The Odyssey of African American Women in Films: From the Silent Era to the Post-War Years to the 1950s

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THE ODYSSEY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN FILMS:
FROM THE SILENT ERA TO THE POST-WAR YEARS TO THE 1950S

by

ELVERA LORETTA VILSÓN

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

THE ODYSSEY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN FILMS:
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by

Elvera Loretta Vilsón

Advisor: Professor Robert Singer

African American women were historically and traditionally depicted in Hollywood film productions as maids and servants, like actresses, Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers or sultry sirens like, Lena Horne, Theresa Harris, Fredi Washington and Dorothy Dandridge. The filmic images of African American women that developed in minstrel shows and vaudeville stereotyped African American actresses. My thesis begins with minstrelsy and vaudeville because of its influence on creating negative stereotypical roles in films. The thesis then focuses on the film period of silent era through the post-war period, up to the 1950s in classic Hollywood, and discusses independent Black films and Hollywood’s so-called “race” films.

There were African American women who became pioneers in cinema as producers, directors, screenwriters and editors to make independent films for a Black audience. These women rebuked Hollywood's portrayals of African American women and men by making films with positive images that showed beauty, wit, intelligence and talent to largely Black audiences for them to admire and emulate. There were filmmakers like Zora Neale Hurston, Tessie Souders, Eloise Gist, Madame Touissant and Maria P. Williams who made independent Black films that had complex narratives. Actresses, like Evelyn Preer, Eslanda Cardozo Goode and Alice Burton Russell and African American Hollywood actresses, like Nina Mae McKinney and Fredi Washington acted in independent Black films or “race” films that offered a variety of roles. Two African American male filmmakers, Oscar Micheaux and Spencer Williams, are cited for their contributions to independent Black films and offering more acting roles and other creative opportunities in film for African American women.

There are comments from African American actresses from the silent era and 1950s who were critical of racist Hollywood and playing stereotypes that were disparaging to them and other African Americans. The history of these stereotypes culminated from the social and political history of racism in America and influenced the images of African Americans from the silent era through the 1950s in film and affected the attitudes of the American public even today. Visual images are provided in the thesis.
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HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

THE GREAT MIGRATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS FROM THE SOUTH

America’s racial history reflects that the silent era through the 1950s in film were turbulent years for African Americans throughout the United States. There were many African American women who left the South for “freedom and independence, better wages and educational opportunities for their children” and to escape the “intimidation and outright violence.”¹ They were part of the first Great Migration, from 1890 to 1930, when one million African Americans moved from the South to the urban North, making it “the largest movement of Black bodies since slavery removed Africans (from their homeland) to the New World”.² African American women were also part of the second Great Migration, from 1940 to 1960, when three million African Americans migrated from the South. They settled in places like Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Oakland, Los Angeles, Portland, Seattle and New York City. Some African Americans pursued careers in entertainment as singers, dancers, comedians, musicians, actors and actresses. In the face of persistent de jure segregation in American life, African American performers offered a respite from the realities of American life for themselves and their African American audiences. Lena Horne’s comment about her life in *Lena Horne, In Her Own Voice* spoke for African Americans who chose to be entertainers, “My life has been about surviving. Along the way, I also became an artist. It’s been an interesting journey, one in which music became first my refuge and then my salvation.”³
THE MINSTREL SHOW SYNDROME

Racist representations and negative characterizations of African American women and men in film were conceived during two hundred and forty-six years of chattel slavery on the plantations of the American South. Therefore, the minstrel show is a good place to begin to discuss the negative stereotypes that were a staple for minstrel shows and, inevitably, were the way African American women would be portrayed in the Hollywood film industry. Minstrel shows, created by White males in 1820 and continued through the end of slavery in 1865, colluded with the racist system in America that derided and denigrated African American women and men. The argument for the enslavement of African Americans was justified by regarding them as property. Minstrel show performances encouraged this racist mentality by objectifying African Americans for the amusement of Whites. White males manufactured an African American persona by wearing burnt cork or blackface, manifesting extremely exaggerated facial and physical features, dressing in outlandish costumes and performing buffoonish imitations of African Americans singing, dancing and speaking in a plantation-style cadence. Although White minstrel shows were enormously popular, they could not capture the gag routines found in African American comedy. Instead, White humor mocked, scorned and falsely misrepresented African Americans while being indifferent to the vicious and deplorable acts of violence that were being perpetrated against African Americans on the plantations.

Nevertheless, by the late 1840s, African American men, to the specificities of White audiences, also had their own minstrel shows, wore blackface and embodied
similar racist images to entertain White and African American audiences. However, in African American minstrel shows, audiences observed African Americans entertaining themselves. They also could only parody themselves, unlike Whites who were free to parody them with impunity. Minstrel shows mostly catered to the working class in the White and African American communities. The performances Whites observed pacified them into believing that African Americans were ignorant, contented with their lot in life and happy-go-lucky children. Minstrel shows were profitable for White theater owners and White and African American performers. For African American men, unlike the system of slavery, it was the first time they were being financially compensated for their labor. It is understandable that African Americans would be drawn to working in entertainment.

Although, racial characters were heralded as extremely popular in minstrel shows for White America, African American middle-class audiences, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the African American press were not impressed and criticized minstrel shows for their racist caricatures as an affront to African Americans that was extremely detrimental to the progress of the race. And to add insult to injury, minstrel shows even in the North were not integrated, but segregated with African Americans relegated to either the balcony (standing or sitting) or simply denied entry. However, seating was not an issue when minstrel shows were performed to all-black audiences in African American communities.
CHARACTERIZATIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

Ultimately, the objectionable characterizations of African Americans in minstrel shows had a profound effect on the types of acting roles that would, ultimately, be offered to them in Hollywood movies. African American women, for example, were portrayed as the angry, domineering, bossy and no-nonsense dark-skinned “mammy,” the tragic “mulatta,” the simple-minded “pickaninny,” and the oversexed “Jezebel” or “wench” in minstrel shows. The malicious labels, paired with the grotesque outfits, had a visceral effect on the audience and created memorable characters. For example, the “mammy” (servant/maid) was depicted as dark-skinned, heavy, wearing a head scarf and an unflattering house dress cinched at the waist to emphasize the overweight size, the “pickaninny” had bulging eyes, unkempt hair and an unusually wide, red-painted mouth and the tragic or sultry mulatta was oversexed, wild and wanton. Lamentably, once African American actresses came to Hollywood, they were expected to emulate the look and behavior of these racist characters. Ultimately, some African American actresses would be identified with these characters particularly, the domestic.

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN FROM MINSTRELSY TO VAUDEVILLE

Women were incorporated into minstrel shows in late 1870s, just before women appeared in vaudeville in the 1880s. Since African Americans could only impersonate their race, women usually portrayed the African American man as a “dandy.” But unlike the clownish-looking “dandy” depicted by White male performers, African American women presented the character as a “Jazz Age sophisticate” wearing a black top hat and
tails and twirling a cane. Some of the well-known female minstrel performers of the day were Florence Hines, Ida Forsyne-Howard, Alberta, Alice, Mabel and Essie Whitman (the Whitman Sisters) Anna and Emma Hyer (the Hyer Sisters) and Aida Overton Walker.

As minstrel shows were waning, vaudeville began and African American women could play themselves in vaudeville (and in the theatre) instead of being parodied by men. These entertainment venues gave women opportunities to showcase their unique and diverse talents (singing, dancing, conducting all-girl bands, playing musical instruments and acting). There seemed to be more opportunities for them to play diverse characters than what was offered to them in the film industry. Some of the famous African American women in minstrelsy and vaudeville were: soprano Sissieretta Jones considered the “The Greatest Singer of Her Race,” comedian Sweetie May, singer, dancer and actresses Evelyn Preer, who would work with Oscar Micheaux, Ethel Waters, Josephine Baker and Hattie McDaniel, who was also a comedian and a songwriter.

Vaudeville was considered a melting pot that gave men and women of all races a chance to participate, although, there was still a racial divide between Whites and African Americans in entertainment and segregated seating for the audience. However, vaudeville offered more opportunities for African American female performers than even minstrelsy because they were included from its inception and could play themselves. There are theories about why vaudeville came to an end in the 1930s: the acts became stale when audiences began to recognize the routines, the decline in audience attendance,
the synchronization of sound in films and the popularity of broadcast radio that came directly into people’s homes.

The demise of vaudeville ended the careers of many performers, White and African Americans. However, for some entertainers, this would not sound the death knell. There were African American actresses who continued to work in theater and radio, and pursue opportunities in movies. Meanwhile, White Americans were fondly remembering minstrel shows and vaudeville because they adored those “lovable” characterizations of African Americans. Writer Mark Twain was one of those Americans who glorified minstrelsy and expressed his nostalgia about its demise by saying, “If I could have the nigger show back again in its pristine purity, I should have little use for opera. It seems to me that to the elevated mind and the sensitive spirit the hand-organ and the nigger show are a standard and a summit to whose rarified altitude the other forms of musical art may not hope to reach.”

For many Whites, blackface was the first, formative public or institutional acknowledgement by Whites of Black culture. However, its racial characterizations left an indelible mark on the minds of Hollywood producers and subsequently influenced their casting of African American men and women in film roles.

**HISTORIZATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ACTRESSES AND FILMMAKERS**

America’s psychosis about race affected the lives of African American men and women. African Americans either acquiesced, if they wanted to work in Hollywood, or rejected Hollywood’s repugnant stereotypes of them that were reminiscent of slavery, the
minstrel show and vaudeville. Even though all African Americans were racially discriminated in entertainment, African American men are the most historicized in countless books, essays, lectures, websites, films and videos on their work in minstrelsy, vaudeville and film, such as entertainers and actors, Bert Williams and Paul Robeson, or filmmakers like Oscar Micheaux and Spencer Williams. The contributions to the history of American cinema by African American women are equally relevant, but not given as much attention, especially concerning lesser known actresses like Alice B. Russell and Evelyn Preer who appeared in Oscar Micheaux films and independent African American women filmmakers, like Eloise Gist and Maria P. Williams.

THE EMERGENCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN EARLY CINEMA

Author Donald Bogle offered one explanation for the exclusion of women in minstrel shows for nearly fifty years that could also apply to the treatment of women in film. He states in his book Brown Sugar: Over 100 Years of America’s Black Female Superstars that, “Audiences were suspicious of any woman who called herself an entertainer since this still was, after all, a man’s world.” In early cinema, White actresses and White women filmmakers struggled for better roles and to get work behind the cameras, respectively. The history of film is incomplete without the inclusion of women. Ally Acker in the opening of her book Reel Women: Pioneers of the Cinema 1896 to the Present, quotes Greek poet, Pindar, “ Unsung, the noblest deeds will die.” French New Wave director, Agnes Varda said, “We have a lot of women in the film industry – it is in terms of consciousness that we have not got it right.” The quotes
from Pindar and Varda also are applicable to African American women. Their contributions enriched the history of minstrel shows, vaudeville and films and they have stories to tell.

Minstrelsy was enormously successful and lasted for eighty years from the height of its popularity in 1840. The success of minstrel shows and vaudeville influenced Hollywood film producers to continue bringing audiences the same traditional stereotypes of African American women because their bottom line was more important than upsetting the status quo. Also, in some large measure, they believed that the racist images of African American women in films pacified White America’s expectations about African Americans and safeguarded the racial paradigm that even they embraced in building the film industry. The pervasive nature of film has the potential of perpetuating racial perceptions of African American women (and men) exponentially in America and abroad. These racist depictions rendered Africa American women “persona non-grata” and reduced them to nothing more than caricatures for the amusement of White moviegoers.

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN: OPENING DOORS AND BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

African American women came to the North, East and West with ambitions that far exceeded the opportunities afforded to them in the South. African American women were opening doors and breaking down barriers in entertainment from the 1800s although, minstrel shows, the most popular form of entertainment, did not allow women to perform until the 1870s. In New York, for instance, there were two ship stewards,
William Henry Brown, a Caribbean, and James Hewlett, who founded the African Grove Theater in New York’s Greenwich Village, in 1812, to attract an African American audience. The company performed mostly Shakespearian plays, like *King Lear*, as well as a variety of instrumental and vocal entertainment. African American women acted in the dramas as well as in musical and dance numbers.\(^{15}\)

When vaudeville arrived in the 1880s, African American women refined their talents in acting, singing and dancing that would prepare them later to pursue the film industry in the latter part of the nineteenth century. One of the most popular African American women of the vaudeville circuit, Aida Overton Walker “The Queen of the Catwalk,” was financially successful and respected in vaudeville. Aida had an outstanding career before she passed at the young age of thirty-four. She performed with her husband, George and his partner, the legendary Bert Williams. They were one of the few African American acts to appear on the White vaudeville stages, and they refused to do demeaning minstrel acts.\(^{16}\) They played a command performance at Buckingham Palace, in 1903, for King Edward VII that made Aida an international star. Upon her husband’s death in 1908, Aida would continue as a solo act, performing her husband’s parts in drag and doing choreography.

**BERTHA REGUSTUS**

In early films, “Black women have been presented as sexually deviant, the dominating matriarchal figure, as strident, eternally ill-tempered wenches, and as wretched victims (for example, as domestic servants).”\(^{17}\) The one exception is an 1895 image, from one of Thomas Edison studios’ earliest attempts to tell a story, *A*
Morning Bath (1896) in which an unknown African American woman is bathing a baby, in a metal tub, with lots of soapy water. Although criticism could be made about the amount of soap the woman is putting on the baby’s face and body in a haphazard and dangerous way, the film is noteworthy for proving that African American women were present from the beginning in the history of cinema.

Another film, Laughing Gas, was directed by Edwin S. Porter in 1907 and starred a young African American woman named Bertha Regustus. Bertha plays a woman who goes to the dentist with an infected tooth and after getting laughing gas to remove the tooth, she convulses into uncontrollable laughter. Her laughter is so infectious that wherever she goes, she is laughing and leaves everyone she meets laughing hysterically. This nine-minute movie was shot in the studio, on different sets, and shot on the street. The parting head shots of Bertha are in close-ups that can be compared to the extreme close-ups of the train in Edwin S. Porter’s 1903 film, The Great Train Robbery that came towards the audience like a spectacle to create shock and awe.

Fundamentally, African American women, like women from other races, were considered servile, property and subject to the whim of men in American society. In films, even White actresses, like Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, fought for better female roles in Hollywood, but the film roles for African American women had strict limitations. There were clearly defined parameters when it came to the characters they could play in films that were written and produced by Whites.

Before Laughing Gas, Bertha Regustus appeared in Edwin S. Porter’s comedic 1903 film, What Happened in the Tunnel but this time, she played a maid. In the
narrative of this short film, a White woman, who is getting unwanted attention from a White man, plays a practical joke on him with the aid of her trusted African American maid, played by Bertha, as Mandy.\textsuperscript{18} When the lights go out on the train, the woman and her maid switch seats so that the man ends up kissing the maid, instead of his intended conquest. The Mandy character, in Porter’s film, was presented as the stereotypical, unglamorous domestic who is acting as an accomplice for her White employer’s best interest. The man was not amused that the tables are turned and the joke was played on him as he exited the train car in a huff.\textsuperscript{19}

Bertha preceded other African American film actresses who had film careers playing maids, such as Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen in \textit{Gone with the Wind} (1939), Louise Beavers in the original \textit{Imitation of Life} (1934) Juanita Moore in the re-make of \textit{Imitation of Life} (1959) Libby Taylor in \textit{The Great McGinty} (1940)\textsuperscript{20} Ruby Dandridge (mother of Dorothy Dandridge) in \textit{Three Little Girls in Blue} (1946) Gertrude Howard in \textit{I’m No Angel} (1933) Jessica Coles Grayson in \textit{The Little Foxes} (1941) and Daisy Bufford in \textit{Showboat} (1936). The list of African American actresses playing domestics is exhaustive.

\textbf{HOLLYWOOD’S DOMESTICS AND MULATTAS}

\textit{MADAM SUL-TE-WAN}

Madam Sul-Te-Wan, whose real name was Nellie Crawford (1873-1959) became a single parent when her husband left her and their three children. Sul-Te-Wan wanted to be an actress, so she went to see D.W. Griffith on location while he was shooting the 1915 film
The Clansman (renamed Birth of a Nation). She walked up to D.W. Griffith on the set and said she always admired him. He gave her an uncredited role in Birth of a Nation, playing the “colored” woman who had riches and had property, and he put her on the payroll. African American men also had minor roles in the film; however, Whites wore blackface and played the lead African American roles. When Griffith’s movie was released, the African American community, NAACP, community organizations and White liberals were in an uproar; they protested and boycotted the film. Griffith and the White cast members of the film blamed Sul-Te-Wan for the criticism. Sul-Te-Wan expressed surprise at the negative criticism and that it cost her job. When Griffith took her off the payroll, Sul-Te-Wan retained a lawyer to sue him and she was put back on the payroll. Griffith put her in Intolerance (1916) as the woman at the marriage market. Griffith made Intolerance partly as a response to his controversial film Birth of a Nation.

The unlikely friendship between Sul-Te-Wan and D.W. Griffith, whose film Birth of a Nation, epitomized racist, incendiary propaganda against African Americans is a bewilderment. Sul-Te-Wan remained a loyal friend to Griffith, even standing outside the hospital where he laid dying.

Sul-Te-Wan worked from the silent film era through the 1950s, usually playing maids or servants in mostly uncredited roles in films like Birth of a Nation (1915) Intolerance (1926) Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1927) King Kong (1933) Sullivan’s Travels (1941) and Carmen Jones (1954).
HATTIE MCDANIEL – THE GRAND DAME OF DOMESTICITY

Generally, maids would merely be lackluster, stereotypical parts, except for the way the grand dame of domesticity, Hattie McDaniel, played them. She managed to elevate the role of the domestic in an unconventional way that made her look like the “star” of the film. Besides Gone with the Wind, McDaniel appeared with James Cagney in the movie, Johnny Come Lately (1943), where she is a housekeeper, cook and a confidante. There is a scene in the film where she playfully chased Cagney around the table with a knife, while he ate a pork chop from her plate that she was prepared to eat. Scenes like this Southerners criticized Hattie for filming because she was stealing the show from White actors and actresses, like Katherine Hepburn in Alice Adams (1935).22 Hollywood, however, thought differently about Hattie’s screen presence and wrote dialogue that encouraged her to be sassy, confident, and deliver wisecracks that audiences would come to only accept from her. There are no male characters who could tell off Whites, like Hattie’s characters, without fear of reprisal.

Although, the NAACP, the press and African American audiences did not think favorably of consistently seeing African American actresses in typical domestic roles, Hattie had a pragmatic viewpoint about playing these roles. She was once quoted as saying, “I’d rather make seven hundred dollars a week playing a maid on film than be a maid and make seven dollars a week being one.”23 Hattie certainly would know this since she worked as a housekeeper and maid, on and off throughout her career, when parts were scarce. This is what she was doing when she got the call to replace Ethel Waters in the television show, Beulah in the early 1950s.
Besides the legendary actress, Hattie McDaniel, the maids and mammy roles, previously went to Bertha Regustus in 1903 (What Happened in the Tunnel) and to Louise Beavers in 1934 (Imitation of Life) but Hattie represented the quintessence of how to play these characters. Her domestic was heavy set, sexless, wore unflattering attire and spoke with an affected “Negro” dialect. Hattie brought the strong, gutsy voice that filled a room and made her a stand out in her scenes. As the maid, Hattie McDaniel’s duties were to look after the needs of her employer more than herself. Sometimes, she sympathized, defended, consoled, reprimanded and counseled the White cast when they had a crisis (like the husband left his wife for another woman, or the woman or man was jilted by the lover). Hattie’s powerful voice seemed to give her the power and strength to stand up to anyone and any adversity (as in Gone with the Wind). In contrast, her contemporaries, like Louise Beavers, had a softer sounding voice that could be surprisingly firm, and Butterfly McQueen, who never seemed to change her high-pitched and childlike voice. Hattie had a long film career (three hundred films) working steadily throughout the 1930s and 1940s, and mostly playing the domestic.

Before coming a film actress, Hattie McDaniel had a long career in show business that dated back to working in minstrel shows with her brother, Sam (who she, eventually, followed into film). When she was no longer performing with her brother, she continued working on the vaudeville stage making her mark as a singer, dancer, comedian and a songwriter. Once Hattie started working in films, she received screen credit for only eighty of the three hundred films she made during her thirty years in film. Studio executives reasoned that McDaniel should be uncredited because, presumably, she
needed to gain popularity. Paradoxically, Joan Crawford, considered one of the greatest White screen legends of the twentieth century, got screen credit in her film debut, *Lady of the Night* (1925) playing, of all things, a body-double for the popular actress, Norma Shearer. When Crawford appeared in the film, she was using her real name, Lucille LeSueur. As Lucille LeSueur, she was given film credit for two more films that same year, *The Circle* and *Pretty Ladies*. She also made two more films that same year, but without receiving credit. Screen credit was important because it meant name recognition and it acknowledged that the actress was a noteworthy member of the cast. As proof of this, Lucille was noticed by the head of MGM, President Louis B. Mayer. He not only took notice, but ordered his staff to find her a new name. After having a contest for the public to select a new name, Lucille LeSueur became forever known as Joan Crawford, and the rest is cinema history.

Hattie McDaniel, on the other hand, received several uncredited screen roles in the 1930s, beginning in 1931, when she played an extra in a chorus while supporting herself as a maid and a washer woman off-screen. Her first credited film role came the following year, in 1932, as a housekeeper in *The Golden West*. Six years later, Hattie would become the first African American to win an Oscar for the Best Supporting Actress of 1939 playing a maid in the movie, *Gone with the Wind*.25

**AFRICAN AMERICAN CAST EXCLUDED FROM PREMIERE**

Behind the premiere of *Gone with the Wind*, there was a real-life drama taking place. Hattie McDaniel and the other Black actors (like Butterfly McQueen) were shunned from attending the movie’s first premiere on December 15, 1939 in Atlanta,
Georgia because of Jim Crow laws in the South. Georgia’s social and political culture was consistent with the system of segregation that was pervasive throughout America, especially in the South. From the beginning, everything surrounding Gone with the Wind was evidence of racism. The first premiere of the 1939 film was in Atlanta, Georgia at the Loew’s Grand Theatre (noted for primarily showing MGM films) where Hattie McDaniel and the rest of the African American cast were not welcome. Although, Producer David O. Selznick invited Hattie to the premiere, he was reminded that it was against Georgia’s Jim Crow laws for her to be in the theater. Therefore, Hattie and the other African American cast members were not in Atlanta for any of the events for the movie.

When Hattie McDaniel and her guest arrived at the 12th Annual Academy Awards held at the Ambassador Hotel’s Coconut Grove restaurant in California, they were allowed inside, but were not permitted to sit with the White cast members from Gone with the Wind; instead, they were seated at a small table. It seemed incongruous that Hattie, who was nominated by her peers and ultimately won an Oscar for Gone with the Wind, making her the first African American to win an Academy Award, was segregated from the rest of the fellow White actors. Hattie’s acceptance speech, although gracious and heartfelt, was somewhat in keeping with the servile roles she played in films. Hattie’s ‘humble’ and ‘grateful’ speech were hollow words because, although, the actors of the Academy voted for her, Hollywood would never consider Hattie, or for that matter, any other African American actress, for anything more than roles as a domestic for many years.
It would be ten years, after Hattie’s Oscar, before another African American actress would win the trophy. After 1939, there were six other nominations for African American women in the supporting role: Ethel Waters for *Pinky* (1949); Juanita Moore for *Imitation of Life* (1959); Beah Richards for *Guess Who’s Coming for Dinner* (1967); Alfre Woodard for *Cross Creek* (1983); and Margaret Avery and Oprah Winfrey for *The Color Purple* (1985). However, there would not be another Oscar win for an African American actress in a supporting role until Whoopie Goldberg for *Ghost* (1990). Hattie lived long enough to see Ethel Waters be nominated for Best Supporting Actress in 1949. Eventually, the first African American actress to be nominated for Best Actress would be Dorothy Dandridge for *Carmen* (1954).

As for the first African American actress to win an Oscar for Best Actress, it took sixty-three years from Hattie McDaniel’s Best Supporting Actress Oscar win in 1939 and forty-eight years from Dorothy Dandridge’s Best Actress nomination in 1954 before Haile Berry won the Best Actress Oscar for the controversial film, *Monster’s Ball* (2002). The few nominations and lack of wins were not because there were no talented African American actresses who gave Oscar-worthy performances to win Best Supporting Actress or Best Actress awards, it was arguably racial bias in the Hollywood industry. In 2016, actor, writer, director and producer Spike Lee said that the problem does not lie with the Academy Awards, but with studio executives. He wrote, “People, the truth is we ain’t in those rooms, and until minorities are, the Oscar nominees will remain lily White.”29 The press put a list of the boycotters on the internet but seemed not to know,
understand or admit that discrimination still exists in Hollywood, or the larger problem: there is still racism in America.

As African American actresses from the 1930s and 1940s were being strongly criticized by African American audiences for playing housekeepers and maids, *Beulah*, a comedy program on CBS radio ran simultaneously on ABC Television in 1950. In 1951, Hattie McDaniel replaced Ethel Waters as the domestic in the title role, amid rumors that Waters left because of mounting protests from African Americans about African American actresses playing servile film roles. Hattie, whose film career was stalled at the time, assumed the television role for nearly a year before her illness. She died in 1952, at the age of fifty-nine from breast cancer, and the following year, 1953, the network canceled the *Beulah* show.

Even in death, Hattie McDaniel could not escape racism; it quite literally followed her to the grave. In her last will and testament, she requested to be buried in Hollywood Forever Cemetery located on Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood, California, the resting place of Hollywood stars, like Rudolph Valentino, Janet Gaynor, Tyrone Power and Douglas Fairbanks. Because of racial segregation, McDaniel was denied burial and instead, was laid to rest in Angelus-Rosedale Cemetery in Los Angeles. Years later, Hollywood Forever Cemetery attempted to right the wrong, but Hattie’s family declined the offer to relocate her. The treatment of Hattie McDaniel in life and in death was clearly another example of the racial discrimination that African Americans faced daily living in America that also crossed over to every form of entertainment.
Unlike Hattie McDaniel, Louise Beavers was more vocal and critical about playing the usual subservient roles. She once told a reporter, in talking about the theater, “As long as the plays are being written and produced by Whites for Whites, there will be the same chance for criticism. The only remedy is for such plays as would meet popular favor to be produced by us.” Louise’s comment would certainly apply to Hollywood where movies were written, produced and directed by White males for White audiences, but did not broaden the caliber of parts for African American actresses.

Like Hattie McDaniel, the Hollywood career of Louise Beavers spanned four decades, beginning in 1923 when she debuted in *Gold Diggers*, co-starring with Joan Blondell, William Powell and Ruby Keeler. When casting began for *Gone with the Wind*, there were eight thousand votes from African Americans who wanted Louise in the role of Mammy, but the role, ultimately, went to Hattie.

Beavers stood five-foot-four-inches tall, yet the studio forced her to eat more to maintain a stout figure, like Hattie McDaniel. She climbed up to two hundred pounds to fit the Hollywood industry’s stereotype of the overweight Black maid. Louise played this character in most of her hundred and sixty feature and short films. There was a clause in Louise’s contract that explicitly forbade her to lose weight. As a plus-sized actress, Louise had a film career that spanned from the 1920s to the early 1960s. Louise was regularly seen in movies, in the 1930s and 1940s playing a domestic, and she was criticized by African Americans for doing these roles. Louise, like Hattie, was pragmatic about always being a maid, “I am only playing the parts, I don’t live them.”
The 1930s were Louise Beavers’ most prolific decade. She was steadily working, playing servants in most of her films. She did thirteen films in 1931, fifteen films in 1932 and eighteen films in 1933. In one of those 1931 films, *Ladies of the Big House* starring Sylvia Sydney, Beavers was not a domestic. Instead, she played a tough talking convict in a women’s prison, who was the leader for a group of African American prisoners. She is tough-talking in a scene with Sylvia and she tells her, with a giggle, “Well, I killed a no-good husband, but that wasn’t really killin’ either.”

Louise Beavers appeared in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1927) and *Coquette* (with Mary Pickford) in 1929 and in several pre-code Hollywood films, the Busby Berkeley choreographed musical, *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers* (1933) that starred Ruby Keeler and Dick Powell, and a gangster film, *Bullets or Ballots* (1936) with Edward G. Robinson. She won rave reviews for *Imitation of Life* (1934). In the 1950s, Louise departed from her maid’s duties on film to play Jackie Robinson’s mother in *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950) with Jackie Robinson playing himself in his first and only acting role, with Ruby Dee playing his wife, Rachel. Louise had a minimal role and is only seen in the early part of the film. She would continue to work in films in the early 1960s starting in *All the Fine Young Cannibals* (1960), with Robert Wagner and Natalie Wood. Louise once said, “In all the pictures I had seen…they never used colored people for anything except savages – and I had no ambition to appear before the public in a G-string and an African smile. The costume seemed a little bit too sketchy for general use.” Louise, eventually, used her visibility to criticize the lack of positive film roles for

**BUTTERFLY MCQUEEN**

Another African American actress also well-known for playing maid roles was Thelma “Butterfly” McQueen. McQueen, had her first film role as Prissy in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) when she was twenty-eight years old. She gave a standout performance in her squeaky, high pitched, childlike voice that never failed to amuse. *Gone with the Wind* was in some ways a curse rather than a blessing for McQueen because the character personified her acting career. She played an uncredited role as a dimwitted salesperson in the 1939 film, *The Women*, with Norma Shearer and Joan Crawford. However, the film was released after *Gone with the Wind*. Butterfly McQueen also appeared in the Oscar-nominated 1945 film, *Mildred Pierce* with Joan Crawford as a “charming” maid, but ditzy.

Butterfly McQueen, as Prissy, earned $200 a week for her role in *Gone with the Wind*. In the Margaret Mitchell novel, Prissy is slapped, eats watermelon, and Rhett Butler calls her “a simple-minded darkie.” McQueen was against these humiliations, but only succeeded in getting the director to agree to not have her eat watermelon in the film. McQueen worked on *Gone with the Wind* for a year when her contract called for her to work six weeks.³⁵ McQueen was nothing like her screen persona and was not oblivious to the fact that her film roles were always playing a servant. She once told an interviewer for *People* magazine, “I didn’t mind playing a maid the first time, because I thought that was how you got into the business. But after I did the same thing over and over, I
resented it. I didn’t mind being funny but I didn’t like being stupid.” McQueen could be philosophical and was an avowed atheist. McQueen left Hollywood in 1949, vowing not to work in Hollywood again. She kept that promise and worked in radio and television and even worked as a salesperson in Macy’s without anyone knowing her. She earned a bachelor’s degree from the City College of New York at the age of sixty-four.

THE MULATTA AFRICAN AMERICAN ACTRESSES IN HOLLYWOOD

Aida Overton Walker’s fame and popularity in vaudeville in the early 1900s was an inspiration to younger fair-skinned women like Josephine Baker, Nina Mae McKinney, Theresa Harris, Lena Horne and Fredi Washington, who would go from the vaudeville stage to Hollywood films. This group of African American actresses was esteemed for “passing the brown paper bag test.” Their fair-skin was regarded as closer to White skin and therefore, more beautiful and desirable to men, but even these women were typecast and faced prejudice on and off-screen. Their roles seemed to be the opposite of the domestic roles except, they not only were dressed up to sing and dance, but at times, played the tragic mulatta or maids and housekeepers to the lead White actors. The so-called, on-screen tragic mulatta experienced the real tragedy off-screen, as all African American actresses, when they were not getting steady work. They were hired as a glamorous singer and dancer in a film, but they could not interact with the White cast members on-screen.

Producer and director St. Clair Bourne gives a historical and critical explanation for racially stereotyping African Americans that is very insightful: The purpose of the Africans, brought here by Europeans as
slaves, was to provide service and nothing more, the art and media images of these slaves were also created and used to rationalize and reinforce their place in society. Thus, racial stereotypes came to symbolize the mental restructuring of the African presence in America. The movies, as the plastic, sub-conscious of the nation, became the major distributor of the Black image initially to American audiences and, as Hollywood’s impact became international, throughout the world.\(^39\)

The light-skinned African American actresses might have been praised for their beauty, but they were not going to get roles that upstaged the White actresses in Hollywood. Theresa Harris, Lena Horne, Josephine Baker, Dorothy Dandridge, Eartha Kitt, Fredi Washington, Edna Mae Harris, Dorothy Van Engle, Francine Everett and Sallie Blair worked less frequently than darker-skinned African American women chosen for domestic roles. Whenever these lighter-skinned actresses appeared as servants, they were expected to darken their skin for the roles, like Theresa Harris in *Blossoms in the Dust* (1941) that starred Greer Garson. This was to eliminate any ambiguity about them being White women. Lena Horne’s contract stated that she would not do any stereotypical roles. If Horne needed to look a shade darker, she wore makeup especially made for her by Max Factor, like the kind she wore when she played a saloon owner in the film *Panama Hattie* (1942).

Hollywood was not the land of opportunity for African American actresses unless you repeatedly accepted prescribed roles. These women understood that the deep-seated racism in America could not be erased by their lighter skin color or compliments about
their almost White beauty. The reality of the “one drop of black blood” meant they were “Black” and held to the same standards as darker-skinned African American actresses, like Hattie McDaniel, Louise Beavers, Ethel Waters and Butterfly McQueen.  

**FREDI WASHINGTON – TOO WHITE TO BE BLACK**

Fredi Washington could pass for White with her ivory-colored skin and green eyes, but she consistently expressed to the press and the African American community that she was proud of being an African American and wanted to stay close to her roots. “I am a Negro and I am proud of it.” Earl Conrad, a writer for *The Chicago Defender*, remarked that “You would never know she was Negro,” pointing out his first impressions about Fredi.

Fredi Washington was scantily clad as a flapper in director Dudley Moore’s 1929 musical short, *Black and Tan*, with Duke Ellington and his band. In the film, she wildly dances to the band’s music and then faints. Her dying wish, at the end of the film, is for the Duke and his band to play *Black and Tan* at her bedside.

In 1934, Washington received rave reviews from Hollywood for her role as Peola Johnson, the daughter of Louise Beavers (Delilah Johnson) in the film, *Imitation of Life*. In the film, Peola grows up to resent her mother for being African American and the housekeeper to the widow, Beatrice Pullman (Claudette Colbert) and her daughter, Jessie Pullman (Rochelle Hudson). Peola looks White and therefore, believes she deserves to have the privileged lifestyle like Jessie. She is convinced that the only thing standing in the way of her aspiration is her mother. Through the course of the film, her mother realizes that Peola is ashamed of her for her skin color and for her being a domestic.
Fredi Washington’s performance and her naturally very light skin tone was so convincing that African Americans were convinced Washington shared Peola’s attitude. Washington had a difficult time living down her role as Peola. African American audiences did not believe that Washington was proud of her race and that her belief was antithetical to Peola’s. During the making of *Imitation of Life*, Washington told the director, John M. Stahl that she didn’t want to say the line in the script that “I want to be White,” because she said not everyone wants to be White, and the director agreed to her request.

Fredi Washington was constantly dealing with questions and comments about her skin color. Her desire to choose who she wanted to be was not enough for Hollywood who wanted her to say she was White and her own people who did not believe that she was not passing for White. In an unusual twist, Washington starred in a 1936 Zombie horror film, by British writer and director, George Terwilliger called *The Love Wanga* (or *Ouanga aka Drums of the Jungle*) in which Washington plays a Haitian plantation owner named Clelia who was in a romance with a White plantation owner who decided to marry his White fiancée. Washington is so furious that she expresses to the “Black” overseer, LeStrange, played by White actor and writer, Sheldon Leonard whose skin is darkened for the role, that she is determined to have the White man. LeStrange reminds her that his employer is marrying “his kind” to which Clelia responds, “You think so. I’m White too, as White as she is!” It’s incredulous that Washington committed to saying these lines because it contradicts her impassioned conviction that she does not want to “pass” for White in “real” life.
LeStrange argues that she is not White, but “Black,” and cautions her about the danger of pursuing the romance with his White employer. Clelia (like Scarlett O’Hara) vows that the White man will be hers or “no one can have him.” Not giving up, Le Strange tells Clelia that she is “just like us” (Black). The dialogue becomes more acerbic with Clelia proclaiming vehemently that she is “White.” She demands that LeStrange take a good look at her and as she touches her face, she asks him, “Is this Black or these, (touching her hands), or this, (as she pulls back the neckline of her dress)?” LeStrange tells her “This is madness. Your White skin does not change what is inside you.” He emphasizes, “You’re Black! You hear me, you’re Black! You belong to us, to me.” In B-movie fashion, he kisses her and she lets him. Clelia’s (Washington’s) contrition is astonishing because a year earlier, when Washington was in *Imitation of Life*, a film produced by a major studio, Universal Pictures, she told the director, emphatically, that she would not say, “I’m White,” as called for in the script. The justification for Washington to declare she is “White” in *The Love Wanga*, a virtually unknown film, is inexplicable. Perhaps, Washington thought no one would ever see this disastrous “B-movie” and therefore, it would not be necessary to mention it.

Conversely, in the movie, *The Emperor Jones* that Washington performed in opposite Paul Robeson, their love scenes were re-shot so that Washington’s skin could be darkened to quell the disapproval of White audiences, particularly southerners. The debate over Fredi Washington’s skin color was the bane of her existence. The press, African American and White audiences cut her film career short because they too often
centered on her ivory skin, more than her talent and Hollywood producers thought she was too light to play parts for African American actresses.

**NINA MAE MCKINNEY**

Nina Mae McKinney and her family moved from the South, in the early twentieth century, when she was a youngster. She was another actress who had difficulty getting roles in Hollywood like many African American actresses. Out of frustration, McKinney like other African American entertainers, traveled to Europe in 1930. McKinney said, “The Negro went to Europe because we were recognized and given a chance. In Europe, they had your name up in lights. People in the United States would not give us that chance.” McKinney did not stay long in Europe and returned to the States three months later for unspecified reasons. During the short time, she was in Europe, the African American press, namely *The Chicago Defender* and *The Baltimore Afro-American*, followed her about, but they seemed to be more interested in her alleged admirers and marriages, and some of the rumors contrived by McKinney to keep her name in the press.

McKinney was known for being a light-skinned beauty and in Europe, she was dubbed “The Black Garbo.” Langston Hughes said that “Nina was so beautiful she made my heart ache.” At the age of seventeen, McKinney was the first African American actress to be cast in a mainstream role in the first All-Black, all-sound King Vidor film musical, *Hallelujah!* (1929), and her performance in the film made her a star. *Hallelujah!* is the story of lust, revenge and death. McKinney (as Chick) is the stereotypical vixen and tragic mulatta who lures an unsuspecting African American
southern cotton picker named Zeke into a dice game with her crooked partner, Hot Shot. Once Zeke realizes that he lost the game because the dice were loaded, he attempts to shoot Hot Shot, but instead, Zeke accidentally shoots his own brother, Spunk. Afterwards, Zeke becomes a preacher and after initially ridiculing him, Chick converts to his religion. Eventually, Zeke abandons his preaching and marries Chick; however, she soon longs for the life she had with Hot Shot. Chick attempts to run away with Hot Shot, but before they can get away, the pair are shot by Zeke. He is incarcerated and upon his release, he returns to his family in the south. The making of Hallelujah! was not without controversy behind the scenes. Nina McKinney was called a “nigger” by a grip, according to African American musical director, Eva Jessye, who was brought in to do the gospel portions of the picture. Jessye also was paid three times less than her White counterpart for doing the same work.

In 1931, McKinney appeared with the African American actor, Clarence Muse in a William Wellman, pre-code thriller, produced by Warner Brothers, called Safe Hell. This film was produced before her fated relationship with MGM, who promised more than they delivered on her career. She had a five-year contract with MGM, but was given only two films, Reckless (1935) and Dark Waters (1944). Reckless starred Jean Harlow, but without McKinney on screen; instead, she dubbed Harlow’s songs. She was the maid to Merle Oberon in the film noir, Dark Waters, set in the south. Meanwhile, other studios wanted McKinney, but MGM refused to allow McKinney to work for other studios, like Warner Bros. and thus, like MGM’s handling of Fredi Washington’s career, MGM stonewalled McKinney’s film career. Ultimately, like Washington, she returned to the
stage. Hollywood was fickle. They were fascinated by the beauty and talent of African American women like Fredi Washington and Nina Mae McKinney, but then criticized them for the qualities that awarded them MGM contracts.

McKinney was interviewed by a reporter from the *Sun Dispatch* and shared a story about the prejudice she experienced in a London restaurant. She said, “Sometimes, I’ve gone into a restaurant and they say they’re full up. But, I can see empty tables. It makes you feel – both hands touched her heart – awful bad.”

When McKinney starred with Paul Robeson in Alexander Korda’s, *Sanders of the River* (1935), a story about the colonial system in Africa, Nina was half-clad, spoke in a jarring American accent and wore heavy make-up that would not be worn by an African tribal wife. The film was a contrived excuse to show off McKinney to no advantage.

**LENA HORNE**

It was not easy for African American actresses to work in Hollywood because of the racial divide. There was no separate but equal, just separate. Some of these actresses spoke out virulently about the racial bias and racial characterizations that marginalized the acting roles open to African American women in Hollywood. Lena Horne was a “sepia” beauty and Hollywood could not pass her off as a White woman like they wanted to do with Fredi Washington, and Horne was not interested in passing. She loved her African American father too much too slander his name. Her father was instrumental with his contacts in the NAACP to get her a long-term Hollywood contract with MGM, although the roles were scarce. Horne informed Hollywood studio executives, early on in her career, that she would not do domestic roles. Instead, as she so aptly put it, “They
didn’t make me into a maid, but they didn’t make me anything else either. I became a butterfly pinned to a column; singing away in Movieland.”

When Lena Horne needed a darker complexion to sing the Cole Porter song, Just One of Those Things in Panama Hattie (1942), a special make-up was created for her by Max Factor called “Light Egyptian.” It would become make-up especially made for Horne. Unlike, Hattie McDaniel, Louise Beavers, Fredi Washington, Nina Mae McKinney, Horne was a divorcee with two children when she began her film career in Hollywood. She debuted in a short film with Duke Ellington called The Duke is Tops (1938). Ironically, Fredi Washington also made her debut in an Ellington film. Horne was given a long-term contract with MGM and made eleven movies in the 1940s, including two of her well-known films with all-Black casts: Stormy Weather and Cabin in the Sky. Horne, like the other lighter-skinned African American actresses, could not appear in scenes with White actors. Sometimes, Lena was shot alone so that she could be edited out when the film traveled to the South.

THERESA HARRIS

Theresa Harris was the daughter of Louisiana sharecroppers who started her career in Hollywood in 1929. She debuted in a Josef von Sternberg film, Thunderbolt, looking gorgeous in a beautiful sequined gown and jewels as she sang “Daddy Won’t You Please Come Home,” while swaying her hips to the music. von Sternberg, a German director, has a White actor, George Bancroft, look at her approvingly as he goes off camera. The scene was reminiscent of Marlene Dietrich singing in The Blue Angel, a year later, in a film also directed by von Sternberg.
Theresa Harris had a honey-toned complexioned that got her roles as a singer and dancer and as a domestic. Harris was a beautiful woman and she was often allowed to show her beauty and sex appeal, and this was rare for an African American actress. She made ninety films from the 1930s and worked for every major studio until she ended her career in the 1950s to settle down with her husband, who was a physician.

Theresa Harris worked with many legendary and well-known White actors and actresses throughout her career. Usually, she was given the part of the maid in films like *Morocco* (1930), directed by Josef Von Sternberg; with Gary Cooper and Marlene Dietrich, an uncredited role in *Professional Sweetheart* (1933), with Ginger Rogers; *Jezebel* (1938), directed by William Wyler, with Bette Davis and Henry Fonda; an uncredited role as Olive in *The Women* (1939), directed by George Cukor; with Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford and Rosalind Russell, *Blossoms in the Dust* (1941), directed by Mervyn LeRoy; with Greer Garson and Walter Pidgeon, *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947), with Maureen O’Hara, *The Big Clock* (1948), directed by John Farrow (father of Mia Farrow); with Ray Milland, Charles Laughton and Maureen O’Sullivan, *Angel Face* (1952), directed by Otto Preminger; with Robert Mitchum and Jean Simmons. Theresa Harris also appeared in horror films, *Cat People* (1942) as Minnie, the waitress and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) as Alma, the maid.

Theresa Harris played a dual role in *Professional Sweetheart*. She was uncredited as Ginger Rogers’ maid, Vera and credited in the role of the “Purity Girl” who replaces her employer, Glory Eden (Ginger Rogers), as a radio singer for one night. Harris is a sensation as “Purity Girl,” causing Glory to be jealous. In this pre-Code film,
*Professional Sweetheart,* Theresa transforms from a servile role to a sultry singer; replete in a low-cut sequined gown. Harris is also uncredited as a singer in *Banjo on My Knee* (1936), directed by John Cromwell; starring Barbara Stanwyck and Joel McCrea. Harris sits on the stoop of an apartment house and sings *St. Louis Blues.* Harris is dressed beautifully, wearing a hat and clutching a purse. Her voice is strong and soulful as she leads a cast of African American men and women who are singing from the windows and the verandas of the building while African American men are walking to and fro from the dock carrying burlap sacks, and also singing. It is a powerful scene with Stanwyck’s character getting teary-eyed. It was not unusual for Hollywood producers to hire African American performers for a part without giving them screen credit even after they were famous.

Theresa Harris appeared with Barbara Stanwyck and George Brent in the pre-Code film, *Baby Face* (1933). This was a substantial role for Harris because she plays not only a maid, but a companion and confidante to Stanwyck. This was a very unusual role for an African American woman, in this period of Hollywood cinema, to have this type of relationship with a White woman.

Theresa Harris was uncredited in her last film, *The Gift of Love* (1958) with Lauren Bacall and Robert Stack. Although, there is a scene in the film when Bacall goes to the door, and welcomes Harris as “May” and her husband and the other guests to their house for the Christmas holiday.

Theresa Harris was the attractive maid who is paired with Eddie Rochester Anderson, as her boyfriend, in *Buck Benny Rides Again* (1940) with Jack Benny and
"What’s Buzzin’ Cousin" (1943) with Ann Miller. In Buck Benny Rides Again, Harris and Anderson sang the musical number “My, My” and danced in the styles of tap, classical, Spanish and swing.  

Theresa Harris spoke out against discrimination in Hollywood, like many African American actresses who were only able to work in Hollywood playing stereotypical roles. Harris said to a reporter, “I never had the chance to rise above the role of maid in Hollywood movies. My color was against me anyway you looked at it. The fact that I was not “hot” stamped me either as uppity or relegated me to the eternal role of stooge or servant. I can sing, but so can hundreds of other girls. My ambition is to be an actress. Hollywood had no parts for me.” An article in Jet magazine noted in 1952 that “Her (Theresa Harris) fate, however, was like most Negro girls working in films – one maid role after the other.”

**ANITA REYNOLDS – “AN AMERICAN COCKTAIL”**

Anita Reynolds (1901-1980) was an actress, dancer, model, writer and psychologist, art teacher and Langston Hughes’ cousin. Anita is not a well-known actress to most moviegoers. Her name does not appear among the names of other African American actresses in the silent era, but Anita was a mulatta, admittedly. Because of Anita’s White-looking skin, Hollywood, in their inimitable way on the topic of race, cast Anita in films as Arab, Indian, Mexican and Creole. In her posthumous memoir, American Cocktail: A “Colored Girl” in the World, Anita talks about her life in
Hollywood, an entertainer in Europe, a Red Cross nurse in Nazi-occupied France during World War II, a literary critic, a psychologist and a model for Coco Chanel in Paris. Her book covers her birth to boarding the plane to flee Nazi-occupied France in the 1940s.

The uniqueness of Anita is that she lived her life without letting her color be the issue. Anita grew up in Los Angeles with family members who could mostly pass for White; they were well-educated and financially comfortable, but not wealthy. Some of her family took advantage of the ambiguity of their skin color, but Anita was more radical and accepted her race. When Anita wrote her memoir, she left a note saying that she enjoyed being Black in the twentieth century.54

Anita Reynolds was impulsive. She went to Paris on an ocean liner at twenty years old, using money intended for her Wesleyan College tuition because her friend, H.L. Mencken was not allowed entry into a black bourgeois party with her. It seems that the hostess frowned on inviting White men and especially, White men who were journalists. Anita associated and partied with many White and African American celebrities from the cinema, theater, publishing, literati, music and art such as, Claude McKay, Ernest Hemingway, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Booker T. Washington, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, and she dated W.E.B. DuBois.

Anita had acting roles in The Thief of Bagdad (1924), with Douglas Fairbanks, playing one of the attendants to the princess along with Asian actress, Anna May Wong. Anita said she got to know Fairbanks and he was a nice man. She even brought W.E.B. DuBois, her boyfriend at the time, to the set. Anita was an extra who danced with Pedro Valdez in the epic drama Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (1921) starring Rudolph
Valentino. Pedro Valdez taught Rudolph Valentino to dance. African American actor and producer Noble Johnson appeared in the film with Anita as one of the four horsemen. She did *A Man’s Duty* (1919) and *By Right of Birth* (1921), two of four films she did for Noble and his brother, George’s Lincoln Motion Picture Company.

“ONE DROP OF BLACK BLOOD” THEME IN THE DEBT AND IN HUMANITY’S CAUSE

There were two silent films that epitomized the “one drop of Black blood theory,” the two-reelers, *In Humanity’s Cause* (1911) and *The Debt* (1912). In *The Debt*, the tragic mulatta and the White man’s wife bear him children. The children, a White son and the mulatta daughter grow up together, fall in love and decide to marry. Once they learn that they are brother and sister and that the sister has a drop of black blood, their lives are ruined and their relationship abruptly ends. In the Civil War melodrama, *In Humanity’s Cause*, a Confederate soldier, unknowingly, is given a blood transfusion from an African American. Presumably, the blood makes him a brute and his sweetheart finds him repulsive. He ends up locating the African American and while fighting each other, they go over a precipice and die in each other’s arms. As a sign of the times, in December 16, 1911, *The Moving Picture World* (a weekly movie picture periodical) criticized *In Humanity’s Cause* for its moral message and said the film “may leave in the spectator’s mouth a somewhat unpleasant taste, because of its peculiar central idea.” The reviewer went on to say, that “One could hardly call this a highly commendable film.” There were other films with the same tragic mulatta archetype in 1913: *In Slavery Days*, *The Octoroon* and Oscar Micheaux’s *The Conquest*. 
AFRICAN AMERICAN ACTRESSES:
IN THE FILMS OF OSCAR MICHEAUX AND SPENCER WILLIAMS

OSCAR MICHEAUX

Oscar Micheaux and Spencer Williams were two African American filmmakers who made films for mostly African American audiences, beginning in the silent era through the 1950s. Their films provided work for African American actresses to play atypical roles not being offered to them in Hollywood. Oscar Micheaux was a former Pullman porter, a novelist, screenwriter, director and producer. He was a prolific filmmaker making films on a shoestring budget and often his actors and actresses worked for little or no pay because they wanted to work with him. He made silent films from 1918 to 1930 and sound films from 1931 to 1948. Micheaux, like many independent filmmakers, regardless of race, lacked capital and a film distribution system. Micheaux took his films door-to-door. He went to fifteen southern towns in the south and when necessary, took White women to distribute his films. Micheaux’s timing into filmmaking coincided with Hollywood’s mission to increase their film output. Since Hollywood was not making films with African Americans in mind, Micheaux filled the void by making films for an African American audience. At least forty of Micheaux’ films that were located reveal that there were a variety of parts for primarily, light-skinned African American actresses. Some of his leading ladies were Evelyn Preer, Ethel Moses, Alice B. Russell, Dorothy Van Engle, Edna Mae Harris, Francine Everett and Inez Clough.
Actress Evelyn Preer (1896-1932) was Micheaux’s leading lady and starred most frequently in his films. The African American community and the press dubbed her the “First Lady of the Screen.” Preer starred in twenty of Oscar Micheaux’s films, such as Micheaux’s first feature-length film, The Homesteader (1918), Within Our Gates (1919), The Gunsaulus Mystery and Deceit (1921), Birthright (1924), The Devil’s Disciple and The Conjure Role (1926).

Preer was a singer in vaudeville and on the “chitlin’ circuit” of minstrel shows, but never sang in Micheaux’s films. At the age of twenty-three, she starred in Micheaux’s The Homesteader as the tragic mulatta named Orlean. Orlean, the daughter of a preacher, marries a homesteader named Jean Baptiste who refuses to praise her vain father when he demands it. Unable to handle the conflict between her husband and father, Orlean kills her father and commits suicide. Jean Baptiste returns to South Dakota and marries Agnes (who grew up believing she was White because she was adopted by a White man, but then discovers she is Black).

Preer’s next film, Within Our Gates was Micheaux’s most controversial film with a multi-racial cast that was not common with African American or White filmmakers at that time. The film depicts two critical moments: the attempted rape of a schoolteacher, named Sylvia Landry, (Preer) by a wealthy White landowner who discovers she is his daughter, and the lynching of her adoptive parents by the Ku Klux Klan. Within Our Gates, Oscar Micheaux’s eight-reel film, was a response to D.W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation (1915). Within Our Gates was initially rejected for its premiere screening in
Chicago by the Chicago Board of Movie Censors, but a second screening of the film requested by the press, Chicago politicians and leading members of the Chicago community changed the Board’s mind. However, African American activists continued to protest the film. Even today, the rape and lynch images are disturbing; particularly, when seeing the parents’ little boy, in the film, narrowly escape being lynched by the Ku Klux Klan, as he gallops away on a horse.

Within Our Gates was released on January 20, 1919, and that summer, on July 27, 1919, Chicago had a violent race riot called “Red Summer” that took the lives of thirty-eight people — twenty-three African Americans and fifteen Whites — and also injured five hundred people.55

Although Evelyn Preer was famous among African American audiences, she had an uncredited role in Josef von Sternberg’s English version of Blonde Venus starring Marlene Dietrich in 1932. Preer was considered the first African American actress to transition from silent to sound films. Unfortunately, Preer’s career was cut short when she died, at the age of thirty-six, from double pneumonia.

ETHEL MOSES

Oscar Micheaux billed African American actress, Ethel Moses (1904-1982) as “The Black Jean Harlow” because he thought that she had Jean Harlow’s facial features. Moses began appearing in Micheaux’s films in the 1930s when she was in her thirties, but she looked ten years younger. She and her three sisters had gone into show business against the approval of their preacher father. Ethel Moses became popular as a stage dancer working in nightclubs like The Cotton Club and traveled internationally with
bands, like Cab Calloway’s band. However, Moses wanted to become a serious actress and got her start with Oscar Micheaux playing the lead role in *Temptation* (1936). The film tells the story of a beautiful, young and naïve woman named Helen Ware, who is a nude model for an artist and given the name, “The Bronze Venus.” She is taken advantage of by men who hire her if she will also pose nude for them. Her lover introduces her to gangsters and she gets falsely accused of murder. This was one of the few Micheaux films that did not deal with racial issues. The film was a sensation with African American audiences and at the movie’s premiere, a crowd flocked around her for an autograph. Moses also starred in *Underworld* (1937) playing the “Other” woman who helps her lover regain his good reputation. In that same year, she starred in *God’s Step Children* (1938) and her last film was Micheaux’s re-make of his film *Birthright* (1939). Ethel also appeared in a few Cab Calloway short films and a Count Basie short film.

**DOROTHY VAN ENGLE**

Dorothy Van Engle (1910-2004) was regarded as a beautiful and naturally talented actress, so Oscar Micheaux put her in his most important films. Van Engle was in films from 1934 to 1939. She appeared in *Harlem After Night* (1934), *Murder in Harlem* (1935) and *God’s Step Children* and *Swing!* (1938). In *Murder in Harlem*, Van Engle stars as Claudia Vance, whose friendship with an author, Henry Glory leads to romance until he thinks she is a call girl. In the meantime, her brother is charged with a crime he did not commit and Henry, who becomes a lawyer, unites with Claudia and they succeed in having her brother vindicated of the crime.
EDNA MAE HARRIS

Edna Mae Harris (1910-1997) made her first film appearance in a Hollywood film, The Green Pastures (1936) playing a spirited character named Zeba. In the 1930s and 1940s, Harris worked primarily in underground, all-Black cast films such as Lying Lips (1939), The Notorious Elinor Lee (1940), and Murder on Lenox Avenue (1941). In Lying Lips, Harris plays Miss Elsie Bellwood, a singer and dancer, who is accused by her uncle and his wife of murdering her uncle’s sister, Josephine Hawkins for the insurance money. Miss Bellwood is tried, convicted, sentenced to life and sent to prison. However, a police detective believes her innocence and proves that it was her uncle’s wife who murdered her aunt for the insurance money. In the closing scene, Miss Bellwood and the detective are married and decide that the money from the insurance is going to be put into a trust fund for their future children. In the last line of the movie, Micheaux proves that movies can entertain as well as teach the African American audience.

SPENCER WILLIAMS

Spencer Williams was an actor, writer, director and producer who made films in the forties that featured many African American actresses. Some of the African American actresses who appeared in Williams’ films were: Francine Everett, Cathryn Caviness and Myra Hemmings. Spencer wrote his films and there were always twists and turns in his films, plots and sub-plots.

Spencer Williams’ film career started when he got a job with Christie Studios and wrote and starred in Paramount’s first all-Black production, Melancholy Dame (1928).
Williams played the character, Andy, in the *Amos n’ Andy* television series that ran from 1951 to 1953. The TV series ended the same year as *Beulah* because African American audiences protested these negative stereotypes of themselves. Williams was the only African American who frequently was commissioned by White financial backers to make films, which he did for ten years.

**FRANCINE EVERETT**

One of Spencer Williams’ leading ladies, Francine Everett (1915-1999) was a dancer, singer and actress and considered “the most beautiful woman in Hollywood,” and a leading lady of African American cinema. She was married to the actor, Rex Ingram (“de Lawd” in *The Green Pastures* and the Devil in *Cabin in the Sky*) from 1936 to 1939. Everett had two small parts in Hollywood films in the White actor, Mel Ferrer’s first movie in 1949 called *Lost Boundaries*. The film is the powerful true-life drama about Doctor Scott Carter and his wife, Marcia who are a light-skinned African American couple who move to a small New Hampshire fishing town passing for White people. Francine Everett appears in the film’s dream sequence as a White woman who transforms to an African American. Everett then had an uncredited role in Sidney Poitier’s first film, *No Way Out* (1950). This is another story of a doctor (Poitier) and his wife, but this time, they are tormented by racist criminals. Everett would not accept demeaning roles like maids, so she preferred to act in All-Black “race films” and independent African American films.

Everett appeared in Williams’ *Paradise in Harlem* (1939) and gave a compelling performance as Desdemona Jones in a modern version of Shakespeare’s *Othello* and
played the lead role as the nightclub entertainer, Gertie LaRue in *Dirty Gertie from Harlem U.S.A.* (1946) who is murdered by a jealous former boyfriend from Harlem when he finds her on the fictional Caribbean island of Rinidad.

**CATHRYN CAVINESS**

Cathryn Caviness (1914-1993) played the lead character, Sister Martha Ann Jackson in Spencer Williams’ religious fantasy, *The Blood of Jesus* (1941). This was Caviness’ first and only film and was Spencer Williams’ directorial debut, which he also wrote and produced. The film had a budget of five thousand dollars and Williams worked with non-professional actors. *The Blood of Jesus* was a commercial success and Caviness was praised for the realism and honesty she brought to the role. Williams’ film is regarded as an important film among African American independent films that shows the role of religion for African Americans.

In the film, Caviness plays Sister Martha Ann Jackson whose atheist husband, Razz Jackson (Williams) goes out hunting one Sunday while his wife, Sister Martha is being baptized by her pastor in the river. She goes home and her husband’s hunting rifle falls on the floor and the rifle discharges, accidentally shooting her. The women of Sister Martha’s congregation surround her, singing religious spirituals while her husband sits in the corner of their bedroom, with his head in his hands. As Sister Jackson lays dying, her soul journeys between Heaven and Hell while a representative of Satan puts temptations in her way to test her faith. In the end, Sister Jackson chooses good over evil, recovers from her gunshot wound and returns to her husband who has become a Christian.
MYRA HEMMINGS

Myra Hemmings (1895-1968) was an actress, teacher, director and producer who appeared in several Spencer Williams films. In the 1941 drama, Go Down Death! The Story of Jesus and the Devil, Hemmings plays Aunt Caroline who adopted son, “Big” Jim Bottom when he was young. Big Jim becomes a juke joint owner who has hired two photographers to help him frame Reverend Jasper Jones, who he believes, is threatening his business. Aunt Caroline steals the photographs from Jim’s safe, with the help of the ghost of her deceased husband. Jim catches her in his room in possession of the photographs. They struggle and when he pushes Aunt Caroline she hits her head on the safe and dies. Jim’s guilty conscience causes his death.

Myra Hemmings plays Mrs. Ellen Tucker who is a widow and a mother in Where’s My Man To-Nite (aka Marching On!) in 1943. Her son, Rodney Tucker, Jr. initially refuses to enlist in World War II and follow the family’s history in military service because he is afraid that he would not return home from the war like his father (played by Myra’s real-life husband, John Hemmings). When Tucker, Jr is drafted, he goes AWOL and is on the run. He has a chance encounter with his real father who he discovers lost his memory, during the war, and could not find his way home. The two hitch a ride on a freight train and he awakens to see his father jumping from the moving train. Tucker Jr. goes after him and holds his dying father in his arms. Tucker Jr’s grandfather goes looking for him and finds his grandson exhausted and dehydrated in the Arizona desert. They both discover two Japanese men sending radio transmissions to
Japan, and they stop them. The Army shows up and arrests the Japanese. Tucker Jr. is reinstated in the Army and vows to fight the Japanese after their attack on Pearl Harbor.


“RACE FILMS” BY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

The African American woman is the only figure of importance in American culture who had not been heard in the early history of film. “The 1890s in the urban North were a historical moment when, for the first time, Black women in America were rising in significant numbers to positions of prominence and relative power.” Early African American women filmmakers were not necessarily making films that expressed the needs or concerns of African American women nor making feature films. These pioneers made films on topics such as soldiers’ war experiences, anthropological documentaries, crime dramas, social and spiritual issues, and they had other intellectual pursuits. They founded or co-founded companies, produced, directed, edited and wrote screenplays for their films. Women like Alice B. Russell Micheaux and Eslanda Cardozo Goode Robeson might be better known because they married famous men, but they also assumed leadership roles.

There were other women who were not filmmakers, but their ideas became films such as Mrs. M.M. Webb, whose idea became the film, Shadowed by the Devil (1916)
directed by her husband, Miles M. Webb. This might have been the only film produced by their production company, Chicago’s Unique Film Company. This three-reel drama is a short film about the lives of three different characters: the good, the bad and the ugly. “A frivolous, spoiled girl is ugly, a Satan-guided businessman is bad and a loving father and husband is good.” There is no print of the film, but Mrs. M.M. Webb was given credit as the originator for the film in the *Chicago Defender.*

Birdie Gilmore’s story, *Jungle God* was produced by the Black independent film company, Delsarte Film Company, based in New York City. The film was mentioned in a 1921 article in *The Competitor*, “Our Growing Importance in the Amusement World.”

**MYRA HEMMINGS – ACTRESS, PRODUCER AND DIRECTOR**

Myra Hemmings (1895-1968) was not only an actress in Hollywood and in all-Black independent films by filmmakers like Spencer Williams, but she co-produced and co-directed *Go Down Death: The Story of Jesus and the Devil* with Spencer Williams. Hemmings’ considerable interests included being one of seven African American women who founded the infamous Delta Sigma Theta Sorority –Xi Chapter in 1913, and she was also its President. The organizations various chapters include many African American women in film such as Lena Horne, Ruby Dee, Cicely Tyson, and Angela Bassett. Hemmings was also a drama teacher for fifty-one years in San Antonio, Texas and directed plays from 1920 to 1950.
ALICE BURTON RUSSELL – ACTRESS, PRODUCER AND MANAGER

Alice Burton Russell (aka Alice B. Russell) (1892-1984) was the wife of legendary filmmaker, Oscar Micheaux. He admired his wife’s middle-class background and superior education; Alice was a concert soloist before marrying her husband. Therefore, Micheaux had his wife play only characters with refinement when he cast her in his films. Alice appeared in Broken Violin (1926), Easy Street (1930), Ten Minutes to Live (1932), Murder in Harlem (1935), Birthright (1939) and The Betrayal (1948)

Micheaux also had a great regard for his wife’s opinions and Alice played an integral role in his filmmaking career. She was a producer and manager of the Micheaux Film Company and sometimes, assisted as a crew member. Alice produced Micheaux’s Darktown Revue (1931), Murder in Harlem, Birthright and his last film, The Betrayal.

ESLANDA CARDOZO GOODE – SINGER, ACTRESS AND PUBLICIST

Eslanda Cardozo Goode (1895-1965) had an acting career in films like the 1929 avant garde silent film, Borderline, portraying a woman in a bi-racial affair and a tribal princess in Jericho (aka Dark Sands) in 1937.

Eslanda was a Renaissance woman. She published three books and co-authored a book with Nobel Literature Prize winning scholar, Pearl Buck. Eslanda had an adventurous spirit who wrote travel books, was a freelance journalist for twenty years, traveled to interesting places like Beijing, South Africa and Moscow as a photographer and spoke several languages. She was a United Nations correspondent. She was the first
African American to be hired to work as a surgical technician and chemist in the surgical pathology department in New York Presbyterian Hospital from 1918 to 1925. Eslanda was an anthropologist, a lecturer and a civil rights activist (along with her husband, Paul). She was forced to leave America with her husband, during McCarthyism, and then would reside in Russia.

She was married to internationally acclaimed singer and actor, Paul Robeson. For a time, until his notorious promiscuity was discovered, she focused her attention on supporting and encouraging his film career by becoming his business manager and booking agent. Eslanda was tough, tenacious, assertive, formidable and significantly changed Paul’s career and their life. At Eslanda’s encouragement, Robeson first appeared as an actor in Oscar Micheaux’s race film, *Body and Soul* (1925).

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**ELOISE KING PATRICK GIST (AKA MAYME ELOYCE KING) – ACTRESS, DIRECTOR, SCREENWRITER AND PRODUCER**

Both Eloise Gist (1892-1974), along with her husband, James Gist, produced short religious films. She practiced the Baha’i faith and James was a Christian evangelical. Together, they traveled thousands of miles showing their films to community groups and churches. Field Secretary, Roy Wilkins, of the NAACP was interested in the Gist’s films and the NAACP backed the couple by paying for advertisements to promote their films. Eloise studied music so their religious dramas were accompanied by the piano. The couple produced three films: *Hellbound Train* (1929) directed by James and re-wrote and re-edited by Eloise. The narrative is about
taking the righteous path to avoid a ride on the hell train to perdition. Eloise acted in and possibly, re-directed *Verdict Not Guilty* (1933) that was a social commentary on the justice system. Specifically, a woman, in the afterlife, pleads her case to God in the hopes of making it to heaven. *Heaven-Bound Traveler* (1935) was a film on the evils of listening to jazz.

The *Hellbound Train* and *Verdict Not Guilty* were both considered “lost” films like so many independent African American films in the silent era. One of the reasons Oscar Micheaux’s films survived is the financial support he received from White backers when his production company was bankrupt.

Eighty years after the making of *Hellbound Train*, the granddaughter of Eloise Gist discovered remnants of the film in the Library of Congress. Professor Steven Torriano, an award-winning independent film producer, writer, director and a former esteemed faculty member at Howard University reconstructed the film. Professor Torriano’s estimation of the logical reconstruction of the film runs twenty minutes.

James and Eloise Gist worked tirelessly to show their films, but the grueling schedule took a toll on James and he contracted pneumonia and died. Eloise was an early feminist who believed women should have the financial means to support themselves. She, therefore, continued traveling to screen their films until the silent era came to an end.

There has been a renewed interest in restoring Gist’s films since the restoration of forty of Oscar Micheaux’s films. Currently, the sequential order of the negatives of James and Eloise Gist’s films, *Verdict Not Guilty* and *Heaven-Bound Traveler* are being
determined to make prints for the Motion Pictures, Broadcasting, and Sound Recording Division of the U.S. Library of Congress.

**DRUSILLA DUNJEE HOUSTON – SCREENWRITER, ACTIVIST, CIVIC LEADER**

Drusilla Dunjee Houston (1876-1941) was regarded as an American writer of the West. Her 1915 screenplay, *Spirit of the South, The Maddened Mob* was written to refute the misrepresentations of African Americans in D.W. Griffith’s, *Birth of a Nation*. She shopped around her fifty-eight-page screenplay, but producers were only interested in scripts with minstrel “Negro” stereotypes. Drusilla did not get the chance to become one of the first African American female directors.

Drusilla was a contributing editor to her brother’s newspaper, *The Black Dispatch* and wrote articles to uplift the African American race. She dedicated a book, *Wonderful Ethiopians of the Ancient Cushite Empire* (1926) to the people of African descent to refute the racists and Ku Klux Klan. Drusilla’s book presented facts to prove Africans influence on civilization.

**THE FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE DIRECTOR**

There are four African American female filmmakers who have the distinction of being considered the first director: Madame E. Touissant Welcome (aka Jennie Louise Van der Zee), Zora Neale Hurston, Marie P. Williams, and Tressie J. Souders. Except for Zora Neale Hurston, the films of the other directors are lost, but to have the distinction of
being “the first African American female director” means their films made some impact at the time they were shown. African American women filmmakers were active in every decade of the twentieth century.  

**MADAME E. TOUISSANT WELCOME – DIRECTOR AND PHOTOGRAPHER**

Madame E. Touissant Welcome (aka Jennie Louise Van der Zee) (1884-1956) was a woman of many talents: director, photographer, artist and musician. She was the personal photographer for Booker T. Washington and the sister of famed Harlem photographer, James Van der Zee. Jennie partnered with her husband, Ernest Touissant Welcome, to form the film company, Touissant Motion Picture Exchange in Harlem, New York. Jennie directed a two-reel, twelve-part documentary, *Doing Their Bit* that told the story of African American soldiers who had returned home from Europe in World War I. The film focused “on the military and economic role played by all races in the War of Nations both ‘Over Here’ and ‘Over There’”.  

In World War I, African American soldiers faced institutional racism that forced them to serve with the French rather than the American forces. Since no print of *Doing Their Bit* exists, it is speculated that the film was made between the years 1919 and 1922.

**ZORA NEALE HURSTON – FILMMAKER, ANTHROPOLOGIST, FOLKLOРИST NOVELIST AND ESSAYIST**

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) made anthropological documentary films. Aside from being a filmmaker, she was an acclaimed novelist who wrote four novels, besides her well-known novel, *Her Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and fifty short stories, plays
and essays. She was also a part of the “New Negro Movement” called The Harlem Renaissance. Zora Neale Hurston understood the power of films. Her films covered so many aspects of African American southern life in films like *Children Games*, *Logging and Fieldwork* (1928), *Baptism* (1929) and, *There Stands a Bluebird* (1935). She also made films on stories and folklore from her hometown of Eatonville, Florida (a town founded by African Americans) zombies in Haiti, and films for the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

*MARIA P. WILLIAMS – DIRECTOR, PRODUCER AND WRITER*

Maria P. Williams (1866-1932) wrote, produced, directed, distributed and acted in her five-reel crime drama, *The Flames of Wrath* (1923). There is only one frame of *The Flames of Wrath* that is known to exist at the UCLA Library. She and her husband, Jesse L. Williams, a Kansas City businessman, distributed the film by forming the Western Film Producing Company and Booking Exchanges. The *Norfolk Journal and Guide* (May 5, 1923) regarded Maria as the first African American film producer in the United States. Maria and Jesse also operated their own motion picture theater.

Maria P. Williams was a woman of many skills, besides filmmaking. She was a school teacher, a social and political activist, an editor-and-chief of a weekly Kansas City, Kansas newspaper, *New Era*, an editor and publisher of a Kansas City, Missouri newspaper called *Women’s Voice*. She published a short pamphlet discussing her political and social views called, “My Work and Public Sentiment.” Maria’s productive life was cut short when she was murdered and left on the side of the road. Ironically, the
caption on the pamphlet she published said that ten percent of the proceeds from the pamphlet would be used for “the suppression of crime among Negroes.”

**TRESSIE J. SOUDERS – PRODUCER, SCREENWRITER AND DIRECTOR**

Tressie J. Souders (1897-1995) produced, directed and wrote anthropological documentary films. The year 1922 was auspicious not only because the Ku Klux Klan first emerged in western Missouri and eastern Kansas in 1922, but also because of the release of Tressie’s film, *A Woman’s Error*. The film was one of two African American films distributed by the Afro-American Film Exhibitors Company of Baltimore and Dallas (“the largest distributor of releasers and photoplays”)66 *Billboard* (an African American publication) said that *A Woman’s Error* was the first film produced by an African American woman and it was a true portrayal of African American life.67 Tressie moved from Kansas City, Missouri to Los Angeles in 1926 to continue making films. *A Woman’s Error* was her only known film and no known prints exist of the film. It seems that Tressie also worked as a maid in private homes throughout her life.68

**CONCLUSION**

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, movie going was a popular form of leisure.69 African American audiences went to African American and White owned theaters (sitting in segregated spaces) to see “race films.” In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African American audiences saw films in all sorts of venues, such as community centers and churches. In Chicago, the legendary Pekin Theatre became the
first African American owned theatre in 1906. The theatre was controversial for being a former saloon, owned by gambler, Robert T. Morris and located in Chicago’s vice district. Surprisingly, Ida B Wells, a prominent Civil Rights advocate was not one of the critics. She felt that the Pekin Theatre was important for building unity and she used the theatre for a benefit to raise money for an African American settlement house that was a success. Every effort was made to make the “Stroll” theaters, like the Pekin, Grand and the Monogram Theaters in Chicago’s Black Belt, exemplary sites to show movies and have other forms of entertainment.70

African American audiences were not interested in going to see Hollywood films that denigrated African Americans. Therefore, White audiences primarily saw these films. However, Hollywood got into the picture by creating African American films like Hollywood’s first all-Black cast film in 1929, Hearts in Dixie and Hallelujah! The African American press’ enthusiasm affected the livelihood of African American independent filmmakers.71 African American audiences flocked to see Hollywood films that had popular African American stars like actresses Theresa Harris, Fredi Washington and Nina Mae McKinney. However, in the Hollywood films African American women could only be domestics, vamps, aunties, or sing and dance their way through Hollywood films.

African Americans were only performers in Hollywood films. Therefore, African Americans who wanted to create their own films and have greater control of their stories, in front and behind the camera, needed African American audiences to see their films.
Hollywood, essentially, led to the demise of the African American filmmaker. Hollywood’s deeper pockets and media machine made it impossible for African American filmmakers to compete with these advantages.

Besides the financial and technical challenges African American independent filmmakers faced, Hollywood began making their own all-Black films that drew African American audiences away from the African American independent films. The Hollywood films could not deliver on substance and did not address the concerns of the African American community. In an effort to compete, “race movies then changed from organic Black entertainment to knock-offs of standard Hollywood fare, like westerns, crime dramas and musicals, but now, featuring an all-Black cast,” for example, a very good drama called Broken Strings (1940) with Clarence Muse (who provided some dialogue) and Sybil Lewis and directed by Bernard Ray. Clarence Muse is a violinist who loses the use of his fingers, but his young son takes his violin to perform a swing tune in a contest on a radio show. Although, initially upset that his son has refused to play the classics, the father changes his opinion when his son wins the contest and suddenly, the father regains the use of his fingers. Butterfly McQueen appeared for a brief moment as a typist in Killer Diller (1948) with Jackie “Moms” Mabley and Nat King Cole, produced by All American. The film was nothing more than a musical revue that featured vaudeville entertainers and contemporary performers. Particularly interesting is that the performances were filmed before a live audience. The camera pans from the stage to the audience showing Whites seated below and African Americans
seated in the balcony. Oscar Micheaux’s later films are a classic example, particularly since White backers eventually owned his company with him as the producer.

The introduction of sound technology that was resisted by some African American filmmakers was another factor in the disappearance of African American independent films. The cost of sound technology was a deterrent for African American men and women filmmakers already financially strapped to make silent films. Hollywood films had greater popularity with African American audiences because African American cinema could be accused of not creating a Black film aesthetic to engage African American audiences. Also, the Great Depression gripped America and was devastating to African American filmmakers already dealing with economic and distribution struggles. African American audiences on the lower economic strata or jobless would not regard movie going as a priority during the Depression.

Ignoring the negative aspects of being an independent African American filmmaker, there were African American women filmmakers who continued to make films beyond the silent film era. Eslanda Cardozo Goode Robeson’s last credited role was in Jericho/Dark Sands (1937) with her husband, Paul Robeson. Alice B. Russell appeared in her husband, Oscar Micheaux’s last film, Betrayal (1948) and worked in her last role as producer on her husband’s film Birthright (1924). Directors and producers like Tressie Souders, Mary P. Williams and Madame E. Touissant Welcome made only one film. Zora Neale Hurston made several films and her last film, Baptism, was in 1929.
Until the end of the so-called “race films,” African American men and women churned out films that were relatable to the lives of African American audiences. African American filmmakers lived in the urban cities and the city was a backdrop for stories about survival and the dangers of living in the big city, such as corruption and vice. African American filmmakers came from all walks of life to uplift the race through a medium with the potential to educate and a platform to protest the treatment of African Americans throughout the country. Film was especially important for the less educated men and women who migrated from the South to the urban cities.

Based on statistics from the Library of Congress, seventy-five to ninety per cent of silent films that were produced before 1930 are lost. Once sound films were produced, silent films were not regarded as important. Footage was lost, destroyed by fires (nitrate film was highly flammable). Production companies ran out of money. No one considered archiving films, not even the major motion picture companies.

As for the African American woman striving for an acting career in Hollywood, struggle, repression, redemption, frustration and artistic spirit are the adjectives that come to mind when talking about the journey African American women have taken from the cusp of minstrelsy to vaudeville and from silent films to talkies. From this span of time, women performing in minstrelsy through the fifties, African American women were fighting the same fight and that is, for a chance for equal opportunities in the film industry. Nina Mae McKinney, Louise Beavers, Butterfly McQueen, Hattie McDaniel, Fredi Washington, Francine Everett, Theresa Harris and Lena Horne and so many others
wanted film careers in Hollywood that were comparable to their White counterparts. But instead, Hollywood producers set them up to let them down. MGM signed contracts with African American actresses, Fredi Washington and Nina Mae McKinney, for example, and then they were not getting work. They refused roles as maids and Hollywood producers would not let African American actresses, regardless of their acting abilities and looks, upstage White actresses. African American actresses, like Dorothy Dandridge, Fredi Washington, Theresa Harris, Lena Horne and Nina Mae McKinney, were admired for their beauty, but it could only get them so far. Lena Horne was a survivor in Hollywood, but her contemporary, Dorothy Dandridge, tried to play up to the White establishment, by having affairs with actor Peter Lawford and director/producer, Otto Preminger. But in the end, she was rejected and betrayed, and personal and professional disappointments contributed to her untimely death at the age of forty-two in 1965. Dorothy became the poster child for the tragic mulatta. Her acclaimed performances in \textit{Porgy and Bess} and \textit{Carmen Jones} did little to give her the parts she wanted and her relationship with Preminger was contentious as he tried to control her film choices. She was not as strong as her contemporaries who did what they had to do to survive and refused to compromise their principals, like Horne and Washington who would not take parts as domestics. While actresses, like Louise Beavers, Hattie McDaniel, Butterfly McQueen and Theresa Harris, found themselves repeatedly playing domestics. Theresa lamented that she “never had the chance to rise above the role of maid in Hollywood movies. My color was against me anyway you looked at it.”

Theresa, Louise, Hattie and Butterfly did domestic work in real-life when they weren’t
getting acting roles. They, along with Lena Horne and Fredi Washington, enlightened African Americans about Hollywood and the lack of decent roles. The fleeting moments they received for the work they did in Hollywood films was not enough to give them leading roles. A Los Angeles Times critic once wrote that Imitation of Life’s success is due to Louis Beavers performance. However, the racial climate of the times refused to acknowledge the significance she and other African American actresses made to films by offering her better and more varied roles. After Octavia Spencer won the Best Supporting Actress award in 2012 for her role as a maid in the Help, she told a reporter for Vibe magazine that ninety percent of the subsequent roles being offered to her were as maids. However, none of those roles were as well-written as the one she played in the Help and this was the reason she turned them all down.
NOTES

1 http://www.inmotionaame.org/print.cfm


4 Most historians use 1619 as a starting point: twenty Africans, referred to as “servants” arrived in Jamestown, VA on a Dutch ship. It’s important to note, however, that they were not the first Africans on American soil. Africans first arrived in America in the late 16th century not as slaves but as explorers together with Spanish and Portuguese explorers. One of the best known of these African “conquistadors” was Estevancio who traveled throughout the southeast from present day Florida to Texas. As far as the institution of chattel slavery – the treatment of slaves as property – in the United States, if we use 1619 as the beginning and the 1865 Thirteenth Amendment as its end then it lasted 246 years, not 400. http://www.rawstory.com/2014/10/four-myths-about-slavery-in-the-us


The blackface tradition originated in the days of slavery when African Americans were not permitted to appear on the stage. White minstrels blackened their faces with burnt corks.


8 www.black-face.com


14  Belgium-born filmmaker, Agnes Varda, when asked if it was difficult being a woman director said, “It is difficult being a director, period! It is difficult to be free; it is difficult not to be drowned in the system. We have a lot of women in the film industry. It is in terms of consciousness that we have not got it right.”


16  When Hattie McDaniel performed in local minstrel shows at East Turner Hall in Denver, Colorado and in vaudeville with her older brother, Sam, they refused to do characters where they rolled their eyes or wore blackface.

Bertha Regustus was a pioneering African American actress who played the comedic lead in *What Happened in the Tunnel* (1903) and *Laughing Gas* (1907). *Laughing Gas*, played by Regustus, as the character Mandy (as indicated in the Edison Catalogue) was not a “race film.” Chuck Williamson a film critic for *The Missing Slate* wrote in his article “Laughing Gas: The Close-up and Racial Spectacle” (October 2, 2014) that the film “traffics in racial spectacle.” Williamson believes that Porter’s use of close-ups “does not elicit audience identification with our heroine or drum up some sort of cross-racial empathy with her plight, but instead tries to jolt, jostle and stimulate.”

There was a film called *The Masher* that had a similar theme to *What Happened in the Tunnel*. The title gives some idea about the story. A White man who considers himself a ladies’ man goes around making advances at White women who ignore him. Eventually, he meets a woman that allows him to kiss her. However, she conceals her identity and then he discovers the woman is not White, but an African American woman. He is appalled and runs away.

Libby Taylor played Jasmine in *Belle of the Nineties* with Mae West. Taylor was a domestic for Mae West in real-life. She traveled with Mae West who left New York for Hollywood. West considered Taylor not only her maid, but a trusted good friend.

22 *Alice Adams* was adapted from the 1922 Pulitzer Prize winning novel by Booth Tarkington. In the film, Hattie McDaniel is not the domestic who helps her employer cover-up her mistakes, but quietly and knowingly watches her employer make a fool of herself. McDaniel, as Malena, is hired to cook and wait on Alice’s family and a wealthy dinner guest, Arthur Russell (Fred MacMurray) who she is trying to impress. When Alice (Katherine Hepburn) and her mother, Mrs. Adams (Ann Shoemaker) ignore McDaniel’s query about serving hot food on a hot, sweltering summer night, the results are so disastrous that Alice tries to blame Malena to cover up her own embarrassment. The hot food has everyone at the dinner table sweating uncontrollably. McDaniel’s performance is hilarious. Malena (McDaniel) is forced to wear a black maid’s uniform, with a little white laced hair piece, so that Alice can make a feeble attempt at creating an air of sophistication for Russell who is wealthy. Each time Malena returns from the kitchen with plates of food for the guests, she is sweating even more profusely until eventually, her walk becomes a shuffle and the white lace hairpiece falls over her eyes.

Studio executives asked if Lucille LeSueur was “Joan Crawford’s” real name because of her reputation for being a free-spirit earlier in her career.

When David Oyelowo, British Nigerian actor and producer, won a Virtuosos Award at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival, on February 1, 2015, for his portrayal of Martin Luther King in Ava DuVernay’s Selma, he astutely stated, during a Q&A, that “Generally speaking, we as Black people have been celebrated more for when we are subservient, when we are not being leaders or kings or being in the center of our own narrative, driving it forward.”

Martin Luther King Sr. (father of Martin Luther King, Jr.) received an invitation to the cotillion ball held in Atlanta at the premiere of Gone with the Wind. He attended the event with his son; choosing not to boycott the film because the African American cast was not permitted to attend.

Hattie Daniel’s speech at the 12th Annual Academy Award in 1939, “Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science, fellow members of the motion picture industry and honored guests, this is one of the happiest moments of my life and I want to thank each one of you who had a part in selecting me for one of their awards. For your kindness, it has made me feel very, very humble and I shall always hold it as a beacon for anything I may be able to do in the future. I sincerely hope I shall always be a credit to my race and to the motion picture industry. My heart is too full to tell you just how I feel (begins to
get choked up) and may I say thank you (walks away from microphone while wiping her eye with handkerchief) and may God bless you.” (Applause) Hattie didn’t make a political speech like they would do today for getting snubbed at the premieres in Georgia and California.

28 Hattie McDaniel’s last role was as a domestic in the television comedy, Beulah in 1951, a role she assumed after actress, Ethel Waters left the show because of mounting criticism from African Americans about Waters’ character and the show. Ruby Dandridge, mother of Dorothy Dandridge, played opposite McDaniel as Beulah’s neighbor Oriole. Ruby was chosen to replace Butterfly McQueen who had been partnered with Waters.


30 Louise Beavers was being interviewed in 1935 by Lula Jones Garrett, a journalist for the Baltimore Afro-American.

hundred pounds. He regarded Hattie as “one of the screen’s greatest presences, a pre-Fellini-esque figure of the absurd and a marvel of energetic verve and enthusiasm.”


33 In 1931, during the pre-code period, before the Hays Production code enforced censorship guidelines, Louise Beavers appeared in twelve films, besides *Ladies of the Big House*, such as an American crime drama, *Scandal Sheet* and three romantic comedies: *Don’t Bet on Women, Party Husband* and *Annabelle’s Affairs*.


36 McQueen, Butterfly, interview in *People* magazine, 28, Jan. 1980, p. 36.

(an organization that promotes nontheism “the absence of an espoused belief in God or gods” and defends the constitution’s separation of church and state) spent $2,100 on six signs that would appear inside fifty Madison transit buses for two months in Madison, Wisconsin, using Butterfly McQueen’s quote, “As my ancestors are free from slavery, I am free from the slavery of religion.” White, Gayle, “Gone with the Wind Can’t Shed Its Racism,” Atlanta Journal-Constitution online, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 8 Oct. 1989, accessed 19 Dec. 2016. Butterfly McQueen was interviewed by reporter, Gayle White and told her, “As my ancestors are free from slavery, I am free from the slavery of religion.”


40 The “one drop rule” is a social and legal principle in America that states if a mixed-raced person is of African and European ancestry that person is considered Black.

Conrad, Earl, “Pass or Not to Pass?” *The Chicago Defender*, John Sengstacke, 16 Jun. 1945 accessed 19 Dec. 2016. Fredi Washington was interviewed by Earl Conrad and told him, “I am an American citizen and by God, we all have inalienable rights and whenever and wherever those rights are tampered with, there is nothing left to do but fight...and I fight. How many people do you think there are in this country who do not have mixed blood, there's very few if any, what makes us who we are our culture and experience. No matter how white I look, on the inside I feel black. There are many Whites who are of mixed blood, but still go by White, why such a big deal if I go as Negro, because people can't believe that I am proud to be a Negro and not white. To prove I don't buy White superiority I chose to be a Negro.”


Regester, pp. 54-57.


Regester, p. 50. King Vidor’s *Hallelujah!* was controversial on the set. Eva Jessye said that on the production different lunches were served for the White and African American casts.


In a tape from the 1990’s, host Bob Dorian on *American Movie Classics* (*AMC*) did an introduction to the airing of *Buck Benny Rides Again*. The film was originally scheduled to premiere at the Paramount Theater, downtown in New York City, in 1940. But Jack Benny, who greatly admired Eddie “Rochester” Anderson as a friend and his enormous contributions to Benny’s career, debuted the film, the night before the Paramount, in Harlem at the Loew’s Victoria Theater. It was a star-studded event that


55 Tuttle, William, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*, NY: Antheum Press, 1970 pp. 14-15. The race riot began when an African American youth drowned because he was stoned to death by White beachgoers for swimming in a segregated pool; triggering a violent summer. The reasons for at least twenty-five riots in Chicago that summer in 1919 had been a long time brewing for many reasons such as: the Great Migration of African Americans to Chicago after World War I, a tighter job market and African Americans moving into all-White neighborhoods to find adequate housing. Also, see http://www.blackpast.org/aah/Chicago-race-riot-1919.


59 Delta Sigma Theta Sorority was founded on January 13, 1913 by twenty-two collegiate women at Howard University. These students wanted to use their collective strength to promote academic excellence and to provide assistance to persons in need. The first public act performed by the Delta Founders involved their participation in the Women's Suffrage March in Washington D.C., March 1913. Delta Sigma Theta was incorporated in 1930. [www.deltasigmatheota.org/archive-13/history.htm](http://www.deltasigmatheota.org/archive-13/history.htm)

Famous African American women who belonged to Delta Sigma sorority are sculptor and lithographer, Elizabeth Catlett; Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm; Myrlie Evers Williams, former wife of murdered civil rights activist, Medgar Evers; Dorothy I. Height, a Carter appointee to the Presidential Commission on a National Agenda in the 1980s and Congresswoman Barbara Jordan.
Rasby, Barbara, *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013, p. 48. Eslanda was with her husband, Paul Robeson and pianist and singer Lawrence Brown when she wrestled a would-be purse snatcher to the ground in New York City from stealing travel money she had for Paul and Larry.

The Baha’i faith based their doctrine on the belief that mankind is one and that there is no difference between Black and White. Therefore, humankind should be treated with love.


The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural, artistic and social movement in Harlem that occurred from 1918 to the mid-1930s. The notable literati who were a part of this “New Negro Movement” (named after Alan Locke’s 1925 anthology, *The New Negro*) included W.E.B. Dubois, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson.


www.fultonhistory.com/newspaper


68 There were other African American women, were working in film, who also needed to take jobs doing domestic work to support themselves, like Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen.


70 Lupack, Barbara, ed., *Early Race Filmmaking in America*, NY: Routledge, 2016, p. 166. The Stroll centered on 35th and State until the late 1920’s. It was a cordoned-off town square for African Americans that had theaters, restaurants, dance halls and businesses.

History of Blackface. www.black-face.com

ILLUSTRATIONS

(1) Bertha Regustus in Movie Frame from Edwin S. Porter’s *Laughing Gas* (1907).

(2) Bertha Regustus in Movie Frame from *What Happened in the Tunnel* (1903).

(4) Madame Sul-Te-Wan as Ruva in Horror Film Black Moon (1934), from womeninhorrormonth.tumblr.com; Web; 7 Jan. 2017.
(5) Actress Hattie McDaniel (Headshot) from tellmehowilooknow.wordpress.com; Web; 7 Jan 2017.

(6) Hattie McDaniel and Vivien Leigh in Gone with the Wind (1939), from The Red List@theredlist.com; Web; 7 Jan 2017.
(7) Louise Beavers in *Bullets or Ballots* (1936), from tumblr.com; Web; 7 Jan 2017.

(8) Sylvia Sydney (l) and Louise Beavers (r), *Ladies of the Big House* (1931) Color Poster, from moirasthread.blogspot.com; Web; 7 Jan 2017.
(9) Butterfly McQueen and Joan Crawford in Movie Frame from *Mildred Pierce* (1945)

(10) Publicity shot of African American actress Fredi Washington in *One Mile From Heaven* (20th Century Fox), 1937, from gettyimages.co.uk.com; Web; 7 Jan 2017.
(11) Louise Beavers (l) and Fredi Washington (r) *Imitation of Life* (1934), from girlsdofilm.wordpress.com; Web.; 7 Jan 2017.

(13) Actress and Performer Nina Mae McKinney (darkened skin), Publicity Shot for *Hallelujah!* (1929), from blackpast@blackpast.org; Image courtesy of Ruth Harriet Louise; Web; 7 Jan 2017.

(14) Publicity Shot of Actress Nina Mae McKinney, from vintage everyday@vintage.es, 12 Jun 2016; Web; 7 Jan 2017.

(17) Lena Horne uncredited as a singer in *Panama Hattie* (1942), from nydailynews.com; Everett Collection; Web; 7 Jan 2017.

(18) Theresa Harris cover story by Jet magazine about her roles as a maid, from flicker.com; Web; 7 Jan 2017.
(19) Barbara Stanwyck (L) and Theresa Harris (R) in *Baby Face* (1933), from lipstickalley.com; Web; 7 Jan 2017.

(21) Anita Reynolds (center) as an Attendant in *Thief of Bagdad* (1924), from nytimes.com/2014/02/17; Kino Lorber Inc.; Web; 7 Jan 2017.

(22) Oscar Micheaux’s controversial film *The Homesteader* (1919) featuring Evelyn Preer, from legacyfilm.org.uk; Web; 7 Jan 2017.
(23) Ethel Moses (R) in Birthright (1939), from npr.org; Courtesy of Kino Lorber Inc.; Web; 7 Jan 2017.

(24) Talented leading lady, Dorothy Van Engle appeared in Oscar Micheaux films (1934-1939), from angelfire.com; Web; 7 Jan 2017.
(25) Actress Edna Mae Harris (L) appeared in Hollywood and Oscar Micheaux’s films, from publicdomainmovies.net; Web; 7 Jan 2017.

(27) The Blood of Jesus (1941), from blackfilmcenterarchive.wordpress.com; Web; 7 Jan 2017

(28) Actress Cathryn Caviness as Sister Martha Ann Jackson in Spencer Williams’ The Blood of Jesus (1941), hollywoodsoapbox.com, 14 Feb 2016, Photo Courtesy Film Forum, via Kino Lorber Inc; Web; 7 Jan 2017.

(30) Myra Hemmings starred, produced, directed *Do Down Death!* with Spencer Williams, from alchetron.com; Web; 7 Jan 2017.

(32) Lobby card of movie frame from *The Betrayal* (1948), starred in and produced by Alice B. Russell (center); Oscar Micheaux’s last film.
(33) Eslanda Cardozo Goode – Singer, Actress, Publicist and Business Manager for her husband, Paul Robeson, from alchetron.com; Web; 7 Jan 2017.

(34) Movie frame of Eslanda as the café owner with Paul in the film Big Fella (1937)
(35) Movie Frame from *Hellbound Train* (1929)

(36) Drusilla Dunjee Houston, Screenwriter, from blackpast.org; image ownership: public domain; Web; 7 Jan 2017.
(37) *Doing Their Bit*, Image based on Madame Touissant Welcome’s 12-Part Documentary, from masshist.org; 2014 Sep; Web; 7 Jan 2017.

(38) Zora Neale Hurston, Filmmaker, Novelist, Anthropologist, from Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Colored Woman Is Big Film Producer

(Pacific News Bureau)

Kansas City, Mo.—Kansas City is claiming the honor of having the first colored woman film producer in the United States, in the person of Mrs. Maria P. Williams. As secretary and treasurer of the Western Film Producing Co., a Negro corporation of Kansas City, Mrs. Williams has just completed “The Flames of Wrath,” a five reel mystery drama, written, acted and produced entirely by colored people.

Headed by Roxie Mankins and J ohn Burton the cast includes Chas. Pearson, Anna Kelso, John Johnson and Frank Colbert. Samuel Ellison, of Kansas City, Kansas, is the author.

Poor Sunday School

(SAT MAY 5 1923)

(The Associated Negro Press)

Atlanta, Ga.—Something akin to alarming figures concerning the Negro Church was given out by Dr. I. Garland Penn, of Cincinnati, Ohio, corresponding sec-

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