

Credit to my Race: On Boundaries of Black Film

Since its premiere in 1939, David O. Selznick's Hollywood adaptation of *Gone with the Wind* has been a cinematic phenomenon. This tale, set during the Civil War and Reconstruction Era, reflects on the old American south. It follows the tumultuous life of young Scarlett O'Hara, a Southern socialite, during one of the most volatile periods in the country. The film features a star-studded cast, including British actress Vivien Leigh and fan-favorite Clark Gable (Ruppersburg 2004). Among this cast, actress Hattie McDaniel makes her mark, sparking discourse about Black performers in Hollywood. McDaniel presents a performance worthy of an Academy Award as "Mammy," a bold house slave, and raises questions for Black performers and viewers in the 19th century. The 1989 Hattie McDaniel Doll, displayed in the Southern History Museum, encourages museum patrons to consider the stereotypes of the Black performer throughout history.

The 1989 version, produced by David Selznick and Turner Entertainment, is a replica of MGM's 1967 Mammy doll, both featuring Hattie McDaniel in full costume, including a headscarf and face-splitting grin. Though *Gone with the Wind* emphasizes the traits of this role, the reputation of the mammy character began long before this film's premiere. The mammy archetype dates back to the antebellum period, created to circulate the belief that "enslaved African American women were happy to care for white families in favor of their own" (Mohn 2020). Media featuring mammy characters usually portrayed them as a large Black woman with dark skin and a beaming smile (Mohn 2020). This depiction maintained popularity throughout the Jim Crow era, promoting social and economic growth for mainstream society (Pilgrim 2000). With this picture in mind, consumers grew into the belief that domestic work was the realm of

Since there has been substantial social progress for Black entertainers since the 1930s, one must consider modern representations of blackness in film and television. Today's big-screen presentations display Black characters in an array of roles, yet are still a warzone for equal representation (Smith 2013). These performers are left to be the sassy friend, the nurturing mother, the misguided youth, or any other caricature of blackness deemed appropriate by the film industry. Black characters remain confined to secondary, insignificant roles, even when they play the lead performer (see Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* or *Charlotte* from Nickelodeon's *Henry Danger*). In these roles, Black performers are charged to reject authenticity and embrace the scraps of Hollywood films. They often must minimize themselves to achieve the film's goals, regardless of how it cheapens to Black experience. Author Joshua Gamson suggests a "tightrope of visibility" for Black performers, a precarious position that leads to ruin

The Hattie McDaniel doll signifies a moment of excellence and grace in the history of Black film representation. Her production helps viewers think of typical roles for Black performers and inverts beliefs about them. This museum piece exemplifies the progress set into motion by McDaniel. It reminds viewers to appreciate her contributions to the film industry. In her Academy Award acceptance speech, Hattie McDaniel stated, "I sincerely hope I shall always be a credit to my race and to the motion picture industry" (Youtube 2012). With this unassuming, heartfelt speech, McDaniel establishes a space for Black performers to embrace the limits Hollywood attempts to force upon them. For her commitment to her craft, Hattie McDaniel will always hold a special place in the heart of Hollywood's film scene.

Works Cited

Vilson, Elvera L. *The Odyssey of African American Women in Films*. 2017. City University of New York.

https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2934&context=gc_etds