothes, while Annie dressed well but simply. Annie represented the new possibilities available to a black woman, while Sarah Jane only seemed to see the limitations in being black. Lora Meredith may not have seen Annie as having limitations, but she did not see the whole Annie. There is a scene toward the end when during a conversation Annie informs Lora about her various interests and charities. Lora was not aware of any of this. (Susie probably was). Annie tells her sweetly, but matter of factly, that she never asked.

In 1958, the filming of *Imitation of Life* took place within the context of the Civil Rights movement. The remake was released four years after Rosa Parks made her stance leading to the 1955 Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott. Black people had also made gains in the motion picture industry, including Louise Beavers legal fight to have Nigger removed from the original version. It would be ludicrous for the film makers of the 1959 remake not to have the character of Annie portrayed as a more modern black domestic than her counterpart Delilah. And yet, it could have happened as decades later there continue to be people making films who seem to be living in a time warp.

Both versions of *Imitation of Life* are considered classics. On October 17, 2005, the remake was honored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, two days before Juanita Moore's October 19th birthday. Moore was born in 1922. The Afrocentric News Network's Deardra Shuler interviewed Moore and Susan Kohner, who turned sixty-nine the following month. Moore and Kohner had become friends only after the filming of *Imitation of Life* had ended. Kohner did not want to get close to Moore during filming because of the way her character Sarah Jane had to behave toward Moore's Annie. Kohner revealed that she had been afraid of the director Douglas Sirk, who could be forceful with her. She understood though, that

this was because he wanted to pull emotions of anger from her. On the other hand, Sirk was very patient with Moore. Moore told Shuler about how the muscles in her face jumped at times during filming due to nerves. One day Moore cried all day, but reported, “... yet he did not fire me. During my dying scene, Sirk said: ‘Juanita, you got to remember you are dying not crying,’ recounted Moore” (Shuler 2005, 3). She added that it was easy for her to cry in the film as she cried a lot during filming: “I had a lot to cry about. Conditions for black actors were unbelievable back then. Very few black actors got the opportunity to hone their craft in the same way white actors did” (Shuler 2005, 3). Kohner had portrayed other non-white characters and did not have any qualms about taking on the half-black character. Kohner herself is biracial and was born to the late Mexican/Catholic actress Lupita Tovar and a Jewish/Czech producer father, Paul Kohner. Perhaps it is because of her mixed race identity that I believed as a child that Kohner was indeed a biracial black woman.

Both Moore and Kohner were nominated for Golden Globes and Academy Awards in the Best Supporting Actress Category. The lead actress Lana Turner was not. Kohner won the Golden Globe and a second Golden Globe as The Most Promising New Comer Female. Both Moore and Kohner lost their Oscar bids.

Ethel Waters

Ethel Waters was born in 1891. She grew up in Chester, Pennsylvania. To survive, Waters ran errands for women working in prostitution. A lookout for pimps and crooks, she stole food to eat. Growing up in the slums, nothing came easy for Waters. She was married at thirteen and separated at fourteen. She went on to work in a Philadelphia hotel as a chamber maid and laundress by age fifteen, earning \$4.75 per week, \$19.00 monthly.

During this time she had many struggles, including that she was hit by a car and then left

for dead by whites who passed by her laying in the road. She was constantly cheated out of money and treated badly by men. She clashed with many people over the years, including other entertainers such as Josephine Baker and Lena Horne. A very religious woman performer who knew Waters said in a documentary that she would put God aside, cuss you out, and then pick God back up afterwards.

By the 1930s, Waters had been performing for well over a decade. On the Black Vaudeville circuit, she was called Sweet Mamma Stringbean. As a singer, she introduced many popular songs such as *Am I Blue?* She also fulfilled her dreams of becoming a Broadway musical star, appearing in many hit musicals on stage and film such as: *Africana* (1927), *Blackbirds of 1930*, *Rhapsody in Black* (1931) and *Cabin in the Sky* (1943). Waters became one of America's most versatile performers, covering stage, screen and later television.

By the mid 1940s, Waters career was in trouble; as Bogle (1994) describes: "Overwork, exhaustion, exploitation, and personal unhappiness had made her 'difficult' and chronically suspicious of everyone. Her outbursts on the set of *Cabin in the Sky* remain a part of Hollywood legend" (162). Consequently Waters was unemployed from film work for six years. Then Darryl Zanuck asked Waters to try out for *Pinky* (1949), although some say that Waters had to actually fight for the role. Her powerful, dramatic performance as the grandmother of the tragic mulatto Pinky and the roles that followed helped shatter the myth that black women could only deliver in musical and comical setting, or be the attractive, exotic other. Bogle (1994) argues that Waters single handedly "brought time and substance to the time-worn mammy."

It was in the Eisenhower era, in the film version of Carson McCullers' Broadway play *The Member of the Wedding*, that she scored her greatest triumph and an overwhelming personal victory" (Bogle 1994, 162). *The Member of the Wedding* motion picture was released in 1952.

This film marked the **first** time a black actress carried the white production at a major studio. While the film was a critical success, reports of its unconventional characters and lack of plot turned off many potential movie goers. It focused on three outcasts, including one who is the family cook Berenice (Waters) who is the rock of the family. She was simultaneously the “housekeeper, protectress, reprimanded, advisor, and confidante” (Bogle 1994, 164).

The film marked another comeback for Waters who had published her autobiography *His Eye Is On the Sparrow*, with details of her marriages, lovers, fights and career problems. According to Bogle, the book convinced the public that Waters was indeed the long suffering character she had played and so audiences rooted for the woman herself and the characters she created. She was more than the strong black woman with the hard life; she was now a “great, ‘serious’ popular myth come true” (Bogle 1994, 164).

Waters performance and success represented different things to blacks and whites. For black audiences, Waters represented our spirit that blacks:

...believed had prevailed during the hard times of slavery, and they felt she brought dignity and wisdom to the race. For the mass white audience Ethel Waters spoke to an inner spirit of a paranoid and emotionally paralyzed generation that longed for some sign of heroism. Movie stardom itself had often been based on a thin line between actress and myth, and with this performance Ethel Waters became a genuine movie star. (Bogle 1994, 164-165).

Waters personality, not her movie characters, endeared her to the public and with this the history of blacks in film had a new perspective.

There was other work for Waters in the 1950s, including stage work and television work as the housekeeper Beulah on *Beulah*. She was also in serious debt as she had been charged with income-tax evasion. To try and pay off her debts, she appeared on the game show *Break the \$250,000 Bank*. According to Bogle (1994),

The great actress stood before millions in their homes trying to win money to pay her taxes. Surprisingly, audiences took Waters plight in stride. There was neither outrage nor great

sadness. In a frightening way, Ethel Waters' public sorrow and humiliation were considered fitting for the tough enduring mythic figure who had always shown America that she could prevail, even under the most trying situations. (165)

Contrary to Bogle's view, I am quite certain that there were blacks who truly felt both outrage and sadness for Waters. It is not unreasonable to think that some black citizens also felt embarrassed for Waters and themselves, feeling that her behavior was a reflection on them. After all, this was *their* star, who had conquered so many entertainment mediums. This was *their* star who had introduced songs that became standards of American music. This was *their* star who was shamed on national television. That's why I find it impossible to fathom that a significant portion of the black population, including the wealthy and the entertainers, did not truly feel for Waters. I believe there were whites who truly felt for Waters plight as well.

In 1959 Waters appeared in *The Sound and the Fury*. Twentieth Century-Fox's PR department wrote that "everybody's favorite, indeed America's favorite, Ethel Waters, was back" (Bogle 1994, 165). She went on to guest star on television shows through the early 1970s portraying *variations* of the mammy/maid, the strong matriarch and the heroine. She also appeared with the Billy Graham Crusaders. Waters died in 1977. In the documentary *Brown Sugar* (1986), the narrator states that "For decades no other black star was held in such affectionately high regards as Ethel Waters." Her appeal is linked to the strength she consistently portrayed. Audiences seemed to have no doubt that Waters unwavering strength and faith – in her life as in her films - would see her through anything.

Libby Taylor

There were other actresses from the early era of films in the 1900s whose careers consisted of *opening doors* for whites, as Juanita Moore put it. These were actresses whose hey days coincided with the women covered thus far (McDaniel, Beavers, Moore and Waters). One such

actress is Libby Taylor. She was born Elizabeth A. Taylor in April 1902 in Chicago, before the other actress Elizabeth Taylor would become a household name. She was one of the black domestics initially employed by white entertainers who then took their real life professions to the screen. This sometimes led to a new career in films as it did for her. She had worked as a domestic for Mae West in New York, and when West made the move to Hollywood, she brought Libby Taylor with her. As I mentioned in the section on Louise Beavers, Taylor appeared in Mae West's *I'm No Angel* (1933) as well as *Belle of the Nineties* (1934). Overall, she appeared in sixty films between 1932 and 1953. She filmed her sixty-first film in 1960 as an unaccredited maid.

Claudia McNeil

Claudia McNeil (August 13, 1917 - November 25, 1993) was the God-fearing, strong matriarch Lena Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961). The play made its Broadway debut in March 1959. The cast, except for one person, was entirely black. The author of the original play as well as the screenplay adaptation is the late Chicago native Lorraine Hansberry. The play was set on the Southside of Chicago and is based on Hansberry's family. The film version featured the original Broadway cast, including Sidney Poitier and Ruby Dee. While the director was white, the original play and screen play was written by a black woman and so the film does have the black perspective.

For her role in *A Raisin in the Sun*, McNeil was nominated for a Tony Award as Best Actress. The play was nominated for a total of four Tony's. She received many glowing reviews, although not everyone was a fan of hers. According to Donald Bogle (1994), *Time* magazine wrote that McNeil behaved like a "mean old man in a wig" (198). According to Bogle, McNeil is like the old mammies portrayed by Hattie McDaniel "but without the humor and spontaneity. She had the power but not the pathos required, and her work was most effective

when she was hooting, yelling, and reprimanding” (198). Whether or not the resemblance of McNeil’s performance to past mammy roles is due to the direction she was given, the way McNeil perceived her character, or a combination of both, the character of Lena Younger is a mammy/maid type with her own family and home. Both Younger and her daughter-in-law Ruth work as domestics, while her son Walter Lee is a chauffeur. Much of the plot revolves around the life insurance check the family is expecting, due to the death of Younger’s husband. This makes Mr. Younger an integral part of the plot, while it also leaves Lena Younger void of a mate.

Women like Lena Younger who are the heads of their families are not just strong, nurturing, robust, matronly and funny, like many screen mammy/maids and matriarchs. In reality, women who resemble the heavy set, brown black women are not always frumpy or matronly, nor are the slim black women always stylish. No, sometimes, the most stylish, sophisticated women in the room are the large black women. They routinely have romantic relationships with men who would not want them any other way than their large and lovely selves. But this is not the image the screen mammy puts forth. Mammy/maid characters are routinely desexed. According to most films, we are to believe all of these women are content to devote their lives solely to the white people they work for. They are not just void of a love interest, but they lack any outside interests.

Beah Richards

Hurry Sundown is important in the history of mammy/maids in film. In a film chock full of stereotypes, the Mammy Rose character, played by the late Beah Richards, broke out of stereotypical restraints. She showed the long over due rage that was present, though under the surface, in many real life docile mammy/maids. The reality of this rage was long over due on screen by 1967. This Mammy Rose ultimately regretted the way she lived her life as opposed to

earlier characters who were presented as happy and content to serve. Bogle addresses the many black stereotypes in the film:

Hurry Sundown was, in many respects, a summation of almost every Southern white and black cliché the movies had ever relied on. The Southern Belle, the Simon-Leger massa, the white idiot child, the faithful mammy, the white Liberal, The New Good Sensitive Negro, the Corrupt Old White Bigot, the Po' White Trash--all had their place in this drama. (Bogle 1994, 209)

And yet, Richards performance stands out in this problematic film. According to Bogle, Richards was a middle-class mammy who was in revolt; he writes, "Beah Richards was always the paragon of black respectability--at least at first glance. There had never been anyone like her before. She was so soft-spoken and genteel (notably later in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*) that audiences knew she had to be acting" (212). I agree with Bogle's observation that Richards did not look like what people (both white and black) perceived as a middle-class black woman. The black middle class was frequently perceived as light complexioned in real life and on screen and "as close in complexion to whites as they were in their life styles" (212). As Bogle writes, Richards was dark with broad features:

For another thing, she **looked hard and 'evil,'** as if she would bite back in a minute if anyone dared step on her toes. She **looked** as if she had been raised in a ghetto, and that she wore white gloves she was only **putting on airs**. There was something 'cullid' about her, and audiences just wanted her to drop the middle-class sweetness and **phoniness** and scream out in black rage. (Bogle 1994, 212; *emphasis mine*)

I agree that (some) people and (some) films have associated middle class blacks with being those of a lighter hue. However, I found Bogle's view of Richards appearance insulting. His words give the impression that **he** himself equates middle-class status and goodness with light (close to white) and low-income person and living in a ghetto with darkness and *African* features. His harsh words about Richards continued; he argues that in most of *Hurry Sundown*, Mammy Rose was:

...the essence of the Louise Beavers type of submissive, cheerful domestic. 'Sometimes, Rose,' says white actress Fonda, 'I think you just about invented love.' The proper, intelligent, polite Mammy Rose smiles. But within a few minutes when she is asked to give up her property, she collapses with a heart-attack. Then like a pepped up, enraged version of Ethel Waters, she cries out to her son, 'I was wrong... I was a white folks' nigger... You gotta fight... Swear to it...' (Bogle 1994, 212)

The Mammy Rose rant continues as she tells her son that she feels hate and anger toward herself for assisting the whites in making her what she is, a person who now "truly grieves for the sorry thing that has been my life." In the context of the film, this scene is comic. No one acquires that much insight in five minutes. But at the movies anything can happen" (Bogle 1994, 212)

Bogle believes that Richards (not the Mammy Rose character) was saying what it seemed she should have been saying all along in the film. The sentiments felt real to Bogle: "The middle-class mammy had dropped the airs and become real. The audience forgot the rest of the film and picked out those parts it held closest. And Beah Richards came off as a heroine of sorts" (Bogle 1994, 213). Mammy Rose's change of heart gave a black female actress a chance to say powerful things through her character. Of course black domestic workers could relate to the emotions and words of Mammy Rose, as might anyone who had worked under oppressive conditions. Bogle argues that Richards was putting on airs with her white gloves and middle-class act, and in this he is, in part, critiquing Richards herself. He claims that Richards became a heroine, not Mammy Rose.

Unlike Bogle I have always found Richards, soft spoken, articulate voice very pleasant and soothing. Richards class and intelligence showed through even when she was playing someone less educated and less articulate. To me, even as a child, whenever I would stumble across a film with her, she was a welcome addition. In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), as Poitier's mother, Richards was the direct opposite of the stereotypical bossy, loud housekeeper Tillie (Isabel Sanford). The film showed, for those willing to see, that brown to dark black women are

not all heavy set, nor are they all domestics. Moreover, even when they are domestics, they also have lives outside of their work. In this case, Mrs. Prentice was the married mother of not just a son, but a Doctor, and so she was not de-sexed. The two black female characters in this film showed that we are not all the same.

Richards also played roles that did not call for her to behave in the quiet, respectful manner. She played a “whore” in *In The Heat of the Night* (1967). She pulled it off because she was a talented Academy Award nominated (*Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*) actress. The role just did not make sense to me. Unlike Bogle, I saw Richards *type* as the soft spoken, but strong, kind, respectful, intelligent and probably educated black woman. She could be low income, middle class or upper middle class.

And yes there was something ‘cullid’ about Richards, given that she *was* colored to those who used the word. To me, she was African-American or black. There was nothing in Richards’ mannerisms and voice that suggested she was trying to hide behind phony airs. With respect to Bogle, Richards obvious soft spoken, genteel behavior could have been hidden in some of her characters. I happen to like that it was not. Why can’t there be a glimpse at a genteel, soft spoken black woman who is also someone who works as a prostitute. Why perceive all blacks, no matter what their upbringing or circumstances, as ghetto?

It turns out that Richards was an educated woman with a middle-class upbringing. She was born Beulah Richardson in Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1920 to a father who was a Baptist Minister and a mother who was a seamstress and PTA advocate. Richards was named after her mother. She grew up in a family that used black in lieu of Negro or colored, and she was proud of this fact. However, life in Vicksburg also held pain for the actress and writer. Richards said she faced racism daily in the Mississippi town. The memories of the racism and accompanying emotions

could have been her grounding when Mammy Rose reached her breaking point in *Hurry Sundown*.

Richards went on to graduate from Dillard University in New Orleans. After college she left Mississippi for New York. Richards was Claudia McNeil's (Lena Younger) understudy in the original stage production of *A Raisin in the Sun*. She got her chance to play Lena Younger in other productions. She was nominated for a Tony Award for her performance in James Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* (1965) along with her Oscar nomination. Richards won two Emmy Awards for guest appearances on the television series *Frank's Place* (1988) and *The Practice* (2000).

Actress/Director Lisa Gay Hamilton, who had met Richards on the set of the film *Beloved* (1998), brought the second Emmy to Richards, who had returned to Vicksburg, Mississippi. She passed away ten days later on September 14, 2000. Hamilton directed an award-winning 90-minute documentary on the actress, *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks* which debuted on HBO in 2004.

Isabel Sanford

Isabel Sanford was born Eloise Gwendolyn Sanford on August 29, 1917 and she died on July 9, 2004. She was a short, stout, busty, medium/dark brown woman. Her first film role came when she played the maid (Matilda 'Tillie' Binks) in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), starring Sidney Poitier. This was a film about interracial love between Poitier (Dr. John Prentice) and Katharine Houghton (Joanna 'Joey' Drayton). Tillie was a bossy, outspoken mammy/maid type who was hell-bent on protecting her white family from John Prentice, Doctor or not. She did not approve of the interracial union and made a statement such as "Civil Rights is one thing, but this is ridiculous." Tillie got away with a lot. The father of the would-be bride, Spencer Tracey (Matt Drayton), referred to her as family.

Sanford received good reviews and a lot of attention for this first film role. Norman Lear, the writer/director and creator of the TV series *All In the Family*, was one of the people paying

attention to Sanford's performance, and recruited her for his series *All in the Family* (1971-1975) where she and Sherman Hemsley played Louise and George Jefferson. This was followed by their star roles in *The Jefferson's* (1975 - 1985). In 1981 Sanford became the first and only black woman to win an Emmy as an Outstanding Actress in a Comedy Series.

Abbey Lincoln

In 1968, *For Love of Ivy* was released. The film starred Abbey Lincoln as Ivy Moore and Sidney Poitier as Jack Parks. The romantic comedy was written by Poitier and Robert Allan. Abbey Lincoln was a young, tall, slim attractive brown woman, and the press commented a lot on her looks. She went on to become a great jazz vocalist and an occasional actress.

In the film, Ivy works as a maid for the Austen family which was comprised of the parents and a young adult daughter and son (Beau Bridges) who are close to her age. Ivy wants more out of life and plans to leave this job and go to Secretarial School. The Austen family does not want to lose her as their caretaker. The Austen children resort to blackmailing a Jack Parks into asking Ivy out. They make the assumption that putting a man in Ivy's life would be enough to keep her satisfied and she would stay put. The sophisticated businessman and bachelor Jack Parks does not want a committed relationship. They get him to go along with it by threatening to expose the illegal half of Parks' two businesses. He has a floating gambling casino, housed in a big rig truck, which is decked out lavishly, and has many well-dressed well-to-do white customers. The trucking company is a legal business and Parks does not take money from blacks. The Austen's also offer Ivy a college education just like their own children. and they even offer her more money and a trip to Africa if she will stay.

In the end of this Doris Day/Rock Hudson type romantic comedy in *blackface* (as described by Bogle), Parks does fall for Ivy, but when she finds out why he initially asked her out, she is

enraged with him and the entire family. In spite of her anger, the family doesn't readily give up on trying to keep her employed in their household. The mother is nervous at the prospect of having to once again take care of her family and the house, and the siblings do not want to lose a friend and a maid who is in their age group. They don't want to lose someone who could possibly run interference between them and the parents.

Parks informs the Austen children that slavery is over. Commenting on their desire to keep Ivy with the family, he now eyes them all as if he were looking at a house of crazy people. Ivy's appraisal of them is not much different and she is also hurt. Once she calms down and makes up with the kids, Tim and Gena, Ivy leaves with Parks. We, the audience, assume one of the first things on the agenda will be a wedding, or perhaps an engagement, even though the two have only known one another for a matter of days. This works because Ivy is the marrying kind and things can move pretty rapidly in romantic comedies.

For Love of Ivy has some cute and funny moments. I would imagine it was nice for black women in particular to have a romantic comedy with black lead characters. I would also think that some were disappointed that the leading lady was employed as a maid, as this was the era of the sophisticated Doris Day romantic comedies. I also think it noteworthy and concerning that the film had Ivy having sex with Parks after two dates, which amounted to about the same number of days. Moreover, she was taking birth control pills prior to meeting Parks, even though she did not have a boyfriend. She was of legal age and at least in her mid-20s, and this was the swinging 60s. And yet, I wonder why the black leading lady in a modern romantic comedy of the day could not have waited, as Doris Days' much older characters of the 1960s? Not even the influence of alcohol caused Day's characters to give it up before marriage. Even the toasted Interior Decorator, Carol Templeton (Day), in the first of the three romantic-comedies starring she and

Rock Hudson *Lover Come Back* (1961), manages to get herself wed before having sex, unlike the black maid in *For Love of Ivy*.

Diahann Carroll

In 1974, Diahann Carroll, as Claudine Price, was the single mother, welfare recipient, and housekeeper in *Claudine*. In this show, she struggles to support her six children. Diahann Carroll's Claudine, like Abbey Lincoln's Ivy, were different from the domestics played by the Hattie McDaniel types. Carroll is of caramel complexion who is more on the lighter side of the medium brown color range. She is a slim, pretty, and sophisticated woman. Bogle (1994) refers to Carroll as a bronze Barbie doll. She describes herself as being "... a black woman with a white image. I'm as close as they can get to having the best of both worlds. The audience can accept me. I don't scare them" (quoted in Bogle 1994, 210). Additionally, unlike the mammy/maid characters who were routinely desexed in films, Carroll's Claudine and Lincoln's Ivy both have love interests.

Claudine's love interest is Rupert Marshall (played by James Earl Jones), who is a sanitation worker. Claudine calls him Roop. Claudine's children are rude to Roop in the beginning. The eldest son Charles (Lawrence Hilton-Jacobs) does not want to see his often married and abandoned mother hurt again, and he does not want to see her to have more children. He does not approve of the fact that she has had so many children by different men. He assumes she'll have the same results with Rupert. Charles is an activist seeking positive social change for blacks.

Claudine and Roop initially do not want to get married. They do not believe they can make it financially without welfare, and they would be cut off of welfare once married. When the case worker Miss Kabak makes her unannounced visits to Claudine's Harlem apartment, the

family runs about hiding their inexpensive appliances. Kabak would inquire about any gifts, including monetary ones, that Claudine may have received from a man. There have always been mothers like Claudine who work the welfare system, only as a matter of survival, not because they do not want to work. Writer Kristal Brent Zook covered the film in her article “Remembering Claudine,” featured in *Savoy* magazine. Zook recalls that in the 1970s, she and her cousins studied the responses of the women in their family to the film. She writes, “Claudine was moral and hardworking we cheered her ability to ‘get away with it’ having a job as a maid and receive aid...” (Zook 2002, 67) They were also offended that the family had to hide their appliances.

At the end of both *For Love of Ivy* and *Claudine*, the leading characters who are also maids are seen literally walking into new chapters of their lives. Ivy walks away from the Austen’s house with Parker, and Claudine with Roop and her children who are holding hands and walking happily down the middle of the street.

Alfre Woodard

Acclaimed actress Alfre Woodard portrayed Geechee, a maid employed by Marjorie Kinman Rawlings (Mary Steenburgen) in *Cross Creek* (1983) and was nominated for an Oscar as Best Supporting Actress. With the Oscar nod, Woodard joined the list of black actresses nominated for Oscars for portraying mammy/maids or care givers to white characters. Encore’s World of Film & TV article on *Cross Creek*, felt Woodard’s performance resembled her character in *Passion Fish*, in which she plays a nurse hired by May-Alice (Mary McDonnell). Both films are set in the South and, as many critics such as Ebert point out, both feature stereotypes and clichés. Woodard’s performances were singled out as significant for her strength in *Passion Fish*, and for comic relief in *Cross Creek*. In 1997, Woodard portrayed a mammy/maid in the last remake of *Member of the Wedding* on the USA Network.

Nell Carter

During the time Woodard was garnering those positive reviews for her performances in *Cross Creek*, Nell Carter was in her second season of *Gimme a Break!* Nell Carter was born Nell Ruth Hardy in Birmingham, Alabama in 1948. She won a Tony award in 1978 for the musical *Ain't Misbehavin*, and in 1982, she won an Emmy for the TV production of it. Carter's other Broadway credits include *Dude* and *Annie*. She walked away from a project that would become a major Broadway hit when she was originally cast as Effie in *Dream Girls* (1978). Instead, she took a role in the soap opera *Ryan's Hope* (1975). She appeared in the film version of the stage musical *Hair* in 1979.

Carter played Nell (Nellie Ruth Harper), a housekeeper, in the situation comedy *Gimme a Break!* that first aired on October 28, 1981 and ended its run in May 1987. Physically, Carter was a short (4'11), heavy set, cute, bubbly brown woman with a sharp wit. She had a powerful singing voice and often her musical talent was showcased on the sitcom. She sang the show's theme song, which was arranged differently every season, and she performed with many famous guest stars, who happened to pass through the fictional California town of Glenlawn. Some of the stars included the late Sammy Davis Jr., Andy Gibb and Whitney Houston.

The character of Nell Harper was essentially a modern day mammy/maid. Nell came to be the Kanisky family's live-in housekeeper because of a promise she had made to Margaret Kanisky, her late white friend, to take care of her family. When Margaret passed away from cancer, Nell moved in to do just that. The Kanisky family consisted of Margaret's Police Chief husband Carl and his three daughters. Nell's bedroom, just like countless other black mammy/maids--on film as in real life--was located off the kitchen at the back of the. The Kanisky's bedrooms were all upstairs. When Dolph Sweet (Police Chief Carl Kanisky) died in May of 1985, Nell became the

head of the family. Once the youngest daughter Sam (Samantha) had graduated from high school and was out of the house, Nell moved on as well.

In Season 6, Nell relocated to Greenwich Village in New York and had new adventures as an Assistant Editor for a publishing company. This season also features her best friend - Addy - played by Thelma Hopkins (from Tony Orlando & Dawn group and TV Variety Show and sitcoms *Busom Buddies*, *Family Matters* and *Half and Half*). Physically at the time, Hopkins was the opposite of Carter. She was tall and slim. Even so, she displayed a similar wise cracking wit. Also in tow to Greenwich Village was Joey Donovan, a boy Nell and the Chief had first become foster parents to in Season 3. Of course Joey, like the Kanisky's, was white. Having a small white boy to parent kept Nell's mammy/maid role in the series intact. Turner wrote in *Ceramic Uncles & Celluloid Mammies*:

In this world where hundreds if not thousands of black children need good homes. Nell manages to find herself another needy white child. With clear enthusiasm, she and the chief adopt the child, and her position as a black woman eager to devote herself to the needs of whites is once again assured. This the subliminal mammy image cultivated in the previous five seasons is safe. (Turner, 58).

When the *TV Land* network aired the special *100 Most Unexpected TV Moments*, two episodes of *Gimme a Break* made the list. One of the episodes, "Baby of the Family," ranked at number 38 and aired in the 1984/85 season. In this episode Joey performed at Nell's church benefit in blackface. Sam had urged him to do so because she was angry with Nell for not allowing her to go on an unchaperoned trip.

Like a lot of blacks, I was happy to see television shows starring blacks. I realized from a young age that seeing black characters on film and television meant taking the bad with the good. There were many who recognized the obvious similarities between Carter's character and the mammy/maids in the old black and white films. A sad reality is that most of the public who

watched her weekly show (and those who later discovered the show in re-runs) were not even aware that they were watching a *Tony* award winning Broadway star. Instead Carter will be remembered more as the mammy/maid character of Nell in her 1980s sitcom, caring for whites and sleeping in the back room off the kitchen.

Esther Rolle

Rolle is someone who also played mammy/maid roles in film and television. She played the maid Florida Evans on the television series *Maude* in the 1970s. Unlike others, this maid was married to a man played by John Amos and they had their own children. Rolle and Amos transitioned to their own series thanks to creator Norman Lear. While Rolle was still Florida Evans in the new series *Good Times*, she was no longer a maid, and Amos' name was changed to James. Lear did the same for the characters of George and Louise Jefferson on *The Jeffersons*, who had begun on the show *All in the Family*.

In the TV film *Scarlett*, the mammy continues to be referred to only as mammy, as was done in the original *Gone With the Wind*. Addressing the mammy character in this film, Rolle said, "If you are so empty and egotistical that you have to call me Mammy instead of a name in order to feel good about yourself, then you've got the problem. If you can't take care of your offspring, to the point where they care more about me than about you, then you've got the problem" (Zaslow 3A). A lot of mammy/maid roles required that the actresses behave as "an undignified, unrealistic buffoon[s]" (3A). In 1989, Esther Rolle portrayed the housekeeper in *Driving Miss Daisy*.

In 1994, Rolle told Zaslow, a *Chicago Sun Times* columnist, that she would have preferred a broader range of roles during her career. For her, the key to playing these characters was to do it with dignity and self love; she says, "You've got to love yourself before you can love anybody else... If I can look in the mirror and say 'Hot diggity, I like her!' then I'm O.K." (Zaslow, 3A).

She also said that she would remind herself that many of the parents of our great black leaders were domestics.

Viola Davis and Octavia Spencer - The Help

The release of *The Help* in 2011 brought a mainstream film about black female maids in 1960s Mississippi to the forefront. The film is based on the 2009 New York Times Best Seller *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett. The screen play was penned by Stockett's childhood friend Tate Taylor who also directed the film. Once again, a film covering a segment of black life is presented through the lens of a white male. And this is not the first time a white woman's book featuring domestic black women was brought to the screen, directed by white men. This was also the case, as previously mentioned, with *Imitation of Life* (1934 & 1959) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939). As Julie Dash suggests, it is nothing new to find our stories guided by the whims of whites.

The Help received a lot of praise as well as criticism. Not surprisingly, there were many critics. An entire blog--*The Backlash against the Help: Let me count the ways*--posted August 13, 2011 explored the issues with the film. The site offers a very extensive list of articles that offer critical reviews and responses to the film, including the review by critic Wesley Moore of *The Boston Globe*. His review was entitled "The Help; Race, class, and Hollywood Gloss." He writes:

A movie now about black maids in the 1960's can try to reconfigure all black maids in the movies. But it's an uphill climb that only the playwright Lynn Nottage has even come close to managing. 'The Help' comes out on the losing ends of the movies' social history. The best film roles three black women will have all year require one of them to clean. Ron Howard's daughter's house. It's self-reinforcing movie imagery. White boys have always been Captain America. Black women, in one way or another, have always been someone's maid...

These are strong figures, as the restaurant owner might sincerely say, but couldn't they be strong doing something else? That's the hardest thing to reconcile about Skeeter's book and 'The Help' in general. On one hand, it's juicy, heartwarming, well-meant entertainment. On the other hand, it's an owner's manual. (Moore 2011, 3)

And yet, Myrtle Evers-Williams, widow of Medgar Evers (slain Civil Rights leader) and past NAACP Chair, found *The Help* to be more socially relevant than any other film of 2011. Ida E. Jones, on the other hand, as the National Director of the Association of Black Women Historians, disagreed. In the same *Boston Globe* article, she is quoted as saying that the film "... is a disappointing resurrection of Mammy--a mythical stereotype of black women who were compelled either by slavery or segregation, to serve white families" (Moore, 3).

In the film, Viola Davis played the maid Aibelene Clarke, and Octavia Spencer portrayed Minny Jackson. Davis was nominated for an Academy Award as the Best Actress in a Lead Role and Spencer as Best Actress in a Supporting Role. Spencer won in February 2012. Davis felt taking the role of Aibelene Clarke was important because the maid had not been humanized; Davis reflects, "I felt she remained a cardboard cutout . . . Now I feel like my mother and my grandmother's lives have been acknowledged... It's painful. You have a whole generation of women who don't want to be reminded of the past" (Moore, 3).

CHAPTER IV

WHOOPI GOLDBERG: CONTINUING THE LEGACY OF THE MAMMY/MAID

Whoopi Goldberg is a contemporary actress with a substantial career in film and television. She has been in over fifty films, including starring, co-starring, cameos, short subjects, and voice-over roles. The list is substantially longer if I include the films where she was herself in the cameos, documentaries and television roles. In addition to Goldberg's Oscar win and two nominations, she has won numerous other awards that celebrate her talent. This list of awards includes four People Choice Awards and a British Film Award. In 2002, she became the 10th and the only black person (out of 11 people) to have earned a EGOT (Emmy, Grammy, Oscar and Tony Award). She has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame showcasing her hands, feet and dread locks. Along with friends and fellow comics and actors, Billy Crystal and Robin Williams, Goldberg has worked to benefit Comic Relief for about twenty years. She is especially fond of charities that benefit children.

And yet, disapproval and controversy has followed Goldberg throughout her career. A central theme of disapproval is related to the long list of her roles as mammy/maids, nurturers and/or buffoons focused on caring for white people, to her choice to act in predominantly white films, and to her relationships with white men. Part of the problem, as noted throughout this thesis, is that stereotypical black characters such as mammies have been used to demonstrate the inferiority of blacks. According to Bogle, the characters have not been *intended* "to do great harm, although at various times individual ones did. Whenever dealing with black characters, they simply adapted the old familiar stereotypes, often further distorting them" (4). But, I believe these stereotypes were intended to inflict harm in some cases and the effect is there no matter the intention. Black feminist critic Barbara Christian argues that the mammy image functions to help

maintain gender oppression (referenced in Hill Collins, 1990). As a slave, the mammy character is consistently portrayed as harmless and deferential, and Whoopi Goldberg's portrayals of harmless mammy/maids do not challenge these notions.

Goldberg, on the other hand, has a different perspective on her life's work. She insists that she has not placed limitations on herself. In her book titled simply *Book*, she opens the chapter "Dream" with "I CAN DO ANYTHING. I can be nothing. No one ever told me I couldn't" (229). A couple of pages later, she writes, "This possibility – is why I took on acting as such a joyous thing. It's shot through with possibility. Anything can happen. As I write this, I'm appearing eight times a week on Broadway, in a part originally written for a man, but you never know, right?" (231).

In this chapter, I explore Whoopi Goldberg's career in relation to her roles and their relationship to the mammy/maid character and stereotype as discussed throughout this thesis. Throughout her career she has both struggled with an industry that actively marginalizes and limits the roles offered to blacks, as well with the criticism that she has contributed to racism and racial stereotyping by the roles that she has played and the projects of which she has been a part.

Whoopi Goldberg was born Caryn Elaine Johnson on November 13, 1955, in New York City. By the time she was eighteen years old, Goldberg was married to the only black man of her three ex-husbands. This marriage to the father of her only child ended after five years in 1978. Goldberg said it can be difficult being part of a famous person's life. She revealed to Barbara Walters that no one paid the price for her success like her daughter Alexandra. She held a variety of jobs, including being a makeup artist in a funeral home, to support Alexandra and herself. Her acting career escalated when her one-woman stage show, directed by Mike Nicholas, landed on Broadway in 1984. By this time she also had already made her film debut with *Citizen:*

I'm Not Losing My Mind, I'm Giving It Away (1981).

The Color Purple, Goldberg's second film, was the subject of much criticism. While she originally pursued the role of Sofia, Spielberg saw in Goldberg the lead character of Celie. The NAACP criticized the film for perpetuating negative stereotypes about the black community. Goldberg felt attacked by the NAACP in both their critique of the film and then in the critique of the *Academy Awards*, because no one involved with the film won an Oscar. She referred to the organization's behavior as schizophrenic. I strongly agree. She was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Actress in a Lead Role, and Oprah Winfrey was nominated for her Supporting Role. Goldberg felt there was a sour taste in the members of the Academy's mouths toward black projects because of the NAACP's protests.

Goldberg has also taken on roles that weren't written specifically for a black actress, or even a woman. *Burglar* was originally a vehicle for Bruce Willis, *Jumpin Jack Flash* a vehicle for Shelly Long, and *Sister Act* a vehicle for Bette Midler, a (white) man, a very waspy-looking blonde and a Jewish woman. In many ways, Goldberg has challenged Hollywood and won in type-casting.

And yet, you could ask, just how much of a challenge was it to cast Goldberg in some of those roles? Take the Bruce Willis role in *Jumpin Jack Flash*. It was not much of a stretch for those who consider her to have an androgynous and more masculine. In this film and many of those that followed, she was treated as unusual, outside of the context of the films' settings. Bogle claims that Goldberg is *never* put in a black cultural context on film, so that black audiences could identify with her. This lack of cultural identity is immediately obvious in *Jumpin Jack Flash*. And yet, I do not agree that Goldberg's characters are never put in a black cultural context. Some of her films have obviously been about the lives of black folks, including *The Color Purple* and

The Long Walk Home, among others.

In *Jumpin Jack Flash*, Goldberg portrayed Terry Doolittle, a white computer programmer, who begins to receive messages from a British agent by mistake. The agent is locked up behind the Iron Curtain. Terry goes on a mission to rescue this man that she has developed a crush on. One scene has Terry trapped in a telephone booth that is dragged through New York. In this scene, Goldberg's Terry has been compared to Butterfly McQueen's Prissy character who was a pickaninny in the film *Gone With the Wind*. Like McQueen, Goldberg screams and pops her eyes. This is the look Prissy has when she runs around screaming, "The Yankees is coming." Similarly, in *Ghost*, her character's response when she first hears Sam the ghost speak is reminiscent of Prissy too. And in *Burglar*, her character is actually told "now listen here pickaninny!" by Ray Kirschmann (G.W. Bailey).

Goldberg has been routinely surrounded by predominantly white casts. This is probably a strategy to help draw in white audiences, and, for the most part, it eliminates the possibility of a lover for her, unless it is an interracial affair. For instance, in the film *Jumpin Jack Flash*, the relationship of Terry and the British agent is projected, but not shown. At the end of the film, the two meet when the agent arrives at Terry's office to thank her. The two share an embrace, Terry blushes, and they go off to have lunch and the film ends. In *Maid to Order*, Goldberg and Ted Danson, another white actor (*Cheers*, *Three Men and a Baby*) engage in what is intended to be a funny love scene. Goldberg originally had an interracial love scene in *Fatal Beauty*, but preview audiences on the West Coast objected and it was eliminated. I believe her race played a factor in the audience's objection. Bogle claims that the negative responses to Goldberg are related to the types of clothing she wore in the film. The baggy pants, tops, and sneakers resemble her attire in real life. Bogle (1994) suggests that Goldberg has been effeminized; he writes, "The film makers

seemed to view her as an asexual creature from another universe” (298).

Without any real romantic situations for Goldberg’s film characters, they stay true to the mammy/maid types who typically had non-existent love lives. The notion that only certain types of black women are sexually appealing is then never challenged. Bogle offers these reflections on the 1988 film *Clara’s Heart*:

Hollywood appeared to have Goldberg where it wanted: playing in *Clara’s Heart*. Here as a Jamaican domestic who works for a white family in Maryland and becomes attached to the young son, Goldberg gave a well-crafted, convincing performance. But the script **desexed** her character, presenting the black woman once again as a mighty **nurturer**—an updated **mammy** without enough of a life of her own. (Bogle 1994, 298; emphasis mine)

When it comes to Goldberg, it is as if all the filmmakers after 1987’s *Fatal Beauty* decided to abide by the reactions and opinions of one film’s preview audience.

In *The Long Walk Home* (1990), Goldberg is included in the story of her people’s struggle for equality in Montgomery, Alabama, during the historic bus boycott. Goldberg plays the role of the maid--Odessa Cotter. The focus of the film is not on Cotter and the other blacks in Montgomery though. Instead, it is on her white employer Miriam Thompson (Sissy Spacek) and the story is told through the eyes of Thompson’s daughter. Odessa is what Bogle describes as a *convert nurturer* in *The Long Walk Home*, whereby Miriam becomes an enlightened friend and ally to Odessa.

Goldberg played Odessa the way it was written, and yet also sought perspective from black women in Montgomery who worked as domestics. One woman informed Goldberg that she would have behaved like the domestics had she been in their place -- “You just have a different sensibility. The world is a different place. When we were coming up if you made any noise they’d hang you. No one asked questions. They’d come in the middle of the night, and they’d take your family and they’d kill you” (111). Goldberg began to look at the women who worked as

domestics as heroic. From her perspective, their jobs helped two families, the black domestic's family and the well off white family they worked for. Goldberg concluded, "So what the hell was wrong with playing them? Nothing. Nothing" (112).

In her autobiographical *Book*, Goldberg reflected on her roles and whether they contributed to negative stereotypes of Black women. She wrote:

I can take any role I want, or reject any role I want, for any reason I want. Early on in my career, a lot of the scripts I saw called for me to play a maid, or a nanny, and I resisted at first. I thought I was better than that. But then I thought about it some more and realized that it didn't matter what the character's job was. Since when are we defined by what we do? We're defined by who we are, and if the stories that interest me happen to be about maids and nannies, then that's fine. I don't give a shit that other black actresses thought it was degrading to have to play a domestic, because they were wrong and I was right. I'm always right. Still, though it gnawed at me. (Goldberg, 110, 111)

While Goldberg's views on playing mammy/maids are legitimate, she must have anticipated others questioning her choices. For years, even prior to the Civil Rights movement, people questioned and criticized actors like Hattie McDaniel, Stepin Fetchit and other blacks playing stereotypes. And even after it began, Dorothy Dandridge and others were taken to task in the 1970s Blaxploitation films. The criticism of Goldberg may not have been so harsh if the mammy/maid type (care giving) roles were not the norm for her.

Critics, cultural historians, writers and others are not simply critiquing these roles without rhyme or reason; they are reflecting on the legacy of servitude that blacks have had in America. It has been pointed out that even when Goldberg is a professional career woman, her primary role in certain films is still that of a care-giver, nurturer or comic relief in predominantly white films. The reality is that the mere presence of mammy/maids and their clones onscreen continues to sting, especially when the character is subservient and behaves buffoonishly. While discussing my thesis, a close friend revealed that she still hates to see black women caring for white children. It is an emotional reaction, as is seeing a black male kneeling before a white man and shining his shoes.

In *Sister Act* (1992), Deloris (Goldberg) saves the day for a church and a group of white nuns. Deloris revives the church choir. She also encourages the nuns to reach out to and become a part of the community they were closed off from. On the surface, race is treated as if it does not matter or exist in *Sister Act*. Janet Maslin, the *New York Times* critic, saw more. In her review of the film, she notes that the original choice was to have Bette Midler play Deloris. Had this been the case, then it would have been a cast of all white main characters. In the film, when Deloris, played by Goldberg, “is scorned by Mother Superior (Maggie Smith), scenes that might have been played as mere snobbery with Midler now have a hint of racism.” Maslin suggests that this “might have been dispelled if the film had addressed it head on” (quoted in Bogle, 232). Mother Superior’s attitude could be viewed as her being angry that she was called upon by the police to hide Deloris, or that she disapproved of Deloris’ masquerading as a nun. Unlike Maslin, I think Mother Superior’s behavior may still have been viewed as racist had Bette Midler played Deloris. She may have been perceived as being anti-Semitic, although Midler would not have had to play Deloris as Jewish. Goldberg’s Deloris is unquestionably black and could not be anything else. And this is true whether or not it was addressed in the film. And it was not. Deloris’s race is ignored, even when it would have made sense to address it in the script. For instance, identifying her race may have helped the police to identify and therefore help her. The public, as well as the police, regularly use race to identify people.

In *Eddie* (1996), Goldberg portrayed coach Eddie (Edwina Franklin) of the New York Knicks, made possible by winning a contest. Eddie is not a mammy/maid character, and yet many of the words the owner of the Knicks, William (Wild Bill) Burgess, flings at her during an argument are words that could be used in relation to the buffoonish type mammy/maid in earlier films. For instance, Wild Bill told Eddie:

Well, I *bought you* for fun Eddie. I got me a circus and *you're my clown*. You've got no great skill. No profound talent. You're *loud*. *You've got a big mouth* and you're *funny*. But you're an amateur Honey. You're all hot and no cattle. As long as you put on a good *show*, I'm gonna *ride you just like I ride my horse*. And if he can't carry me, he's gone. And if *you can't carry me, the same thing is gonna happen to you*. (emphasis mine)

Eddie also is a notable Goldberg film because her looks are emphasized. In a representative scene, for instance, Eddie shows up to a home game looking very pretty and polished. She's tastefully sexy in a tailored black suit, paired with a crisp white blouse, dangling earrings and heels. In response to the probing looks of her coaching team, Eddie informs them that she is wearing Armani. Later she is shown in a light suit also looking great. Goldberg's slim and shapely body is showcased but not revealed in the suit. The entertainment industries usually do not pass up an opportunity to exploit the physical assets of entertainers. I'm thinking of how they've drawn attention to Tina Turner's legs, the handsomeness of Paul Newman and Denzel Washington, the eyes of Elizabeth Taylor and Frank Sinatra's, and the body of James Todd (LL Cool J) body, among others. Goldberg proved she could bring people into the theater. Women are the major draw to her most popular films. Women consistently demonstrate by box office returns that they are happy to see women in films who represent a broader range of beauty, size and age.

This brings me to 1990 and Goldberg's Academy Award winning role in *Ghost*. In this film, she portrayed the fake medium Oda Mae Brown. Black female director, Julie Dash, (*Daughters of the Dust*), compares Oda Mae with the mammy/maid roles of Hattie McDaniel and Ethel Waters. While she does not deny the talent of these three women, she reflects on the ways their roles have been constructed:

As in the sexual roles, the black woman is defined by a quality—sage wisdom—that is explicated as intrinsically and thus exotically black, utterly separate from anything experienced by the white characters. Whoopi Goldberg has frequently played a modern variation of this nonsexual protector role in the 1980's and 1990's, portraying a range of nonsexual women who further the goals of young white women.” (193, 194)

In *Ghost*, Sam (Patrick Swayze) is killed early in the film by a man he thought was his best friend. Sam then returns as a ghost. The ghost can only be heard by Oda Mae. It turns out that she is not a fake medium much to her own surprise. With Oda Mae's help, Sam goes on to communicate with his girlfriend and eventually captures his killer.

Before any of this happens Oda Mae and her two sisters are with a client who is trying to contact her deceased husband. Sam appears and Oda Mae hears him. (The audience sees him as well.) She's understandably afraid and shocked. Bogle (1994) describes Oda Mae's reaction as follows:

...she widens her eyes, hops up, darts into another room, and slams the door behind her. She swears to the Lord to never cheat again. 'I'll do anything, I'll do penance. Give me penance,' she cries out. 'But make that guy go away.' But when Swayze's ghost speaks to her again, well, now fear just overpowers Oda, who screams, runs like mad and literally knocks down the door trying to get away from dis here ole ghost. (329)

Although I found this scene to be one of the two funniest, I had mixed emotions. On the one hand, Goldberg is an extremely talented comedic and dramatic actress and her talent is on display in this film. On the other hand, there's that resemblance to *Gone With the Wind's* Prissy. As Bogle reflects, "Goldberg warmly modulates her reactions, giving them human dimensions. But an old set of stereotypical responses has simply been revamped for a new generation" (329).

According to Bogle, Goldberg's Oda Mae is primarily the comic relief in the white world of the two main characters Sam and Molly. She is definitely that, but also a nurturer and care-giver to both Sam and Molly, especially Sam. Sam couldn't have accomplished what he did without the medium Oda Mae in his corner. Molly is not a funny or happy character and understandably so, after her love was murdered. Unlike other films where Goldberg was cast as a care-giver to white folks, this time around she was caring for the living and the dead.

Goldberg's character was not the only funny actor in the film. Sam was also funny. Sam

and Oda Mae were the film comedic duo playing off of one another. They fuss humorously throughout much of the film, like two old bickering friends or a couple. In one scene, Oda Mae withdraws \$4 million dollars from the bank; this was money that had been stolen from the crook who killed Sam. She is nervous and dressed as she believed a wealthy woman would dress. After withdrawing the money and with Sam's coaxing, Oda Mae leaves the bank with the cashier's check in hand. She is in constant communication with Sam. These scenes are laugh-out-loud funny, including Oda Mae's reaction when Sam wants her to give the tainted money away.

Throughout the history of film, the morality of black characters is often only developed because of the virtuous white person showing them the right thing to do and thereby saving them. When Oda Mae understandably does not want to give up the check, Sam urges her to relinquish the money as the two walk down the street. To passers by, Oda Mae would appear to be nuts, arguing with herself. The New Yorkers don't appear to notice. At Sam's insistence Oda Mae endorses the check over to a couple of nuns on the street who are collecting money for charity. Oda Mae is not happy about letting go of a fortune, but Sam is highly amused. The two had become fast friends and they shine together.

After Oda Mae has convinced Molly that she's telling the truth about Sam communicating through her, she then goes above and beyond duty or friendship. Oda Mae allows the couple to have sex *through her*. Bogle writes, "It's the film's most intense and romantic sequence. But *Ghost* takes precautions not to disturb its mainstream audiences with an 'unsettling thought' ... Once Patrick Swayze's spirit moves into Goldberg's body, we first see Goldberg's dark hands touching Demi Moore's white ones. But soon Goldberg's image is replaced onscreen by Swayze's" (330). The scene can certainly be seen as the film makers trying to avoid any hint of a lesbian or interracial love scene. I simply viewed the scene as film magic.

Goldberg won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress for *Ghost*. In doing so, she became only the second black woman to win an Oscar period. She also made history as the only black actress to have two nominations under her belt. The history making feats don't stop there. Her win came less than a decade after being on welfare for a short while and earning her first Oscar nomination. After *Ghost*, Goldberg was on top of the world and the highest paid actress ever. Reflecting this time of her life, she told *Entertainment Tonight* in December 1993: "For a while I was Queen Bee" (quoted in Bogle, 333).

In 2000, Goldberg critiqued the Oscar nominations of Denzel Washington for his leading role in *The Hurricane* (1999) and the late Michael Clarke Duncan's supporting role in *The Green Mile*. Both actors lost that year, and Goldberg is quoted as saying, "Isn't it funny that the two black men nominated are behind bars in their movies? Very strange. Very Hollywood." (37) Goldberg's words could easily describe many of *her own roles*, including the one that garnered *her the Oscar*. It could have easily been said and written: Isn't it *funny* that many of the films of Ms. Whoopi Goldberg *find her caring for whites? Isn't it funny* that Goldberg's Oscar win was for such a role caring for whites? *Very strange. Very Hollywood.*

With such lofty, history making accomplishments, Bebe Moore Campbell of *Essence Magazine* asked Goldberg if she felt she had clout in Tinseltown. Goldberg's response was no; she explained that, "Power to me is being able to walk into a room with the boys and say, 'I want to make this movie,' and everyone says, 'Yes'. Clint can do that, Redford and Arnold" (60) Campbell felt Goldberg had come closer than any other black star in history to having the kind of clout as the white boys. She refers to Goldberg as "the whipping girl of black leaders and fans alike" (57). Campbell also asks Goldberg about the criticism that she mostly is in relationships with white men. She responded that she was not only married to a black man, but prior to her live-in

relationship with actor Frank Langella, she had gone out with five other men, two of whom were black. Goldberg continues, “That didn’t make the papers because that’s not news. I’ve always gone out with the people who ask me out” (60). I think it would be very newsworthy to fans and reporters if she had been seen with a brother, famous or not. Seeing Goldberg linked with white men is now nothing new.

Goldberg is also regarded as being very opinionated. She has been honest about her life - from her daughter’s teen pregnancy, to her views on a woman’s right to choose to her own abortion. Daughter Alexandra, who Goldberg calls Alex, chose to have her baby and married young like her mother. Alexandra’s teen pregnancy made Goldberg a grandmother in her early thirties. Some people don’t take kindly to celebrities who are viewed as controversial or too liberal. Goldberg is both. The public and the media can be much harder on women for doing or saying than on men. And women who the public and media consider feminine, attractive and vulnerable can get away with much more.

Goldberg’s actions have had repercussions. When she had an affair with her married white co-star Ted Danson in *Made in America*, for instance, the couple received hate mail. In response to the racism Goldberg wrote a skit for a “Friar’s Club Roast”. In the skit, she and Danson appeared in black face. Danson spoke of Goldberg’s large genitals and used the word nigger. To say that people were shocked and offended is an understatement. Apparently out of touch in this instance, Goldberg said that people understood that Jon Voight in *Rosewood* was playing a character that spewed the word nigger and so no one held Voight to it. She continues,

But people held me to mine. Man, did they string me up and hold me to it, and I still don’t get why. The material I wrote was funny, ‘cause I tend to write funny stuff... And the person who was reading my lines who happened to be white performed the material as I wrote it...it was no different than had I gotten up on that platform and said the words myself. (187)

It was unbelievable that Whoopi Goldberg would offer the explanation she did for doing the skit.

Stating that a white man using the word nigger “was no different than had I gotten up on that platform and said the words myself” (187). Really, *no different?* It is simply *not* the same. It also does not compare to a white actor portraying a character in a film using the derogatory word, as it is for a white man doing a skit in *blackface* in the 1990s.

Upon reading this, I too did not understand how in the world Goldberg did not get it. Groups have rules and codes of conduct that they get by the time they are adults. No explanations are needed. Those of us who are black can joke about touchy subjects with some members and not others. There are those blacks who use the word nigger or nigga jokingly, lovingly, insultingly or simply just as another word. Until quite recently, it was mostly black men referring to other black men. When I hear black women use it, they are usually referring to men as well. Yet, these same people who freely use the word would find it totally unacceptable for a non-black person to use the word, no matter who they are and no matter who their close friends are. It is particularly unacceptable for a white person to use the word and could lead to a physical altercation. Puerto Rican singer/actress/dancer Jennifer Lopez discovered those boundaries first hand in 2001 when she used the word nigga once in the remix of her song, *I'm Real*. As a Puerto Rican, Lopez could possibly be part Sista with African blood, but she received a lot of flack. The late Puerto Rican rapper Big Pun (Christopher Rios) used the word in more than one song, but it was minus the uproar. This illustrates my earlier point that female celebrities are judged harsher for doing less than their male counterparts.

Moore Campbell expressed the public's reaction to Goldberg's skit:

Whoopi may well be a woman ahead of her time, but she clearly misread the mood of Black people if she believed they were ready to have a White man in blackface instruct them on how to neutralize their feelings toward the *N* word. She realizes that now. ‘Black folks weren't ready for that,’ she says of the skit. (59)

Goldberg did eventually get it, as the statement above reveals. Coming to the actresses defense was

her friend (and co-producer of Danny Glover's production company) Carolyn McDonald.

McDonald told *Essence* that Goldberg is misunderstood and that she finds it unfortunate that a segment of the black community doesn't embrace her. She claims that her friend is "on a whole other wavelength. She and Angela Davis could be on the same podium. She's a free spirit." (59)

Interestingly, Goldberg often relies on a concept of idea of colorblindness. She claims that she was not aware of racism growing up in a multi-cultural neighborhood. She says she was not conditioned as a kid to think of herself as anything but a New Yorker. And yet, it seems to me that you do not have to be *conditioned* to think of yourself as black. It is simply a fact and a part of who you are, whether you choose to accept and embrace your blackness and the numerous cultures or not. Thinking of yourself as a black person doesn't rule out embracing the other ingredients that make up who you are.

Controversy has followed Goldberg into the 21st century. Goldberg produced the musical *White Noise* that deals with issues of racism. It was inspired by twin teenage girls who performed racist songs and developed a following. It opened in Chicago on 8 April 2011 and generated much controversy. Goldberg claimed that her goal was not to preach; rather she hoped that people would ask themselves questions such as: "Have I secretly held some of these thoughts? Have I ever sold out on my ideals? Have I ever thought about what even the tiny little sellouts can do?" (Sergio 2011, 2) With this play, Goldberg's judgment was surely questioned again.

Goldberg has probably been criticized most for her choice of roles. She has played more than her share of mammy/maid characters as demonstrated. Goldberg does not believe she has had any real power in the film industry, even since she has been in a pretty lofty position. And yet, I would argue that she did have the power to turn down some of the roles she took catering to whites. She chose not to. She continues to defend her choices. As the actress so bluntly states,

she can take any role she pleases. In response to such criticisms, she says, “Isn’t striving for variety in your roles part of the draw to acting?” Again, her perspective is that acting has been “...such a joyous thing. It’s shot through with possibility. Anything can happen.” (231) But all too many of her roles found Goldberg taking care of white folks. Personally I hope this talented actress never graces the big screen again in a role reminiscent of the mammy/maid. Unless, and this is a big unless, the story is realistically told from Goldberg’s or another black character’s perspective. If Goldberg were also the writer, producer and/or director, that would be even better.

At the same time, Goldberg holds the distinction of working in more films in the 1990s than any other actress. She has also worked extensively in television as an actress and behind the scenes as producer. Goldberg was responsible for bringing a revamped version of the 1970s game show, *Hollywood Squares* (1998 - 2004) back to television. As the Executive Producer and the center square, Goldberg was reportedly paid \$10 million annually. She also held a gig as a disc jockey and had her own talk show. She also narrated *Beyond Tara: The Extraordinary Life of Hattie McDaniel*, one of the actresses to whom Goldberg and her mammy/maid characters have been compared.

In 2007, at age 52, Goldberg announced her retirement from acting. By this time she had become a permanent member of Barbara Walters’ talk show, *The View*. On retiring Goldberg told Larry King, “You know, there’s no room for the very talented Goldberg. There’s no room right now in the marketplace of cinema.” However, Goldberg has acted more than once since 2007 including voice-over work for *Toy Story 3* and the video game both in 2010. She was a part of the ensemble cast in the screen adaptation of *For Colored Girls* (2010). Goldberg was cast as God in *A Little Bit of Heaven* (2011). She continues to appear on television shows into 2012, including *The Middle* and *Glee*. These projects are just a sampling of the work Goldberg has done as an actress

since *retiring*.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In 1997, *Essence Magazine* published their special “Hollywood Shuffle” issue that highlighted the dearth of opportunities for black women in the film industry. They interviewed a high-powered white male Hollywood executive who revealed, “We know that we aren’t as connected to other cultures as maybe we ought to be. But it’s really not intentional. When the room is filled with just one color and one gender, that color and gender usually wins out” (144) The black public and the black media are not the only ones who have noticed the continued discrepancies in the film industry. In 1996 *People* magazine featured as its cover story, “Hollywood Blackout”, and five years later *People* published “Hollywood Blackout the Sequel” with the caption: “Five Years after a People Report, Signs of Change Are Visible Onscreen, at the Box Office and on TV, but for Blacks, Progress in Hollywood Comes One Slow Step at a Time.” These issues continue to be relevant today.

While the roles and opportunities in white-dominant Hollywood remain quite limited, it would be remiss not to give attention to the black writers, directors, and actors who are working to create new stories and narratives about black people that will undermine and transform these negative images. For instance, writer/director Julie Dash’s acclaimed film *Daughters of the Dust* was released in 1991. The film is about the Guchee people, also known as the Gullah of the Sea Islands in South Carolina. During the time of slavery, Africans were dropped off in this region prior to being sold. In the film, an extended family has gathered, most of whom are soon departing for the city in the early 20th century. In making the film, Dash was clear that she had no plans to feature mammy or Jezebel characters. Nor was she interested in making a cross-over film. She was single-minded in her goal to make a film focused on black women as she herself

has been strongly influenced by the writings of black female writers. The film also received mixed responses. It was reported that male audience members sometimes angrily challenged scenes featuring the family dressed nicely and eating well. Dash addressed this in the book *Calling the Shots, Profiles of Women Filmmakers*: “It’s like we’re supposed to be hovering over, or crouched over one single bowl of mush all the time. Well that was not the case. It’s from a whole different perspective” (61, 62). Dash did very extensive research for the project to assure its accuracy.

In an interview for the book *Film Fatales: Independent Women Directors*, Dash explained that the perspective of her film wasn’t the norm for black characters where we see their imagination and their fantasy of what life would be. Instead, she says we see “a history on screen that’s a history of someone’s whim or fantasy” (Redding and Brownworth 1997, 193). These whims can be traced back to directors such as King Vidor’s black cast film *Hallelujah* released in 1929. Vidor’s approach in this film was as the white visitor instead of the black inhabitant.

Since the mid-2000s, there has been an increase of films starring black women. One writer/director who contributes to this surge in black women’s appearance on film is Tyler Perry who is loved by many and criticized by others. Even some of his critics applaud Perry for the work he provides, especially to black actresses and those working behind the scenes. Perry has a film studio complex in Atlanta, Georgia. He was *Forbes* magazine’s highest earning actor in 2011, though most of his income wasn’t from his acting.

Many black actresses want to be involved in projects that they would be proud to be a part of and have sought out or created opportunities. For instance, Halle Berry took control by producing her own projects. She took her film, *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge*, to the small screen after film companies passed by. After the enormous success of *Dandridge* on HBO, the film

companies probably regretted their decisions. Ironically, Dandridge was one of the early black actresses who ventured out and secured the rights to books. Unfortunately Dandridge's projects have never been made! The Tony nominated actress from the original Broadway production of *Dreamgirls*, Sheryl Lee Ralph attended the Cannes Film Festival in 1999 to talk up her own film festival. She received 125 film entries and the Jamerican Film Festival was launched. The name is a combination of Ralph's Jamaican and American heritage. Music was added the second year. The festival continued successfully for many years. These are two of many positive outcomes. Yet, as the *People* magazine articles conveyed, there's still work to be done.

Sometimes the obstacles black actresses face involve trying to get black men in their corner, or at least out of their way. Vanessa Bell Calloway is pretty as a doll, and yet this medium-dark actress was not chosen to play opposite the black male lead in a film, even though she was the choice of the studio, director and producer. The dark and trim actress Tyra Ferrell was asked by a black man why she was chosen for the role of Wesley Snipes wife in *White Men Can't Jump* (1992), "Why you of all people?" (129). Over a decade prior to this incident, Ferrell was featured in a docudrama on starlets trying to make their mark in Hollywood. She tells the story of being pulled aside by a white agent with this advice: "You're obviously the most talented girl up there. But you're not going to work in this town. You're a nigger black, and in this town we like the Vanessa Williams type" (71).

In spite of the agent's warning Ferrell did work in *that* town. She has appeared in successful and critically acclaimed films, including *White Men Can't Jump* and *Boyz N' The Hood*. This does not mean that the statement does not have some validity, as far as the color division, obstacles similar to those the early actresses faced. The actresses portraying the mammy/maids were not generally light. But a light and/or slim actress could, and certainly was, cast in servant

roles. Generally speaking though, the large, brown actresses were routinely cast as the sexless mammy/maids, while actresses/singers like Ferrell, Washington, Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge were considered attractive, sexy and appealing to white men. At the same time, the large mammy/maid types worked in more films – in Hattie McDaniels’ case, to the tune of \$7,000 a week.

Fast forward to nearly a century after McDaniel’s first film and the color issue is still on the lips of black talent. Actress Vivica A. Fox told *Savoy* magazine, “The battle is persistent, but that’s part of it. It’s a battle you don’t mind fighting. And I’m fighting for the sistahs!” (54) Fox runs Foxy Brown Productions. She also feels that Hollywood has broadened their view of beauty. This can apply to the dark brown actress such as Denzel Washington’s daughter, who says, “I tell my daughter—she’s at NYU—I say: ‘You’re black, you’re a woman, and you’re dark-skinned at that...look at Viola Davis. I said, that’s who you want to be. Forget about the pretty girls; if you’re relying on that, when you hit 40, you’re out the door. You better have some chops.’”

In the first chapter of this thesis, I listed the five black stereotypes in film singled out by Donald Bogle. He argued that all other stereotypes that followed were based on them. As he says, these types

came and went in various guises.... they were (and remain) deceptive, and they have traditionally been used by the film industry to camouflage the familiar types.... What they failed to note was the variety of servants. There were tom servants (faithful and submissive), coon servants (lazy and unreliable), and mammy servants, just to name a few.... What has to be remembered is that the servant’s uniform was the guise certain types wore during a given period that way Hollywood could give its audiences the same product (the types themselves) but with new packaging (the guise).

My analysis finds Bogle’s observations accurate. In this thesis I have shown that the mammy/maid has been revamped into a nurturing and/or care-giving figure to whites onscreen, often women.

These nurturers can be strangers who become good friends, co-workers or black women employed by the white woman, either as a domestic or in some other role where she ends up caring for her employer. And often this role provides the comic relief for the other characters and the plotline. They may be the kind and docile care-giver or the no nonsense type, both archetypes of the mammy/maids remain strong in contemporary film.

When *Chicago Sun Times* columnist Mary Mitchell went to a ballgame in the early 2000s and one of the fans referred to her as “Aunt Jemima.” She reports that she was calm enough to keep her son from coming to his mother’s defense and retaliating. Mitchell ended her column with, “White people can have Wrigleyville. It is not where I want to be” (16A). After Mitchell reported on this incident in her column, local government officials and others publicly spoke out in her support. Those people included the then long time Major Daley and Governor.

In reflecting on the issue, Mitchell brought up Aunt Jemima products. She admitted that she herself purchased the products without thinking about the image it presented, including Uncle Ben’s rice. She was now forced to rethink the issues – as she writes, “But when drunken white Cub fans chanted ‘Aunt Jemima,’ I went ballistic. That moment opened my eyes.” (14) She quotes Brenda Verner, CEO of Verner Communications and a media analyst, who suggests that “Aunt Jemima is the most powerful image that the dominant culture has of denial of equality of black women to the image of white women.” Mitchell continues with the insight that while “Betty Crocker is a standard accepted middle-class model of a white woman. Aunt Jemima was depicted as rotund, asexual illusion created by her oppressor for his own comfort... (14) She concludes that “You can’t legitimize, sanitize or modernize a negative stereotype from the slavery and Jim Crow era” (14) And so it is with this most enduring archetypal image of the black mammy/maid and its ongoing legacy and impact.

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APPENDIX

Of the 15 nominations for *Best Actress in a Supporting Role*, 6 were for mammy/maid roles.

They are:

Won	Hattie McDaniel	--	Gone With the Wind	(1939)
	Ethel Waters	--	Pinky	(1946)
	Juanita Moore	--	Imitation of Life	(1959)
	Alfre Woodard	--	Cross Creek	(1983)
Won	Whoopi Goldberg	--	Ghost	(1990)
Won	Octavia Spencer	--	The Help	(2011)

Taraji P. Henson was nominated for *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), where she played the adopted mother of white actor, Brad Pitt.

Of the 8 nominations for *Best Actress in a Lead Role*, 2 were for mammy/maid roles.

They are:

	Diahann Carroll	--	Claudine	(1974)
	Viola Davis	--	The Help	(2011)