

UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

Name: Rasheda A. Washington

College: Business Administration Department: Logistics & Transportation

Faculty Mentor: Dr. John O. Hodges

PROJECT TITLE: The Black Black Berry: Depiction of Black People
in Film

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: John O. Hodges, Faculty Mentor

Date: May 15, 2002

Comments (Optional):

This is an interesting topic that is very suggestive for those concerned with the film industry. Ms. Washington has done a good job.

**The Black Black Berry: Depiction of Black
People in Film**

Rasheeda A. Washington
Faculty Mentor: Dr. John O. Hodges
Spring 2002

Abstract

Throughout American history, there has been a notable difference in the roles played by dark-skinned and fair-skinned black actors and actresses. The Black Berry: Depiction of Black People in Film explores the portrayal of black people in the film industry. It proposes black people are portrayed differently in film according to their skin complexion and physical features. This difference in portrayal between fair-skinned and dark-skinned blacks is based on two premises. The first premise states the difference in portrayal was partially based upon the believability of the characters. In film, it is imperative that actors and actresses are convincing in the roles they play. For black actors and actresses, “the right look” was based upon skin complexion and physical features. The second premise explores the notion of “the white ideal.” Fair-skinned blacks played more favorable characters because white-American audiences could identify with them since they favored white people.

This paper presents the five predominant types of characters portrayed by blacks in the film industry; discusses how physical attributes and skin complexion played a role in the parts assigned to black actors and actresses; and explores how the roles played by these entertainers were linked to the political and social climate of the time.

Preface

I racked my brain for weeks in an attempt to develop a research topic that was both interesting to me and one I felt would contribute to my academic community. Though I am a business student, I wanted to explore issues within the black community that would be of interest to other college students. One night I documented several areas of the black community I wanted to learn more about. Among those were papers related to oral tradition, interracial dating, self-love in the black community, and the issue of skin-color within the black community. My faculty mentor, Dr. John O. Hodges, and I finally decided on an idea called The Black Black Berry. The title of this paper came from an old phrase used in defense of dark-skinned blacks, "The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice." This phrase has been used in other works such as Wallace Thurman's "The Blacker the Berry," which explores the issue of skin-complexion within the black community during the Harlem Renaissance.

American attitudes towards black people have changed radically and often. As society and American attitudes change, so did the way black people were depicted in film. Thoughts of strangeness, domestic familiarity, moral controversy, pity, hatred, bewilderment, and curiosity dominated the public mind when it came to blacks (Locke 269). There were three predominant themes concerning blacks during the pre-Civil War and Reconstruction Era (1845-1895). First, black was ugly. Black had both a negative denotation and connotation and was associated with negative things in society. Second, blacks were thought to be happy servants. The South wanted to depict its Negroes as being happy slaves that thanked their masters and mistresses for domesticating them and giving their lives purpose and order. These servants were usually wearing their uniform

and a permanent smile. They were happy serving the white population and never thought of themselves as being oppressed (“Ethnic Notions”). Finally, blacks were savages. This was the pervading theme of the South during the Reconstruction Era. It was during this time that abolitionists were trying to invoke interest and sentiment for blacks; so the South responded by painting the blacks as brute villains (Locke 271). The film “Birth of a Nation” (1915) brought this image to the silver screen to show the danger of disturbing the “moral order at work in the universe” by not keeping black people in their place (Bogle 10). Though all blacks have been portrayed negatively in American films, this paper particularly focuses on the differences in how dark-skinned and fair-skinned blacks have been depicted.

The terms fair-skinned and dark-skinned will be used often in this paper. Within the black community, a black person’s skin complexion was often gauged by the brown-paper bag test. If a black person was lighter than a brown-paper bag, he or she was considered fair-skinned. If not, he or she was considered to be dark-skinned. The concept of the brown-paper bag test is used in this research to distinguish between fair-skinned and dark-skinned blacks.

Finally, there may be terms used in this paper that are offensive in nature. These terms are used as a part of the research and do not reflect any personal values, language, or beliefs.

The Black Black Berry

*If you white, you alright.
If you brown, stick around.
But if you black, get back.*

There has been a difference in the types of roles dark-skinned blacks and fair-skinned blacks have played in the film industry. On average, dark-skinned blacks played characters that were as Webster defined the word black, “opposite of white.” These characters usually represented the antithesis to the average, upstanding, white citizen. Dark-skinned blacks played roles in which they were domestics or militant people. They have usually been portrayed as being unattractive, uneducated, simple, hostile, dedicated, and domestic/industrial people. Fair-skinned blacks usually played roles in which their characters were similar to white Americans. They usually had leading roles and played a variety of characters ranging from the romantic leads to the educated black professionals. Fair-skinned blacks have been characterized as being attractive, educated, exotic, delicate, sophisticated, well groomed, and sometimes desirous of being white. The Black Black Berry: Depiction of Black People in Film explores how skin complexion and physical features were used when depicting blacks in the film industry.

The Five Black Stereotypes

“If it was so glorious to be black, why was it the yellow-skinned people had so much prestige? I found always the blackest Negro being made the butt end of all jokes.”

- Zora Neale Hurston

Throughout history, blacks have played five basic types of characters in film. These characters are the tom, the coon, the mammy, the black brute, and the tragic mulatto. Most times, skin complexion and physical features determined which roles black actors and actresses would play. Dark-skinned blacks usually portrayed the tom, coon, mammy, and black brute. Tom, coon, and mammy were usually depicted as

simple, docile, carefree, lazy, unattractive, sexless, animal-like, and/or obedient servants representative of the black race. They had strong black features such as wide eyes, thick lips, broad noses, and other Negroid features. Dark-skinned blacks also played the black brute. This character was not as subservient or simple as the tom, the mammy, or the coon. Fair-skinned blacks usually played roles more favorable or sympathetic roles. The tragic mulatto, romantic lead characters, and black middle-class were usually played by fair-skinned blacks that had European features such as thin lips, pointed noses, and fine, straight hair. The five stereotypical characters played by blacks in the film industry display how black people were depicted based on skin complexion and physical features.

Tom

The tom was the first black character to appear in films. He was first introduced in the film version of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. The tom was a faithful Christian servant who always keeps the faith and is devoted to his master regardless of how he is treated. It is said that the tom "chased, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, keep[s] the faith, n'er turn against [his] white massa, and remain[s] hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so very kind" (Bogle 3). A dark-skinned black actor played the tom character most times.

Mammy

The black maid, mammy, made her film debut in 1914. Mammy was usually "big, fat, and cantankerous" (Bogle 9). She was haughty and known for her fierce independence. The traditional mammy had an offshoot, Aunt Jemina. Aunt Jemima was more tom-like in the sense that she was religious, and was usually described as being "sweet, jolly, and good tempered... more polite and not as headstrong as mammy"

(Bogle 9). Both mammy and Aunt Jemima had a defining physical appearance.

Actresses wanting to play these characters had to be dark-skinned, possess Negroid features, and be overweight. Mammy had no sexual allure and was presented as the antithesis to the white woman (“Ethnic Notions”). Louise Beavers, the first distinctive mammy figure was described as being “a big boned, robust woman with skin that was as smooth as chocolate velvet, and eyes bright, large, and wondrously naïve” (Bogle 62).

The Coon

The coon was said to be the most blatantly degrading of all the black stereotypes. He was an amusement object and black buffoon that lacked the single-mindedness of tom. The pure coon first appeared in 1905 “as no-account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting craps, or butchering the English language” (Bogle 8). Two of the most famous pure coon characters are Rastus and Sambo.

The pure coon had two variant types: Pickaninny and Uncle Remus. The pickaninny was a “harmless, little screwball creation whose eyes popped, whose hair stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were pleasant and diverting” (Bogle 9). Popular pickaninny characters include Stymie, Farina, Sunshine Sammy, and Buckwheat. Uncle Remus was popular during the 1930s and 1940s as a harmless and congenial character. He was a mixture of the pure coon and tom and is described as being quaint, naïve, and philosophizing (Bogle 8). All coons were dark-skinned males. The coon actors usually had the appearance of being “slow-witted, simple-minded, obtuse, and confused humbug[s]” (Bogle 39).

The Tragic Mulatto

The tragic mulatto was a likable and sympathetic character who could have had a better life had it not been for that one drop of black blood. Tragic mulattoes were “near-white” and characterized as being “intransigent, the resentful, the mentally alert, the proofs of the Negro’s possibilities (Brown 277). They were usually beautiful, educated, sophisticated, and sometimes desirous of being white. Fair-skinned actors and actresses were preferred for roles involving interracial dating, middle-class blacks, and all romantic leads played by black women. Though males played the tragic mulatto at times, women were cast in this role more often. The black heroine was typically fair-skinned, beautiful, passive, and had classic European features (Russell, Wilson, Hall 135). For both men and women, the life of the tragic mulatto almost always met a tragic end. One of the most famous characters of this type is Peola (renamed Sarah Jane in later versions) played by Fredi Washington in “Imitation of Life.”

Brute Negro

The brute Negro was the last of the five types of black film characters. He began in literature with the South painting the Negro as a brute and villain after the Civil War (Locke 271). He first appeared in film in 1915 in “Birth of a Nation” where on-screen was unleashed the supposed “sadism and bestiality innate in the Negro” (Bogle 12). The brute Negro was like a noble savage. He had a “certain primitive nobility and simple dignity” (Bogle 13). There were two types of brute Negroes: the black brute and the black buck. The black brute was a barbaric black out to raise havoc. His physical violence was supposedly an outlet for his sexual repression. The black bucks were “big, baadddd niggers, over-sexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh” (Bogle 13). The brute Negro suggested violence and power, “a dash and daring never

before exhibited by a black male” (Bogle 225). Dark-skinned actors always played the brute Negro to help convey the idea of him being a “pure creature.

This brief overview of the five black character types in film is just the beginning of how dark-skinned and fair-skinned blacks were depicted differently in film.

Believability of the Characters

*Black is black and black is blue.
Black is bright and black is you
- Childhood rhyme*

Talent is not enough to make a performer a believable character. Entertainers must have the right persona and the right looks. For black actors and actresses, the right looks went beyond having a baby-face, a rigid smile, or a frigid stare. Skin complexion and physical features were factors in having the “right look” for blacks in the film industry. These factors were considered when casting black actors and actresses for certain roles. The difference in the roles played by blacks based on skin-complexion and physical features may be attributed to the believability of the characters. It was easy to imagine a dark-skinned, broad nose, thick lip, black person smacking on a big slice of watermelon; just as it was easy to imagine a slender, fair-skinned, well-dressed black woman as a schoolteacher.

Skin-complexion and physical features helped black actors and actresses be more believable in the roles they played. Dark skin and Negroid features contributed to performers being more convincing in roles involving domesticity, comedy, and violence. Negroid features include broad noses, thick kinky/curly hair, wide eyes, full lips, and full, round faces. Fair skin and European features made actors and actresses viable candidates

for roles involving romantic leads, the black middle-class, and black professionals.

European features include narrow noses, straight, fine hair, small eyes, thin lips, and narrow faces. These Negroid or European physical features along with skin complexion seemed to suggest a degree of ethnicity about the actors and actresses which helped them look the part. It seemed that the darker a black person's skin was and the more Negroid features he/she possessed, the more "ethnic" or "black" he or she was thought to be. This same ideal held true for fair-skinned blacks that possessed more European features. They were thought to be less black.

Black actors and actresses were cast to look the part they played. After the smoke cleared from the Reconstruction Era, the period of depicting black people as villains had come and gone. The 1920s was the time of the jester; and it was during this time that the "high stepping and high faultin' and crazy as all get-out" comic Negro was introduced to the screen (Bogle 19). Roles such as the coon or tom suggested Negro inferiority, and fair-skinned black men were too close to being white to be depicted as being inferior. For the famous coon actor Stepin Fetchit, his dark skin, broad nose, thick lips, wide forehead, and aloof look seemed to scream lazy, uneducated, carefree, and simple. Other coon actors such as Willie Best and Mantan Moreland were all dark-skinned, and rarely, if ever, will one find a fair-skinned man playing such a demeaning and self-deprecating role. The Age of the Negro Servant was born in the 1930s as blacks found their way to the kitchens, laundry rooms, and pantries in film. It was during this time of the Depression that these servants, eager to help and sustain white America, were used to prove humans could and should endure this harsh time (Bogle 36). Dark skin and Negroid features made famous mammy actresses Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers

perfect for being depicted as servants. Their skin complexion and physical features made them fit to play in the capacity in which blacks belonged at the time – as servants.

McDaniel was described as being a powerfully built woman, weighing about three-hundred pounds, very dark with typical “Negroid features”, an enormous mouth, expressive eyes, “pearly white teeth,” and a mammoth rounded face (Bogle 83). Louise Beavers was said to be “as smooth as chocolate velvet” (Bogle 62). These black maids never had a life of their own, which was believable because they were “fat, pitch black, and happily obedient” (“Ethnic Notions”). With looks like these and sometimes a bad attitude to go with it, where else did these dark-skinned black actresses belong except for in the house? This idea of physical features playing a part in how dark-skinned and fair-skinned blacks were characterized can be further supported by the career of actress Louise Beavers, the first distinctive mammy. It was said that she was “heavy and hearty but not heavy and hearty enough.” She had to go on force-feed diets or be padded “to look more like a full bosomed domestic who was capable of carrying the world on her shoulders” (Bogle 63). For these domestics, dark skin and physical features helped convey ideas of physical strength, unattractiveness, and domesticity. On the other hand, there were the fair-skinned black actresses such as Nina Mae McKinney, Lena Horne, and Dorothy Dandridge who were cast as romantic lead characters in film. Lena Horne was called MGM Studio’s black-beauty-in-residence and was often cast as the romantic interest in various movies (Bogle 128). Her characters always had men swooning over this refined and sophisticated temptress. Dorothy Dandridge usually played an untamed, feisty, attractive black woman who looked too good to be in anyone’s kitchen. For these actresses, their fair skin and European features made them more aligned with white

women, thereby displacing them for roles as domestics or unattractive women. Their beauty and charm made a way for them in society, allowing them social freedoms on screen not afforded to Beavers or McDaniel. Dark-skinned blacks belonged in domestic and industrial type roles; and for a dark-skinned black actor or actress to play in any other type of role did not seem right. In 1967, dark-skinned Beah Richards played in “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner.” For this movie it was said:

Beah Richards just did not look like the typical middle-class black woman. For one thing, she was very dark and had “Negroid” features. She struck moviegoers as the kind of woman who had been exposed to a harsher black experience, be it urban or rural. There was something definitely [colored] about her, and audiences just wanted her to drop the middle-class sweetness and phoniness and scream out in anger (Bogle 212).

This statement about Beah Richards playing a middle-class black woman as late as 1967, further reinforces the idea of skin complexion and physical features contributing to the believability of characters.

Dark skin did not always suggest negative characteristics about blacks. It sometimes suggested positive aspects of black people or further perpetuated myths. Dark-skinned actresses Ethel Waters and Cicely Tyson were known for playing the long suffering, strong black woman character. It was said of Waters that “[She] was the personification of the black spirit [audiences] believed had prevailed during the hard times of slavery, and they felt [Waters] brought dignity and wisdom to the race” (Bogle 164). For her, dark skin helped convey ideas of emotional strength and spirituality within the black community. This was especially true during the 1960s and 1970s as these were militant and tumultuous times in America as the streets and screen exploded with anger

and insolence. The black middle-class was abandoned as this militant time called for movies to be taken to the street and the brute Negro became a dominant character. It was during this period that fair skin was a vice for women. Fair-skinned actress Debra Pratt was told she was inappropriate for a film because they needed “a real black woman” and she did not “really look black enough” (Russell et al. 150). This statement implied that fair skin suggests characteristics such as fragility and vulnerability not found in the roles played by dark-skinned actresses. Dark skin also helped perpetuate phallic myths of the black male. Dark skin was linked to intense sexuality, violence, and power for some black men. It made the brute Negro a viable black-power sex figure. It was once said of brute Negro actor Jim Brown that “The blackness of his skin and his sheer physicality took audiences back to the myth of the black man as a pure creature of astounding sexual prowess” (Bogle 222). Rarely ever has a fair-skinned black man played the role of a brute Negro. His skin-complexion and physical features do not suggest the same intensity, violence, and sexuality as that of a dark-skinned black man. Dark skin and Negroid features suggest various characteristics about black actors and actresses that helped them serve as believable characters for the roles they played. Fair-complexion and physical features suggested the Negro possibilities, had it not been for that one drop of black blood in them. Skin-complexion and physical features greatly influenced the way black people were depicted in the film industry because both contributed to the actors and actresses being believable for the roles they played.

Notion of the White Ideal

I don't want nothin' black but a Cadillac.

*My momma told me don't drink coffee 'cause coffee make
you black.
- Black phrases*

Film directors and producers had to keep their audience in mind when making a movie. Making black actors and actresses likable and acceptable characters for white audiences introduced the notion of the white ideal. The white ideal involved both looks and behavior. If a black person was going to be cast in a role exhibiting behavior characteristic of white people, that actor or actress had to either look white, behave similar to white people, or both. This notion of the white ideal factored into the differing depiction of fair-skinned and dark-skinned blacks in film.

It was often implied that fair skin actors and actresses were bi-racial. They were usually depicted as being educated, attractive, refined, sensual, sophisticated, intelligent, confused, and angry (because their black blood limited their opportunities). They were used to play roles involving the black middle-class, romance, interracial relations, and professionalism. It was acceptable for them to play these roles because they looked similar to white audiences. Fair-skinned Dorothy Dandridge, the most successful black leading lady during her time, was cast in roles involving interracial relationships (Bogle 166). She was the first black woman to be held in the arms of a white man in “Island of the Sun” (1957). Her fair skin and European features made it more acceptable for her to play in that role. This was significant because a dark-skinned actress would have never been allowed to play that part. Then there was Rex Ingram, a fair-skinned actor described as being “tall, solid, yet athletically trim with piercing eyes, skin that gleamed, and silver hair that gave him an ageless quality” (Bogle 69). Though he was cast as a servant (1933 – 1948), this fair-skinned actor was never required to tom or coon. Unlike

Clarence Muse or Archie Moore, when Ingram was cast as Jim in “The Adventures of Huckleberry Fin” (1939), he was never servile and was more like a “heroic guide leading Huck to manhood” (Bogle 70). Though Ingram was cast in a role normally played by dark-skinned black actors, his skin complexion and physical features allowed him to play the role with more dignity than dark-skinned Muse or Moore. Audiences were not supposed to identify with the characters played by dark-skinned blacks because these characters were opposite to the white ideal.

Behavior added another dimension to the white ideal that was not reflected by looks alone. Sometimes black actors and actresses were stripped of behaviors and attitudes associated with being black and made to take on white characteristics and attitudes. It was still a challenge for fair-skinned black performers to be cast in roles equal to their white counterparts because they exhibited certain behavior that linked them to being black. It was once said that “Black leading ladies have always been cast close to the white ideal, but always, of course, even in the cases of Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge, there was always some trace of the ethnic experience, something [colored] about them that black audiences could identify with” (Bogle 210). So, directors whitewashed the behavior of black actors and actresses. This challenge of expunging the “trace of the ethnic experience” widened the gap between the roles fair-skinned and dark-skinned blacks played; making it even harder for the darker actors and actresses to be cast in the more favorable roles. Producers began to change with behavior what they not change with looks alone. Dark-skinned actors and actresses with Negroid features looked to “ethnic” to whitewash since this notion of the white ideal was partially based on skin complexion and physical features. But, actress Diahann Carroll was the perfect example

of a whitewashed, fair-skinned black. When describing Carroll, it was said “Diahann Carroll came closer in speech, mannerism, look, and life style to the great white ideal than any actress before her. On the screen, not one hair was out of place. Not one word mispronounced. There was not one false blink of the eye” (Bogle 210). Diahann Carroll is quoted in the March 14, 1970 issue of the TV Guide as saying:

I’m acceptable. I’m a black woman with a white image.
I’m as close as they can get to having the best of both
worlds. The audience can accept me... I don’t scare them
(Bogle 210).

This whitewashing of behavior continued through the 1980s as it was a very political time with blacks now moving fully into the system instead of remaining outside of it. The 1980s was called the Era of Tan because black stars were expressed in a white context and black actors and actresses did not seem ethnic (Bogle 268). This notion of casting blacks close to the white ideal seemed to justify relegating black actors and actresses to play certain roles based upon skin complexion and physical features. It contributed to dark-skinned blacks being virtually excluded from roles involving romance, interracial relationships, professionalism, and the black middle-class. “Almost always middle-class black characters, on screen as well as off, were thought of as being light-skinned – as close in complexion to whites as they were in their life styles” (Bogle 212). It was this notion of the white ideal that further led to dark-skinned and fair-skinned blacks being depicted differently in film.

Conclusion

“We’re a thousand and one different colors.”
- *Malcolm X*

The proposal that blacks were portrayed differently in film based on skin complexion and physical features proved to be true. These two physical characteristics were used as limiting factors when casting black actors and actresses for various parts. They were especially important when depicting blacks as middle-class characters, black professionals, and parties to interracial relationships.

For both men and women, fair-skinned blacks were preferred for middle-class characters and black professionals. It was believed that fair-skinned blacks in general could lead a better life had it not been for the black blood in them. Their white blood was believed to give them an advantage over other black people, thereby making it acceptable and believable for them to attain a higher social status than dark-skinned black people in film. The dark-skinned blacks were preferred for characters that exuded physical and emotional strength and comedic antics. Their blackness somehow made them tough and resilient – able to withstand the hard times. This display of strength was what made dark-skinned black actors and actresses perfect for roles involving violence and domesticity. Blackness also suggested laziness and a lack of ambition. Dark-skinned blacks were depicted as carefree coons who solved all their problems with a smile or joke. Finally, fair-skinned actors and actresses were preferred for roles involving interracial relationships. Since fair-skinned blacks favored white people, it was easier to accept them playing that role. To cast a dark-skinned black opposite a white actor or actress would have been unacceptable.

Gender was also a factor when depicting dark-skinned and fair-skinned blacks in film. In general, skin complexion and physical features were more crucial to the way black actresses were cast for parts as opposed to black actors. Fair-skinned black women

were preferred for certain roles because of their supposed beauty, style and grace. These women seemed to possess qualities not found in dark-skinned actresses. Fair-skinned actresses were used to play the more likable and exotic characters in film. They were given a chance to play lead parts and were often characterized as being desirable and having sex appeal (Bogle 15). Dark-skinned black actresses were cast in more domestic roles. These women were characterized as being headstrong, unattractive, and sexless. It is believed that dark-skinned actresses were depicted this way to heighten the sexuality of white women (Bogle 15). They seemed to function best as supporting actresses. Skin complexion and physical features were more important when casting black women probably because of the beauty issue. Today, the way actresses are cast to play certain roles is still largely based on skin complexion and physical features. Fair-skinned women with classic European features still predominate in romantic and lead roles in film, as well as in beauty pageants, music videos, and the world of modeling.

On the contrary, skin complexion and physical features were not that important for men. Though fair-skinned actors may have been depicted more favorably when playing the same part as a dark-skinned actor, actors were not as tied in to the color issue as women. Skin complexion was most important when portraying black middle-class men, men involved in interracial relationships, and the brute Negro. There was still an issue with a dark-skinned actor being cast as a middle-class professional. All the taboos of interracial dating existed and producers definitely would not cast a dark-skinned actor opposite a white woman as a romantic interest. Fair-skinned men were rarely, if ever, cast as a brute Negro because they lacked the image of power and pure sexuality. Today, the tables have turned and dark-skinned black men are preferred in film, regardless of the