

Aja Jones

H01263327

jonesab@hbu.edu

Southern History Museum

Mentor: Dr. Doni Wilson

“Hattie McDaniel Doll, 1989”

“A Credit to my Race: On Boundaries of Black Film Performance”

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

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

Black women. Black actors and actresses suffered from this social standard, often falling into this category without much consideration.

Many have harshly criticized actresses who accept roles that perpetuate this stereotype, arguing that these roles are harmful to the development of Black people. In a 1947 essay published in the *Hollywood Reporter*, Hattie McDaniel addresses these reviewers, arguing that "critics think the public more naïve than it actually is" (McDaniel 1947). McDaniel was well-known for her servile roles, her name quickly becoming synonymous with the title "mammy;" she portrayed a maid or houseworker in numerous films throughout the 1930s. Her full figure and resonant voice made producers partial to casting McDaniel as these characters. Film critics often maintain that McDaniel elevated this character type, though Black audiences did not appreciate her routine domestic roles (Wilson 2017). McDaniel grew to ignore the critics, recognizing the path she was blazing. Twentieth-century production of the Mammy doll represents the impact McDaniel's characters made, regardless of the varying opinions expressed at the time.

The entertainment industry of the 19th and 20th centuries met little significant protest as they portrayed Black characters in this narrow scope. Characters within this domain remained popular throughout a time of intense change in America and still remain so, though on a less noticeable scale. With this in mind, one must question how cartoonish Black characters, such as Mammy, managed to have such longevity. How could these thinly veiled mockeries be sustained as America raced toward the Civil Rights era and desegregation movements? Ardent consumption of these stereotypes throughout history certainly encourages the continued production of these films. Confident performances from Black actors may also foster a space for these roles to be upheld. Whatever the cause, Black actors have suffered from this preservation.

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

The hot button topic of Black representation in the film industry remains one with no clear resolution or neutral point. Hattie McDaniel and her famous portrayal of "Mammy" in *Gone with the Wind* highlights the flaws in the film industry's approach to displaying blackness. This performance plays towards generalizations of Black people, appealing to the white gaze in the 1930s. In spite of this, McDaniel's work also demonstrates hopefulness for Black representation in future big-screen productions. Her success at the Academy Awards and popularity with the public because of this film proves that these roles are not detrimental to one's career. Hattie McDaniel's groundbreaking achievement offers a new perspective on the depictions of blackness in film. She encourages young black performers to redefine blackness through their roles.

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

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