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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by ReGina F Newkirk entitled, "The Evolution of the Black Mother In American Cinema" I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Communications

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THE EVOLUTION OF THE BLACK MOTHER IN AMERICAN CINEMA

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ReGina Fae Newkirk
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ABSTRACT

In this study, films have been reviewed since the introduction of the black mother on the silver screen to examine the evolution of this type of character throughout time. Films were divided into three eras: The Segregation Era (1900 – 1955), The Desegregation Era (1955 – 1975), and the Post-Desegregation Era (1975 – present) Within these time frames, primary films were chosen on the basis of a black mother in a prominent role, a recognized form of critical acclaim, being set within the time period in which they were filmed, and availability to be viewed. The films chosen were *Imitation of Life* (1934), *A Raisin In The Sun* (1961), *Claudine* (1974), and *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) The mothers in these films were examined for physical characteristics, demographic information (ie marital and financial status), emotional status and treatment by others In addition, secondary films starring black mothers were also reviewed as were Academy-award winning films featuring white mothers as points of comparison

Upon researching the black mothers in the primary and secondary films, it becomes extremely apparent that black mothers are not well defined in the segregation era During this time period, these women are more concerned with the white women they work for than their own lives or families. Black mothers become more well-rounded during the desegregation era, but they are still largely portrayed as domestic, poverty-stricken women who have been plagued by the ills of society. The post-desegregation era brought about more variety in the types of professions and

financial status of black mothers. However, they have less of a relationship with their children, and they garner less respect from children, their family, and often society in general Across all eras, black mothers are often portrayed as being single mothers, and their relationships with black men tend to be volatile or non-existent.

When comparing black mothers to white mothers on the silver screen, there are many notable differences Overall, white mothers tend to be more well-rounded, have an inspiring professional career, express more emotion and opinion, and have romantic relationships in addition to their complex relationships with their children. In examining black mothers on television, the trend on the small screen varied tremendously from that of black mothers in film Television brought about more intimate relationships between mothers and their children. The majority of women were involved in happy, loving relationships with their spouse and provided support and nurturing environments for their children. From the desegregation era to the post-desegregation era, black mothers evolved to more complex, happier, and more financially solvent women. This evolution, however, did not occur with black mothers in film Film had its apex during the desegregation era, presenting black women who had complex, intimate relationships with their children as well as having other areas in their lives While the post-desegregation era has produced more black mothers in film, they have returned to being two-dimensional in their parenting relationships and their children act more as plot points than important people in these women's lives.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

American cinema, since its inception in the late 1800s, has been a mainstay in this societal culture, entertaining, educating, and inciting the population in all of its segments. From political commentary to visionary creations, American film has been a medium to relay messages and indicate current trends. With the intertwined relationships of plot, story, character, sound and visual effects, producers and directors have created an masterful art form that has been celebrated across the globe.

However, blacks in American cinema are a unique and delicate subset of this genre The first black character appeared in 1903 in the twelve-minute motion picture, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Instead of the role being portrayed by a black actor, a nameless, overweight white actor in blackface starred as the film's title character (Bogle 1989, 3) This trend, which continued even after blacks were introduced in films, was readily made popular by Al Jolson The first black actor to star in a film, interestingly enough, was James B Lowe in a remake of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1927 (Bogle 1989, 6) When women were introduced, the primary role was that of the mammy, the overweight, black caretaker who does nothing but live to serve her white family The most infamous induction of this character occurred in D W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* in 1915 (Bogle 1989, 10). This film began the maternal figure in film, even though it is mired in racist and degrading undertones. From the legendary

mammy roles made famous by Louise Beavers and Hattie McDaniel to the contemporary roles portrayed by actresses such as Angela Bassett and Whitney Houston, the black mother in films has evolved and changed throughout the course of the century. However, closer examination of this particular subject area shows that there is much to be researched regarding the black maternal figure in American cinema. Therefore, the research questions for this study are:

> **1) How has the role of the black mother in film evolved in terms of physical features, demographics, behaviors, religious beliefs, and place within family and society?**
>
> **2) Does this evolution provide an accurate portrayal of black women in American society?**

These two questions will be addressed by examining the films *Imitation of Life* (1934), *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961), *Claudine* (1974), and *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) as primary sources. To support, negate or contrast these films, additional films will be explored within each defined time period.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In reviewing films that have a prominent maternal figure, it became rapidly apparent that few films have a leading black mother or even a mother who is significant in the plot of the film. Very little has been written on this specific subject, which is likely due to the lack of films that qualify. There is a small amount of literature that addresses some of the individual films that star or have main characters that are mothers. However, the majority of the literature addresses the mammy figure.

The Mammy Figure

Renown film critic and historian Donald Bogle, in his book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks*, defines the mammy figure as one who:

> ...is distinguished...by her sex and her fierce independence. She is usually big, fat and cantankerous. She made her debut around 1914 when audiences were treated to a blackface version of *Lysistrata*. The comedy, titled *Coon Town Suffragettes*, dealt with a group of bossy mammy washerwomen who organize a militant movement to keep their good-for-nothing husbands at home....But the militancy of the washerwomen served as a primer for the mammy roles Hattie McDaniel was to perfect in the 1930s. Mammy's offshoot is the aunt

> jemima, sometimes derogatorily referred to as a "handkerchief head." Often aunt jemimas are [socially acceptable Negroes who never complain and always faithful to their white massas] blessed with religion or mammies who wedge themselves into the dominant white culture. Generally, they are sweet, jolly and good-tempered – a bit more polite than mammy and certainly never as headstrong. (Bogle 1989, 8)

For the purposes of this paper, the mammy and the aunt jemima figures are both included in the term mammy.

The most prominent mammy figure in American cinema is that of Mammy in *Gone With the Wind* (1939), played by Hattie McDaniel. This film represents a significant milestone for black actresses, for Hattie McDaniel was the first black woman to receive an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress. To date, she and Whoopi Goldberg for her role in *Ghost* (1990), are the only black women to have ever received an Academy Award (Harkness, 62, 284) In her role as Mammy, she is a surrogate mother to the character of Scarlett O'Hara, tending to her every need Bogle describes her character as "the good-nigger-in-chief, Mammy, the great black mother of us all" (Bogle 1998, 94). However, this type of role has much more to do with political and societal posturing than accurately portraying black women who work as domestics.

> *Mythification* involves the realization that filmic codes describe an *interrelationship* between images. American films do not merely

> feature this or that debased black image or this or that glorified white hero in isolation, but rather they correlate these images in a larger scheme of semiotic valuation. ..When we consider *The Birth of a Nation* or *Gone With the Wind*, for example, the mechanisms of racial mythification are clear – the dominant "I" needs the coded "other" to function. white female stars (themselves coded as subordinate to white males) employ black maids to make them seem more authoritatively womanly. .Soon, by mythification and repetition, white and black filmed images become large-scale models, positive or negative, for behavior, describing (in the manner of myth in non-Western societies) structures, limits and an overall repertoire from which both white and black viewers in the real world select possibilities of action and thought. (Smith, 27-28)

While the mammy figure no longer wears the black dress, white apron and head handkerchief that was the standard mammy uniform, the mammy role has continued throughout modern-day films. In films such as *Passion Fish* (1992), *The Long Walk Home* (1990), and *Clara's Heart* (1988), the mammy figure is modernized and given contemporary clothing, yet still has the primary purpose of meeting the needs of her white mistress figure. "By 1988, Hollywood appeared to have Goldberg where it wanted· playing a maid in *Clara's Heart.* Here as a Jamaican domestic who works for a white family ., Goldberg gave a well-crafted, convincing performance. But the script desexed her character, presenting the black woman once again as a mighty

nurturer – an updated mammy – without enough of a life of her own" (Bogle 1989, 298) However, the mammy figure either has no children of her own (which is more prevalent in older films) or has given the white family she is working for priority over her own family and children (which is more prevalent in modern films). While this is obviously an important category as it relates to the black mother in American cinema, it does not specifically address the issue at hand. The mammy is critical in the development of black mothers in film, therefore, it must be examined but kept in its proper perspective.

Other Types of Roles

The mammy was the predominant figure of the segregation era (1900s through the middle of the 1950s), the first time period of films to be examined. The majority of black women in film either portrayed this type of character or that of the entertainer. The actresses best known for bringing the entertainer to life during this period were Lena Horne, Hazel Scott, and Dorothy Dandridge. However, these beauty queens were more on parade for their looks and their musical ability. Usually playing the harlot or the unattainable beauty, they were never portrayed as maternal characters The next time period is that immediately preceding and following desegregation and the climax of the Civil Rights Movement. The 1960s were dominated by the black male presence, particularly that of Sidney Poiter. His classic, clean-cut image gave way to the portrayal of the black middle-class American. His legendary performances in films such as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) and *In the Heat of the Night* (1968) were the culmination of the black middle-class

characters that started with his performance with Diahann Caroll's role in *Paris Blues* (1961) and led to Lola Falana's role in the 1970 film *The Liberation of L B Jones* (Bogle 1989, 210-211). However, the predominate role of the 1970s was that of the blaxploitation vixen. Immortalized by actresses such as Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson, this bodacious black superwoman takes on the evils of the urban ghetto. battling drugs, violence and guns. This type of character was so overdone, as were their male counterparts, that the roles become cartoonish if not buffoonish

> At the other extreme as a sort of cartoon reversal of the damsel in distress and of the supermacho black and kung fu hero, the action heroine popped up in one or two Chinese martial arts films and black superwoman epics, *Cleopatra Jones* and *Coffy*, that were the tail end of the blaxploitation genre....these women could function in a violent way, but compared to the magnetic Shaft, they were more superbland than superblack (Haskell, 329)

These roles offered an interesting counterbalance to the lives that African-American women were leading at the time It seemed to be an extreme jump from mammies who love to serve their missus to black women in need of a cape and superpowers.

> The role of black women in films, always previous confined to servant roles, with only white-looking women being allowed to be sexually alluring (and sinful), did not reflect their status in the black community, in which women have always been far more important and far stronger than their white sisters. It is curious, then, that in

> most of the new black films, women were treated as mere sex objects, part of the superficial fantasy lives of the heroes. Two 1973 films, *Coffy* and *Cleopatra Jones*, used women as the hero figures. In *Coffy*, a particularly violent movie, the main character (Pam Grier) is a nurse who seeks revenge on a dope pusher. The film concentrates on violence, and the main character's sex is merely a gimmick. (Null, 216-219)

While this is the dominant role for women in the time period immediately following desegregation, it still does not incorporate the black mother or her experience into the role. Instead, the blaxploitation era created a mother for all, or as Donald Bogle describes it, "the woman as Protector, Nurturer, Communal Mother Surrogate" (Bogle 1989, 251).

Current Types of Roles

The modern era has provided a greater amount of roles for blacks in films While some of the taboos regarding interracial relationships are still intact, blacks and whites interrelate more than they ever have previously in films. Blacks are no longer tied to portraying maids and servants but can be anything from astronauts to doctors to stockbrokers While no one can deny the great strides that have been made regarding the racial divide in American cinema, there still has been a shortage of leading roles for black women The 1980s took a sharp turn towards comedy, with stars such as Eddie Murphy and Richard Pryor making cinematic headlines.

Dramatic roles have also been given more to black actors, carving niches for such actors as Denzel Washington, Laurence Fishburne and Morgan Freeman. However, black actresses have primarily been left out of the roles that have been able to cross the "great white sea." Donald Bogle, in his sub-chapter entitled, *Actresses in Search of Roles*, addresses the issue that several talented actresses debuted in the 1980s but have been unable to become a steady force in Hollywood. With the notable exceptions of Whoopi Goldberg, Whitney Houston and Angela Bassett, black women have not been able to generate any staying power in the industry (Bogle 1989, 356-359)

Literature Regarding *Imitation of Life*

While the literature of black mothers in American cinema is notably absent, there is a recognizable amount of information on the four primary films being researched. *Imitation of Life* gained a great deal of recognition for its complex themes and issues of race. This story centers around Miss Bea, portrayed by Claudette Colbert, and Delilah, portrayed by Louise Beavers – two widowed women – and follows their lives as they happen to come together while Delilah is looking for work at the wrong address Delilah convinces Miss Bea to take her and her daughter in, she will be her live-in domestic for room and board. Upon tasting Delilah's secret family pancakes, Miss Bea decides to turn the recipe into a recipe for success. She opens up a store, which becomes so profitable that she decides to market the pancake flour. Miss Bea "graciously" offers to give Delilah a small percentage of the

company, but Delilah is more interested in taking care of Miss Bea and her daughter than making money. The more intriguing subplot of the film is the plight of Peola, the fair-skinned daughter of Delilah who finds "happiness" when she is passing for white. Upon adulthood, she asks her mother to "disown" her and not claim her so that she can continue her life of passing without the fear of her mother showing up to let out her secret. In the end, Delilah dies of a broken heart from Peola's disavowment of her, and Peola comes back, repentant, at her funeral.

> Because of its racial theme and some inspired casting, *Imitation of Life* turned itself into the slickest and possibly the best made tear-jerker of all time On the surface, the film was a simple tale of motherly love and motherly woes In the relationship between Beavers and Colbert, audiences were assured that differences between white and black, like differences between the rich and poor, could easily be done away with if everybody worked together. Beneath the surface, though, *Imitation of Life* was a conscious apotheosis of the tom spirit and an unconsciously bitter comment on race relations in America. (Bogle 1989, 59)

More specifically, the role that Delilah plays as the mother is one of the first of its kind in American cinema. While she is still a mammy figure and its role often takes precedence over her role as a mother, she does have a maternal relationship with Peola, who is portrayed by Fredi Washington.

> When working opposite Washington though, Beavers's acting rhythm changes One feels a direct bond between the two. In one sequence, after the daughter tells her mother she is leaving home and that should they ever meet again they must act as strangers, Beavers breaks through the bounds of melodrama with an emotional cry that she can't do that, *that she ain't no white mother.* ...She is a woman torn in two, as much by the cheerful role she must play around whites as by what has transpired between her daughter and herself. (Bogle 1998, 114)

While there was praise for the first prominent role of a black mother on film, there was still the conformity to the submissive mammy mold in which Delilah was still cast

> . .the rebellious daughter, in her attempt to pass for white because she could not endure the mistreatment she suffered as a Negro, showed more self-respect than the mother, whose mealymouthed servility was typical of the devoted black mammy....She prefers to remain with Colbert in a semi-servile capacity, justifying her attitude with pious phrases about keeping one's place and accepting one's lot in life. (Null, 64)

In looking at mainstream reception of the film, the majority of the reviews focused on the performance by Claudette Colbert. However, *The New York Times* gave a somewhat glossy review of Delilah's character and role in the film.

> Early in the film she hires an amiable Negro maid, Aunt Delilah, who also owns a small daughter Inspired by Aunt Delilah's wonderful pancakes Mrs. Pullman opens a flapjack shoppe on the boardwalk. She does so well with it that after a few years Aunt Delilah's pancake flour is a national best-seller. At an early age Aunt Delilah's little girl begins to be sad because her efforts to fraternize with the whites are always frustrated by the appearance of her very dark mother. Growing up, she runs away from school and finally breaks with her mother completely, returning finally to participate in the orgiastically tearful funeral of Aunt Delilah, who has died of a broken heart. (Sennwald, 19)

This review reflects the society's view of blacks during this period of time. Delilah is referred to as "owning" her daughter, a leftover reference from slavery, and her key role in the development of the business is reduced to a minimal part. Her two-dimensional role appears to be seized and enjoyed instead of critiqued and questioned

While the film did break some taboos, such as dealing with the issue of passing for white and showing blacks as mothers instead of just mammies, the film still resides in the niche of portraying black women as dark-skinned, overweight, loyal subjects who are extremely docile, subservient and passive in relationship to their white mistresses.

Literature Regarding *A Raisin In The Sun* and *Claudine*

A Raisin in the Sun and *Claudine* each shine a unique light on the role of the black mother during the period of desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement *A Raisin in the Sun*, originally written for the stage, was transformed into a screenplay and kept the stage actors as the main characters. This story of the Younger family, told masterfully by Lorraine Hansberry, is set in a tenement on the south side of Chicago Following the death of the family's father, the Youngers await the payment of the father's life insurance. For Walter Lee who is played by Sidney Poiter, the money would enable him to open a liquor store and give up his job as a chauffeur Walter Lee's idealistic sister Beneatha, who is portrayed by Diana Sands, dreams of using the money to attend medical school and work in Africa. The matriarch of the family, Lena Younger, recognizes that the money cannot fulfill all of their dreams, so she uses a third of the money as a down-payment on a house in a white neighborhood. As an act of faith and in an attempt to save her son's self-worth and her crumbling family, Lena gives Walter Lee the rest of the money so that he can manage it. Instead, Walter Lee misguidedly invest in the liquor store, where one of his business partners leaves town with the money. Walter Lee becomes a disappointment to himself, his sister, his mother and his wife Ruth, portrayed by Ruby Dee. However, in a crucial moment, when a representative from the white neighborhood offers them money to not move, Walter Lee turns down the offer so that his son will not see him "sell his soul to the devil." Instead, Walter Lee resolves to move the family into the

new house, to brave the inevitable violence and forego the money, keeping his family's dignity intact (Valade, 306)

This film was a milestone in American cinema, for it was one of the first times that a movie addressed the plight and internal trauma of the black family, particularly that of the black man. "The film dealt with the wounds that black men face in everyday life – wounds such as those caused by realizing that the white kids, who just loved having the black boy on their baseball team, didn't want to associate with him off the playing field" (Null, 183) By tackling such issues, Columbia Pictures took a major gamble on this picture for they knew it would not make any money in the South, and the growing racial tensions across the country might not be the most politically tactful film to release But, to Columbia's credit, "the film stuck faithfully to the script of the play, avoiding the temptation to hid the subject beneath Hollywood-style melodramatics and glitter" (Null, 183).

However, there are two noteworthy performances by women portraying mothers – those of Claudia McNeil and Ruby Dee "Author Hansberry captured the tension of blacks enduring lives of violent desperation, and she hit with unerring exactness on a number of things never dealt with before in the movies Her drama took the average filmgoer into the grime and grit of the ghetto It exposed the matriarchial set-up in black homes and examined the emasculation of the black male by a hostile white society" (Bogle 1989, 198). There is a dual maternal structure in the Younger home Ruth is the mother to Travis and has a clearly established relationship as such. However, Lena is the mother of the family, taking a very strong

parental role in the lives of Walter Lee and Beneatha and still have maternal influence over Ruth and Travis. "Claudia McNeil's powerhouse portrayal of the mother Lena is the adhesive that thematically holds the picture together" (Bogle 1998, 174-175). However, her role had mixed reviews in mainstream media. *The New York Times* referred to her role as "stolid, voluminous and serene" and says, "She represents the wisdom of the ages, the age-long patience of her race, and she has the sense of abdicate as the mother-monarch when she grasps the dynamic of her modern son" (Crowther, 24). On the other hand, *Time* referred to her performance as "too often on the screen suggest[ing] a mean old man in a wig." The article also describes the film as "a charming, passionate, superior soap opera in blackface" (Crowther, 64).

The role of Ruth, while much more subtle than that of Lena, is equally noteworthy. "As the wife who agonizes over cleaning someone else's home and then returns to find she has none of her own, Ruby Dee proved successful with a difficult character.. Dee forged her inhibitions, her anemia and her repressed and taut ache to convey beautifully the most searing kind of black torment" (Bogle 1989, 198-199) Dee had a more consistent reception among mainstream media, with *Time* noting her as the only actress who "projects her existence without hollering her head off" (*Time*, 64) *The New York Times* stated that "Miss Dee is quietly magnificent as the angry young man's hard-working wife, who is realistic, tolerant and hopeful only of a happier family life" (Crowther, 24). These roles are important to the development of the black mother in American cinema, a fact that was even recognized in the change of the type of review given my mainstream media.

Claudine, which was originally cast with Diana Sands as the leading character until cancer deemed that it be re-cast with Diahann Carroll, was one of the first films to focus on the plight of the single black mother Claudine struggles to manage and maintain her family of six children while trying to establish a romantic relationship with a sanitation worker, played by James Earl Jones.

> *Claudine* seemed to concentrate best on the issues and conflicts confronting a contemporary urban black woman.... This comedy-drama focused on a Harlem domestic worker, living on welfare with six children and no husband Claudine stands at the center of the children's universe When she becomes involved with a sanitation worker – a dirty, smell, out-of-shape garbage man – the children don't want to lose their mother or see her hurt. Nor does Claudine want to be saddled with the same romantic mistakes she has made in the past. (Bogle 1989, 254)

Claudine struggles in spots but does have an intimate look at the mother-child relationship, especially in relationship to Claudine's teenage daughter. "The two lash out at one another, then fall into each other's arms. Claudine desperately wants her daughter to avoid the pitfalls that she once fell into This strikingly, often powerful moment dramatizes a type of emotional intimacy rarely seen between two black women" (Bogle 1989, 254).

This is also one of the few films where the children in the story do have an identity and purpose, thoroughly developed and drawn. By having children as

characters instead of plot conveniences, the story allows for the true development of the maternal relationship.

> Claudine's children are cynical idealists. They act as if they expect little from life, and their raucous, rowdy cynicism is revealed in their non-stop wisecracks The kids are equipped with commonsense and wit. They use both as shields from real heartaches and involvement. The oldest son and daughter act as if they do not believe in life or love or any sort of structure. But when the son turns to militancy and when the daughter embarks on her first love relationship, we know that all along they've really wanted to believe in these things Their mother has been the center of their lives. When the strange garbage man with the bloated face enters her life, the entire family fears for Claudine Claudine's children, rebellious as they appear, love their mother desperately and unequivocally, and they don't want to see her hurt. They like her boyfriend, but they are not about to trust him until he proves himself (Bogle 1998, 55)

The New York Times also notes that "the most unusual thing about *Claudine* is that it seems to take family life seriously, something done by very few films these days" (Canby May 1974, 11) In his first review of the film, Canby praised the movie for it realistic approach to dealing with issues in the black community

> There are some times when *Claudine* threatens to go as soft as a *Doris Day Show* rerun, when you are aware that some of its middle-class

> sensibilities don't quite fit. They seem borrowed from the white media Then it recoups with the sort of line or gesture that makes this one of the few recent black films to reach beyond the black audience, without, as far as I can tell, insulting it. (Canby April 1974, 34)

Although *Claudine* lacks in some crucial cinematic areas, the performance by Diahann Carroll (which won her a Best Actress nomination) breathes new life into the role of the black mother (Harkness, 218). Canby referred to her as an exceptionally beautiful woman whose beauty is truly in the force of her toughness and wit, which is especially present in dealing with her children (Canby April 1974, 34) A *village VOICE* review emphasized the film's producers as having the stated purpose of making films that would not only appeal to middle-class black audiences but also to white audiences (Haskell May 1974, 101). By tackling issues such as poverty, the welfare system, teenage pregnancy and teenage rebellion, *Claudine* provides a realistic look at the complicated life of the struggling single black mother in the urban ghetto.

Literature Regarding *Boyz N the Hood*

The final film, *Boyz N the Hood* by John Singleton, provides an interesting look at the progression of black mothers in contemporary cinema. The two maternal figures, portrayed by Tyra Ferrell and Angela Bassett, provide an intriguing commentary on the state of black mothers, especially in relationship to the fathers. The story begins with Reva Styles (Angela Bassett) sending her son Tre to live with

his father, her estranged husband, Furious Styles. While the story focuses on the friendship between Tre and the brothers across the street, Ricky and Doughboy, and their coming of age, the film does subtly send a message about the mothers in the film.

> Where are the women?!? From *House Party* to *To Sleep With Anger* to *Mo' Better Blues* to *Boyz N the Hood*, the sons are working overtime to secure the place of the father and, in doing so, themselves . The condition of women and girls is made to seem "somehow marginal and derivative" in a cinematic vehicle that offers an opaque cultural analysis, whose formula is simple and straightforward the boys who don't have fathers fail, the boys who do have fathers succeed (Willis, 162)

The role of the mothers is notably negative, while the role of the father is glorified. While there is a line drawn between the lower-class character of Mrs. Baker (Tyra Ferrell) and the more educated Reva Styles, their relationships with their sons are lacking in both cases

> Then, too, while the film idealized Furious and stressed the role of African-American fathers, it rarely drew its women with much insight or sympathy. "And you ain't shit. You're just like your daddy," Doughboy's mother Mrs. Baker is heard telling him just at the moment she is introduced in the film. Tough and foul-mouthed, she, like the neighbor on the block who lets her little girl wander out into the street,

> is indicted as an insensitive, irresponsible mother. Even Tre's educated, ambitious mother is made to seem inadequate at rearing a son. Singleton does not seem willing to consider the pressures with which these women live. (Bogle 1989, 346)

From the minor role of the crack-addicted mother to the supporting roles of Reva Styles and Mrs Baker, black mothers are consistently cast as incapable of being able to effectively rear their children While the educational, economic and social statuses vary, the message is contiguous across the board. This message is even noted in a *Washington Post* review of the film. "Cuba Gooding Jr plays Tre, the only boy with a future -- because his mother throws up her hands and send him to live with his stern father, Furious....Women, referred to for the most part as 'bitches' and 'hos,' apparently makes them lousy parents on their own" (Kempley 1991).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Definition of Time Periods

In order to examine the evolution of black mothers in American cinema, three major time periods were established that were strongly connected to the progression of blacks in this country. The first period, the Segregation Era, was defined as such because the roles that blacks could play in real life greatly limited the roles they could portray on the screen The political and social climate of the time also had a great effect on the types of characters that were given to blacks as well as dictated the actors and actresses who could portray them In linear terms, the Segregation Era, runs from the beginning of motion pictures to the mid 1950s.

In 1955, a woman by the name of Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white man A simple act of rebellion began a boycott of the Montgomery, Alabama bus system, led by Dr Martin Luther King, Jr (Clements, 198). This boycott was a key, igniting incident in the Civil Rights Movement, which spanned the course of over a decade. Through protest marches, sit-ins and other acts of non-violent rebellion, blacks, as well as some other racial groups, joined together to bring about significant change in the United States race relations and governing laws. This included milestones such as the March on Washington in 1963, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which protects voting rights, prohibits racial discrimination in employment and in public accommodations, and encourages school desegregation,

the Watts Riots and the slaying of Malcolm X in 1965 and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr in 1968. The country was in the midst of turbulent times, with the deaths of these prominent civil rights leaders as well as President John F Kennedy and his brother Senator Robert Kennedy. The country was participating in a war in Vietnam, which had the population divided. Free love and the hippie movement were at their height (Clements, 207-215). Obviously, these types of political and social movements in the country had a significant impact on the types of films and roles available to blacks. Therefore, the second era is that of the Desegregation Movement, encompassing the time leading up to the Civil Rights Movement and the time immediately following it. The Desegregation Era falls in the time period of the mid 1950s to the mid 1970s.

The third and final time period is that of the Post-desegregation Era, which encompasses the time period from the mid 1970s to the present. This time period is defined by the significant gains of rights and prominence in the black community. While race relations were by no means on equal ground, great strides had been made to provide blacks with equality in regards to governmental and legal processes. Blacks have prominent places in society and within the industry. While their standing is not equal to that of their white counterparts, it has definitely increased compared to the time periods preceding it In regards to film, blacks were in a greater position of control. There are now multiple black directors and producers as well as the variety of roles available to blacks has dramatically increased. The climate of the country in

determining what is "acceptable" from blacks has changed, and the film industry is reflective of that.

Selection of Primary Films

After defining the time periods, one or two films from each period were selected as a primary film The number of films that have black mothers in a major role is rather limited, so the majority of films that were not selected were included as secondary films However, to identify a primary film from each time period, the following criteria were used (1) the film has a black mother in a prominent role within the film, (2) the film is set within the time frame being examined; (3) the film has a recognized form of critical acclaim; and (4) the researcher has access to the film. Within these guidelines and examining films that had received an Academy Award nomination, the following films were the only films to meet the criteria:

1) The Segregation Era – *Imitation of Life*, which was nominated for an Academy Award in the category of Best Picture.

2) The Desegregation Era – *Claudine*, for which Diahann Carroll received an Academy Award nomination in the category of Best Performance by an Actress.

3) The Post-Desegregation Era – *Boyz N the Hood*, for which writer/director John Singleton received an Academy Award nomination for Best Director, making him the first African-American and the youngest nominee ever nominated in the category.

Because of the complexity and breadth of the Desegregation Era, a form of critical acclaim was expanded to include dramatic awards. When including this form of critical acclaim, *A Raisin in the Sun*, for which Lorraine Hansberry became the first African American to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award in play form, was also included as a primary source This carryover is of particular importance with this film because the film version included all of the performers who participated in the award-winning stage version and the film was staged and shot in close accordance to the play version.

Areas for Content Analysis

Each of the primary films were then reviewed, examining their content in the following areas:

1) Physical Characteristics· skin tone, size and age
2) Demographics marital status, number of children/age of children, financial status, employment status and religious status
3) Emotional Status: relationship with husband or romantic male figure, relationship with children, relationship with other family members and relationship with friends
4) Treatment by Others. respect, language and physical treatment

Secondary Films

Secondary resources simply incorporate black mothers or black maternal figures in the plot of the story. These films include *Gone With the Wind, Member of*

the Wedding (1952), *Pinky* (1949), *Sounder* (1972), *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998), *The Bodyguard* (1992), *Corrina, Corrina* (1994), *Do The Right Thing* (1989), *Passion Fish, Clara's Heart, Jungle Fever* (1991), *The Long Walk Home* (1990), *Jason's Lyric* (1994), *Soul Food* (1997), and *Waiting to Exhale* (1995) Secondary films were selected to include the large majority of films available on video cassette that incorporated black mothers as a significant part of the storyline and prominent films that are widely recognized as have notable mammy figures. Secondary films were also evaluated in content analysis areas, though all secondary films were not evaluated in each area.

In addition to examining black mothers in film, films that incorporated white mothers in the plot were also examined as secondary resources as a point of comparison. To identify a film for comparison from each time period, the following criteria were used (1) the film has a white mother in a prominent role within the film, (2) the film is set within the time frame being examined; (3) the film received an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture; (4) the actress in the role being examined received an Academy Award nomination for Best Actress, and (4) the researcher has access to the film. Within these guidelines, the following films were selected *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner, Terms of Endearment* (1983) and *American Beauty* (1999) These films are not included to be representative of all white mothers in film during each time period. They are included in the study to provide a point of comparison as to what was occurring with white mothers during each of the time periods stated Also, as a point of comparison,

black mothers in television are also examined to look for concurrent and negating trends. Both the comparison of white mothers in film and black mothers in television are included in the study as historical points of reference and are not structured to be indicative of a sample study of either

By examining each of the primary films and using the secondary films as supporting research, each of the research questions will be addressed.

CHAPTER 4

PRIMARY RESEARCH STUDY

Section 1: The Segregation Era

Imitation of Life

This primary story of this film revolves around the story of Miss Bea and her domestic Delilah, who embark upon a profitable business in Delilah's pancake recipe. Miss Bea, in raising her daughter, is confronted with the dilemma of being in love with the same man as her daughter Delilah, in return, is challenged with the dichotomy of her daughter Peola being a Negro but having a white appearance. In the end, Peola opts for a life passing as a white woman, abandoning her mother and breaking her heart As a result, Delilah dies in mourning for her absent daughter, Peola realizes the result of her grave decision when she returns for her mother's funeral While the film is certainly mired in moments of melodrama as well as a misplaced story emphasis, it does offer a poignant image of the black mother during the early part of the 20th century.

Louise Beavers, who portrays the role of Delilah in the film, built her career on the mammy figure Therefore, her physical characteristics embody that of the mammy image She is dark-skinned and overweight, complete with the sympathetic, sweet, non-threatening face Her age in the film also goes along with the mammy figure, spanning the age range of mid 30s to mid to late 40s during the course of the picture.

Demographically, Delilah also fits much of the mammy profile. She is widowed, which allows her to devote more of her time to taking care of Miss Bea She is poor, evidenced by the fact that she needs room and board for herself and her daughter, and she is looking for work as a domestic, or as she states, "a girl", when she meets Miss Bea. Because of her good, Christian beliefs, she is able to go through life whistling and happy, except when her daughter leaves. Of course, Delilah is primarily connected to the mammy figure through her employment status Even when Miss Bea offers her twenty percent of the business that her recipe started, she gently and kindly refuses. When Miss Bea suggests that she use the money to buy her own house and a car, Delilah asked confusedly who will take care of her and her daughter Jane. During this exchange, Delilah pointedly states that her primary purpose, seemingly in life, is to take care of Miss Bea and Jane. Counter to the mammy figure, however, is the fact that Delilah does have a daughter. Though Peola's story does often take the headline, it is not due to the amount of screen time that she and Delilah share While Delilah is a devoted mother and is shown taking care of her daughter, she spends more screen time taking care of Miss Bea and Jane rather than her own child.

The emotional status of Delilah also embodies the mammy figure. While she is widowed and apparently loved her dead husband, she is desexed throughout the film. Miss Bea, who is also a widow, is allowed to pursue a love interest, a pursuit that is continuously encouraged by Delilah. Even though Delilah states "every woman needs a man in her life," she is not permitted to take her own advice. She

never even gives any indication that an emotional relationship with a man is desired in her own life, it appears that having Miss Bea and Jane is enough. While her relationship with Miss Bea is shown to be one of "friends," it is readily apparent that there is still a submissive servant-mistress relationship between the two. After the pancake-flour business has taken off and they are living a posh lifestyle, there are still obvious barriers that prevent them from being true friends While Miss Bea is having fun at her party, Delilah does not attend even though she is in the house. At the end of the party, she offers to clean up. Then, as they are each going to bed, Miss Bea ascends up the staircase as Delilah heads down for the basement. Even in the simplicity of their addressing each other – Miss Bea and Delilah – the inequity of their relationship is ever present. The relationship is quintessential aunt jemima mammy

However, Delilah's relationship with her daughter is of a different caliber. Delilah's love for Peola is obvious throughout the film She wants to make sure that she does not catch a cold, so she takes her rain boots and coat to school. She understands Peola's plight, so she doesn't chastise her for being rude or mean to her. While some of the everyday mother-daughter aspects are missing from this relationship, the truth of Delilah's love for Peola shows through This is greatly evidenced in the end when Peola's exit from Delilah's life causes her a broken heart and results in her death

The treatment others show Delilah is also of interest. Delilah is "respected" by Miss Bea and Jane, even though the racial divide must be a consideration when

examining this aspect While there are definitive lines of respect drawn in the mother-daughter relationship of Delilah and Peola, Peola does cross that line and Delilah allows it to be crossed There is the previous stated reason of Delilah understanding Peola's plight, therefore allowing screams of "I hate you! I hate you! I hate you" to go unaccounted, however, there is also the political posturing that a mother who turned strict with her daughter might do the same with the mistress, therefore violating the submissive mammy image.

Language, both verbal and non-verbal, is very mild throughout the film. Delilah is obviously a pious woman, and she never has a harsh word for anyone. Her voice is always loving and tender, no matter how she is addressed. Others, with the exception of Peola, respond to her in the same manner. With the exception of the white man who confronts Delilah when she sees Peola working as a white woman, no one every takes a hostile or threatening tone with her This appears to be a result of her "knowing her place" and not being harsh with others. Even Peola's words are more emotionally hurtful than they are verbally offensive. While Peola often has hostile body language with her mother, it is more a physical representation of her hostility towards the blackness her mother represents than a physical confrontation with her mother

Overall, *Imitation of Life* draws a limited depiction of the black mother and the struggles the 1930s brought. In its attempts to pacify white audiences and keep the norm with the mammy figure, it fails to truly examine the black mother and portray her thoroughly. Because of Delilah's almost unfathomable dedication to Miss

Bea at the expense of self-exploitation, the film does not begin to accurately depict the complexities of black women who had the dual role of mother and domestic. The film, though it does scratch the surface, also does not properly examine the depth of the challenge of being a dark-skinned mother who is raising a white-looking child. Delilah is drawn in the simplest terms, making her an acceptable figure for white audiences without allowing her to have a true span of emotions, needs, desires or concerns.

Black vs. White – Imitation of Life As Compared To Mildred Pierce

Mildred Pierce, released in 1945, is a murder mystery that begins with the death of Monty Barragon. As the death is being investigated, we learn of the history of the title character, played by Joan Crawford In her first marriage, she leaves her husband because he does not understand her desperate, self-sacrificing need to provide for her older daughter, Veda In order to give Veda the high-society life she so vehemently desires, Mildred begins working as a waitress. When Veda discovers this and expresses her embarrassment and chagrin, Mildred opens a restaurant and builds a successful business. When Mildred's younger daughter, whom she has ignored for the most part, dies, Mildred is just fueled to put more into the business so that she can provide for Veda No matter how she tries, she still cannot satisfy Veda. Veda even tells her that she wants to get as far away from the grease, the restaurant and her mother as possible. After throwing her out of the house for that comment, she eventually recants and asks Veda to come home. However, Veda will only come

home if she can live the life of a wealthy person. So, Mildred marries Monty Barrone in order to live in the lifestyle Veda prefers. After giving one-third of her business to Monty in order to get married, draining her business financially to provide for Veda and then discovering that Monty has double-crossed her by selling his part of the business and having a relationship with her daughter, she confronts Monty and Veda. While she leaves the scene upset, Veda eventually shoots Monty because he says that he does not want to marry her and laughs at her

Mildred Pierce is an excellent film to compare to *Imitation of Life*, as well as Claudette Colbert's character can be easily compared to Louise Beaver's character within the film, *Imitation of Life* In both *Mildred Pierce* and *Imitation of Life*, both daughters are unhappy with the lot that life has handed them and direct that anger towards their mothers Both mothers are desperately trying to provide for their children, though Mildred goes to more extremes and is far more interested in giving Veda material things than is Delilah However, the primary difference between the roles is the well-rounded character development that is present in Mildred's role and is absent in Delilah's role Mildred is so driven to provide for Veda and what she believes is Veda's best interest that she takes a blue-collar position and then turns it into a money-making business of her own Delilah, on the other hand, only ask for room and board for herself and Peola in exchange for her domestic services Miss Bea and Mildred both have very successful entrepreneurial endeavors, both in restaurants and food Miss Bea and Mildred are allowed to have passions, especially surrounding their businesses, and have romantic involvements. Mildred even has

relationships with two men during the course of the movie and another suitor who is interested in sharing a life with her. Delilah, on the other hand, only has one small moment of passion regarding the fact that she cannot be the white mother that Peola wants her to be. Otherwise, she is emotionally flat, never expressing extreme joy, anger, sadness or despair, unlike Miss Bea or Mildred. While Delilah mentions her deceased husband, she is not interested in pursuing an emotional relationship for herself While Joan Crawford and Claudette Colbert are allowed to be main characters, Louise Beavers is, at best, a poorly drawn sidekick. Miss Bea and Mildred are allowed to break traditional stereotypes by being female entrepreneurs who create successful businesses on their own. Not only does Delilah not profit from the business that her recipe and labor initiated, she adamantly refuses a part of the business. Not concerned with her own happiness, she lives to ensure that Miss Bea is content. By looking at these two films, an obvious chasm lies between the portrayal of white mothers and black mothers during the segregation era.

Other Films

The other films of this period are primarily focused on the mammy figure. Hattie McDaniel, the actress who made the mammy figure legendary, starred in over twenty films as a mammy, including *The Gold West* (1932), *The Story of Temple Drake* (1933), *Blonde Venus* (1932), *Affectionately Yours* (1941), *Judge Priest* (1934), *Operator 13* (1934), *Lost in the Stratosphere* (1934), *Little Men* (1934), *Music Is Magic* (1935), *The Flame* (1948), *Another Face* (1935), *The Little Colonel*

(1935), *Alice Adams* (1935), *Gentle Julia* (1936), *Saratoga* (1937), and *China Seas* (1935) In *The Little Colonel*, McDaniel epitomizes the mammy image. In servitude to Evelyn Venable and Shirley Temple, McDaniel is cloaked in the long skirt, the large gingham check apron and the bandana wrapped tightly around her head. However, McDaniel's most well-known role is that of Mammy in *Gone With the Wind* While she is not as submissive as Delilah, she does live to serve Miss Scarlett. Again, she is dark-skinned and overweight; however, Hattie McDaniel did not have the sweet face of Louise Beavers. Therefore, she was more apt to portray the "cantankerous mammy" as opposed to the "aunt jemima mammy" that Louise Beavers embodied in the majority of her roles

While *Imitation of Life* was Louise Beavers's most noteworthy film, she also built a career as the mammy In films such as *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), *Bombshell* (1933), *Rainbow on the River* (1936), *Make Way For Tomorrow* (1937), *Mr Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948), *Wings Over Honolulu* (1937), *Love in a Bungalow* (1937), *The Last Gangster* (1937), *Belle Starr* (1941), *Life Goes On* (1938), *Peck's Bad Boy with the Circus* (1938), *Reap the Wild Wind* (1942) and *The Lady's from Kentucky* (1938), she put her skin tone, girth and smiling face to work to portray the domestic who loved working for her white family In *Wild Girl* (1932), she even goes to the extent of the pickaninny mammy, complete with wild braids with tissue wrapped around the ends

Ethel Waters also had roles as a mammy figure in several of her films. Beginning her career as a singer, she then transformed into an actress. After finding

moderate success as the beauty queen in her younger years, she then took her skin tone and added some pounds to embody the mammy roles. In her more well-known films such as *Pinky* and *Member of the Wedding*, she plays the dutiful servant who takes care of the young, white, female co-star. Other notable figures are those of Theresa Harris in films such as *Professional Sweetheart*, Butterfly McQueen as Prissy in *Gone With the Wind* and *Duel in the Sun* (1947), Gertrude Howard in *I'm No Angel* (1933), Libby Taylor in *Belle of the Nineties* (1934), and Lillian Yarbo in *Destry Rides Again* (1939).

Section 2: The Desegregation Era

A Raisin In the Sun and Claudine

A Raisin In the Sun provides an intimate look into the complex role of the mother and the matriarch in the familial structure The story, which revolves around Walter Lee and his need to find balance in the world that emasculates him and the limits to the reality that can free him, provides an interesting contrast between the young mother and the older matriarch. Lena Younger struggles to keep her family together by making difficult financial choices; Ruth, on the other hand, tries to keep her family together by considering grave personal choices Both of the women are dedicated to making sure that their love for family supersedes all.

Physically, Lena Younger is akin to the mammy image She is dark-skinned, overweight and in her 60s. However, her personality does not fit that of the mammy. She is never shown with a white family, her dedication is definitely to her own

family's survival, and she has a determination that demonstrate that her mind and her beliefs dictate her actions instead of the need to be submissively pleasing. Ruth Younger has a new maternal appearance. Medium-toned and relatively young (early to mid 30s), she has more of an appearance of a beauty queen than the mothers that have been shown on screen She has a small frame and is attractively, though her beauty is not toted in the film as it was done for the entertainers and beauty queens of the 1940s and 1950s.

The demographics are also of key interest for these characters. Lena is a widow, whose financial status is getting ready to be affected by the insurance check from her husband's policy. Ruth is married to Walter Lee, with the entire family staying in one small Southside Chicago tenement Lena's two living children are Walter Lee and Beneatha – Walter Lee is a chauffeur and Beneatha is an idealistic college student. One child died, which apparently greatly affected her husband while he was alive. Ruth has one child, Travis, who is approximately ten years old. During the course of the story, Ruth also discovers that she is expecting another child. Lena and Ruth both work as domestics, though Lena has just retired at the beginning of the film They are financially lower-class, with Ruth telling Travis that she does not have $.50 to give him to take to school Both women are religious in nature. This is a crucial point in the story, for when Beneatha challenges the notion by saying that there is no God, Lena slowly walks over to her, smacks her and makes her repeat, "In my mother's house, there is God." Not only is this a key indicator of her piety, it is indicative of her authority in her household.

The emotional status of these characters is certainly more intense and more plausible than that of Delilah in *Imitation of Life*. Lena's love for her husband is apparent, for in the manner in which she speaks of him, it is obvious that she reveres him even in death Ruth, though obviously in a strenuous time with Walter Lee, loves him greatly. She is so concerned about his well-being and their relationship, that she discusses his state of mind with Lena and she even considers having an abortion in order to hold her family together. Lena's relationship with her children is also strained. Walter Lee, struggling to determine his worth in the world, is desperately begging for what he sees as his "one chance to make it" by using the insurance money to invest in a liquor store Beneatha's idealism and "black power" views have created a riff between her and Lena, for Lena can no longer understand her or where she is coming from However, each of her children know that she loves them, as well as she loves her daughter-in-law Ruth has a strict hand with Travis, and though she often loses her patience, her love for him is also apparent. While Ruth loves Beneatha, she has a chiding relationship with her, though there is also a bond of friendship intertwined with it.

Both Lena and Ruth receive respect from others, though Lena is slightly more demanding of it and Ruth is more subtle with her requirements While Walter Lee and Ruth fight during the course of the film, Walter Lee is never brutishly physical with her nor does he talk to her in a profane or foul-mouthed manner. Lena and Ruth are both respected by the family members, with everyone understanding their "place" in the family structure. Even when Lena "hands over" the family reigns to Walter

Lee, he is still reverent in his talk and mannerisms towards his mother. Though he does have outbursts of physicality and frustration, he is always careful to never cross that line with either mother or wife.

A Raisin in the Sun provides a thorough look at the role of the black mother in the family structure. By having both Lena and Ruth, a more complete picture is drawn and their characters have more truth and heart than their predecessor Delilah. They have personal agonies and personal successes The struggles are real and not glamorized to make audiences feel better about their position. While they certainly do not represent all black mothers of the time, they do give a truer picture of the type they portray

Claudine, on the other hand, focuses solely on the plight of the single mother. While Claudine is also a domestic, she clearly negates the mammy image. She also has a medium complexion and a rather petite frame. A former beauty queen of the 1950s, Carroll puts an attractive face on the single, welfare mother.

Her demographic information is definitely a step in a different direction While she is also single (her marital status of either married, divorced or widowed is never clearly stated, though her social worker refers to her two consensual unions, implying that she has been divorced twice), she has six children instead of the standard one or two Like all of her predecessors, she is also poor, working in a white woman's home as a domestic. Her religious beliefs are not stated.

Emotionally, Claudine is probably pulled in more directions than any of the black mothers that preceded her. She is desperately trying to make her relationship

with a sanitation worker, portrayed by James Earl Jones While she and Jones are constantly riding an emotional roller coaster of good times, making love, hurting each other, running to the corner to lick their own wounds, and then reconciling, she is also trying to manage her relationship with each of her children She is trying to provide the necessities for the younger children while trying to make sure that the oldest ones don't repeat her mistakes. She goes down to a Black Panther-like headquarters to retrieve her oldest son who has become a militant, trying to convince him that the world is ready to kill him if he doesn't recognize its power. When she discovers that her teenage daughter is pregnant, she begins to violently beat her with a hairbrush and then they collapse in each other's arms She is torn between her intense love for her children and her need to protect them. This is even a great consideration in her romantic relationship. When he returns after running out on their relationship, he has to make amends with the children before she seriously listens to his story.

The way others treat her throughout this film is an indication of the direction that black mothers are taking Her children, while obviously loving their mother and caring about her well-being, have little respect for her They constantly talk back to her, spewing smart comments continuously in her direction. They are all headstrong, rarely listening to what she says or actually doing what she tells them to do. While she is physically respected in her romantic relationship, her children constantly give her aggressive body language

The film appears to be a sign of coming trends where black mothers, while claiming the dual role of mother and father in the family structure, lose the familial

respect that, at one point in time, was an assumed part of the role. While the film incorporates more of the inner conflicts of the black mother, it loses the external recognition and reverence that black mothers had received from other family members. *Claudine* makes significant gains in its depiction of the black mother, yet it sacrifices some of the traditional essence in order to achieve this goal

Black vs. White – A Raisin In the Sun and Claudine As Compared To Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

In the film *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner*, Joanna Drayton brings Dr. John Wade Prentice home to meet her parents and announce the fact that they are getting married Portrayed by Katharine Houghton and Sidney Poiter, they recognize that their news will come as a shock since Joanna is white and John is black. The majority of film focuses on Joanna's parents, Matt and Christina Drayton, trying to decide how they feel about the marriage and whether or not they will offer their approval When John calls his parents, Joanna enthusiastically invites his parents to dinner as well. Both fathers, portrayed by Spencer Tracy and Roy Glenn, are strongly opposed to the marriage while the mothers, portrayed by Katherine Hepburn and Beah Richards, are in favor of their children being happy. After many paired discussions between and within the two families, Spencer Tracy delivers a climatic monologue, eventually supporting the marriage.

In examining the role of the mothers in this film, the majority of the spotlight is given to Katherine Hepburn's character. As Christina Drayton, she goes from shock and amazement to frenzied excitement for her daughter's exuberance to

concern over how the family might be destroyed depending on her husband's response. Superficially, there are some characteristics that need to be noted. Christina is an art gallery owner, also demonstrating an entrepreneurial bent like some of her Caucasian predecessors in the segregation era. From her attire and residence, she is obviously upper middle-class to wealthy Not only is her gallery successful, but her husband is also a prominent newspaper publisher in the San Francisco area She also has a live-in domestic Tilly, played by Isabel Sanford, who neatly fits within the mammy definition Tilly is dark-skinned, overweight, cantankerous and so dedicated to Joanna that she is hostile towards John and the elder Draytons for considering being in favor of the marriage.

However, the more personal, intimate characteristics are a bigger point of comparison Joanna has a deep respect, admiration and love for her mother, and the feelings are obviously returned by Christina. Within her marriage, Christina expresses love for her husband but is willing to express her viewpoint to him. She shares her feelings and thoughts with her husband, her daughter, John and John's parents in an articulate and intelligent manner. During one of her strongest moments in the film, she escorts her gallery manager out of the house after she drops by to find out exactly what is going on with Joanna and John. After the manager tries to console Christina and express her shock and horror over what Joanna has done, Christina tells her to go to the gallery, write herself a check for $5,000 and never be seen at the art gallery again. She is a liberal who is convicted in her beliefs, and she is concerned about being seen as a hypocrite in the eyes of her daughter. In a

conversation with Matt, Christina says that they taught her to love all people regardless of their color and they did not teach her not to fall in love with someone of another race.

Within the film *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner*, there is a staunch difference between Christina and Mrs Prentice While Christina owns an art gallery and has an affluent lifestyle, Mrs. Prentice is never said to work and is of a lower middle-class family. Mr Prentice even states that Mrs. Prentice went without a coat so that John could have some things that he needed Mrs. Prentice is soft-spoken and demure, while Christina has a bit more bite to her personality and comments However, the most dramatic difference is in their interactions with their husbands. Christina adamantly defends her belief that they should support Joanna in her conversations with Matt Mrs Prentice, on the other hand, is never even seen talking to her husband regarding the issue. Even Mrs. Prentice's comments to Matt are relatively low-key, never pushing the envelope or appearing empowered. In the same light, Christina is seen repeatedly interacting with Joanna, talking about when she first met him and how she felt. A true mother-daughter relationship can be sensed Mrs Prentice, on the other hand, is not really seen talking with John. They certainly never share an intimate conversation like the ones seen by Joanna and Christina While some of that is due to the fact that Katherine Hepburn stars in the film and Beah Richards is a minor supporting character, the difference cannot entirely be explained by that fact, especially when John and Mr. Prentice do have a one-on-one conversation.

In examining *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner* in comparison to *A Raisin in the Sun*, there are many likenesses. Christina passionately cares about her family as do Lena and Ruth. Christina has heart-to-heart conversations with Joanna, and Lena has intimate conversations with Walter Lee, Beneatha and Ruth. All three women have positions of prominence in their family and are well-respected by their family members The largest disparity between the two families is the level of affluence Again, these films present black women who are barely managing to live at the poverty line and white women who are finding financial success in various ways. Katherine Hepburn is thinner, more educated and more socially graceful than Lena, but all three women do have a multi-faceted life.

Claudine, on the other hand, provides more dramatic disparities in comparison to *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner* While Christina has one child, Claudine has six. Again, Christina is in a higher economic bracket than Claudine. Christina is educated and has a white-collar job while Claudine is not educated and works as a domestic. Even though Diahann Carroll put an attractive, thin look on the face of a welfare mother, she looks so tired and worn out that it proves to be a thin line to draw parallels between the two characters.

The biggest difference between Claudine and Christina, however, is that of their family lives. Christina is happily married, has an open relationship and dialogue with her husband, and is actively involved in her daughter's life. When Matt is having difficulty processing Joanna's news, he invites Christina to go for a drive with him to talk. Joanna cannot wait to share the news about her engagement and jumps at

the chance to share every detail of their relationship with her mother, including information regarding the nature of their sexual relationship. Claudine, on the other hand, is unhappily single and struggling to make her relationship with her boyfriend work, which is does not for a large portion of the film The majority of her interaction with her children is spent yelling or arguing with them, and they have no interest in sharing the intimate details of their lives with her While Claudine presented a more realistic view of single, black mothers living on welfare, it is a sharp contrast to the almost perfect relationships of daughter and husband presented in *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner*

Other Films

Another noteworthy film of this era is *Sounder*. This film tells the story of a sharecropping family in Louisiana during 1939 When the father Nathan (Paul Winfield) is jailed for stealing food for his family, the mother Rebecca (Cicely Tyson) must fend for the family by tending to the crops and taking care of the three children. While the story is not that intricate, it is compelling to watch Rebecca, through sheer determination and grit, make ends meet and hold her family together. The most interesting and unique aspect of this film is the marriage between Rebecca and Nathan. Black mothers in married relationships is a rarity in film. With the exceptions of *A Raisin in the Sun, Jungle Fever* and *Soul Food*, this is the only film that was reviewed that depicted married people instead of single mothers However, in *Sounder*, the couple is portrayed without marital strife. While Walter Lee's

problems have an adverse effect on his marriage, Nathan's imprisonment doesn't seem to have an effect on his relationship with Rebecca. She loves him and worries about him in absentia, even sending him a cake in jail when she is unable to visit him due to her race and gender. They operate as one unit, facing adversity together. While most films of this era center around prominent male actors such as Sidney Poiter or qualify as blaxploitation films, this unique portrait shows the entire family as a healthy, functioning unit, even in the face of constant adversity.

Section 3: The Post-Desegregation Era

Boyz N the Hood

The 1980s and the 1990s presented a new time for blacks in American cinema While there was a greater variety of roles for black women, the great divide became larger. While there were women who portrayed affluent women in films such as *The Bodyguard* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, the poverty level dramatically decreased for mothers in urban ghetto films such as *Jason's Lyric* and *Boyz N the Hood* The story of *Boyz N the Hood* is the coming of age story of Tre Styles and his friendships with neighborhood brothers Doughboy and Ricky, set against the urban violence of Los Angeles's South Central community. However, the mother of Tre and the mother of Ricky and Doughboy, played by Angela Bassett and Tyra Ferrell, certainly make a comment on the state of black mothers in film.

Reva Styles is a medium-skinned woman, average frame, and in her mid to late 30s Mrs Baker has the same physical features, even though she is slightly

darker than her screen counterpart. Demographically, the women vary slightly. Reva is divorced, with Tre as her only child. Mrs. Baker appears to have never been married with two sons, Ricky and Doughboy They are both poor, even though Reva might be in the lower to middle class segment, particularly towards the end of the film. While Reva has a job of some sort, it is never clearly stated; Mrs. Baker, on the other hand, appears to be unemployed. Their religious convictions are never conveyed, though neither of them appears to be very religious.

Their emotional relationships with others varies greatly from the movies prior to it. Neither is involved with a man, though Mrs. Baker does express interest in Furious Styles by sending him a plate of barbecue. However, their relationships with their children appears to be greatly distorted. Reva, in a verbal acknowledgement of not being able to effectively raise her son into being a man, sends Tre to live with his father As she is leaving him, she tells him it is only going to be for a few months. However, five years later, he is still residing with Furious She tries to buy him things to "win his love," but there is no evidence of a strong relationship between the two. The greater distortion is in Mrs Baker's relationship with her two sons. She has a great affection for Ricky, which as one of his Doughboy's friends noted is due to them having different fathers In her eyes, Ricky can do no wrong. She allows Ricky to do as he pleases, including have his girlfriend and their son live with them, even though Ricky is still in high school. Doughboy, on the other hand, is a source of contempt. When he is a pre-teen and is hauled away by the police for stealing, she doesn't look surprised. She just walks out to the porch and flicks her cigarette away

in disgust. She is constantly telling Doughboy that he isn't going to amount to anything, just like his father. There is a sense of maternal obligation, but not one of motherly love. In one of the most telling scenes in the movie, Doughboy and Ricky get into a fight in the front yard. When Mrs. Baker comes to break it up, she smacks Doughboy and then checks to make sure Ricky is all right. As Doughboy repeatedly asks her, "What'd you hit me for?", the inequity of her love and caring for each son is overwhelming

Respect is not something either of these women particularly seek nor gain, especially Mrs Baker. Tre addresses Reva with profanity as a pre-teen, which is apparently acceptable since he does not receive a decent scolding for his language. However, his exchange with Reva is so infrequent that a respect level is not readily determinable During one conversation with Furious about Tre in the restaurant, Furious tries to walk out on her and she demands that he listen to what she has to say. While she is commenting on how he has no right to deny her being a mother to her a child, there is no enactment of that conversation on screen Mrs. Baker, on the other hand, does not even have an inkling of respect from her children She swears and bad-mouths them, almost encouraging it in return. Her children address her in profane language and have no qualms about using strong, abusive profanity around her. Doughboy and his friends consistently drink malt liquor on her front porch, and he constantly refers to women as bitches. While her children never physically attack her, their language, especially that of Doughboy, is definitely hostile in both directions.

In summary, *Boyz N the Hood* does tell an intriguing story of young black men struggling to maintain in South Central Los Angeles. However, with the deaths of both Ricky and Doughboy in the end of the movie, the film sends the message that single black women are incapable of raising their children – a man is necessary in order to raise them successfully. The single, crack-addicted mother cannot even manage to keep her child out of the street or change her diaper Mrs. Baker cannot manage to keep Doughboy out of jail or keep either one of them alive in the end. Reva cannot manage to control her son in school so she ships him off to live with his father. The message is consistent and is a strong deviation from the messages of the films before it.

Black vs. White – Boyz N the Hood As Compared To Terms of Endearment and American Beauty

In 1983, the country became mesmerized by the story of Aurora Greenway and her daughter, Emma Horton, in *Terms of Endearment.* Aurora is deeply mired in her Southern traditions and "appropriate behavior" Emma, who marries a man of whom her mother does not approve, is constantly battling between loving and confiding in her mother and refusing to deal with her insensitive behavior. One of the few movies that primarily focuses on the mother-daughter relationship, *Terms of Endearment* stands out as a film that examines the ways mothers impact their children's lives.

Two of the most telling scenes of the film happen at opposite ends of it. At the beginning of the movie, when Emma is a baby, Aurora comes in to check on her. She immediately thinks the worst, telling her husband that she has stopped breathing

and that she is dead from crib death. She almost climbs in to bed with Emma to check on her, then pinches her until she starts crying. Then, she is completely happy and goes back to bed. The other scene occurs towards the end of the film when Emma has been hospitalized due to her cancer. Aurora comes out to the nurses' station, asking for her daughter's pills When the nurse starts to explain why she has not given them to her, Aurora begins to scream at her that she does not understand why she needs to be in pain and to give her the pills. After the nurse agrees to do so, she calmly returns to her appropriate Southern lady posture by thanking the nurse in her normal tone of voice and smoothing her hair. These two scenes exemplify the extremes of Aurora and Emma's relationship. In some cases, Aurora is not happy unless she is inflicting pain on her daughter, which reassures her of her necessity. On the other hand, Aurora is willing to lose her comfortable Southern decorum in order to make sure her daughter has what she needs

The primary difference between Aurora and Mrs Baker is the manner in which their children interact with them. While Emma gets highly upset with her mother, she never crosses the line of disrespect to yell at her, use profanity or get physical with her. One of the strongest aspects of their relationship is the honesty that is exchanged between them. They share and interact in each other's lives, from Emma telling her mother about her illicit affair to Aurora telling her about her sexual relationship with Garrett Breedlove. In one particularly emotional scene, Aurora tells her that she does not want to fight anymore. Emma responds by asking when they fight. When Aurora says that she always thinks of them as fighting, Emma replies by

saying that is due to Aurora never being satisfied with her. Not only is Aurora a complex mother, but Emma also has strong moments. When she is lying in the bed dying, she urges her young son to not hate himself later for not telling her that he loves her more often In contrast, Mrs. Baker, while overwhelming concerned with Ricky's success, never has any type of intimate conversation with either Ricky or Doughboy. While Aurora and Emma both demand that their children respect them as their mother, Mrs. Baker never commands that type of respect. The relationships are shallow in comparison, and Mrs Baker is not as believable or allowing for empathy as are Aurora and Emma

The 1999 release of *American Beauty* told the story of the dysfunctional family of Lester and Carolyn Burnham, depicted by Kevin Spacey and Annette Benning Just as Lester begins to find himself through marijuana, quitting his job and lusting after the teenage friend of his daughter Jane, Carolyn and Jane seem to fall further in despair and turn to other men for a sense of understanding, satisfaction and wholeness While this film presents the "typical" suburban family and shows the ills that plague them and their community like pedophilia, homophobia, violence, and self-deprecation, it also depicts an interesting relationship between mother and daughter As compared to films in the two eras preceding it, Carolyn and Jane have different type of relationship. Instead of having the loving relationship that is occasionally marred with a negative or insensitive comment, these two have practically no relationship. Jane constantly expresses hatred towards both of her

parents, and the one intimate scene they have results in a fight in which Carolyn slaps her and calls her ungrateful.

In comparison to *Boyz N the Hood*, the parallels are many and few at the same time The relationships these women have with their children seem to be along similar lines. Doughboy has a great amount of hostility towards his mother as does Jane towards Carolyn Carolyn wants to be active in Jane's life yet cannot find a way to connect; Reva complains about how Tre has shut her out of his life to some extent. However, the levels of disrespect by the children greatly differ, especially in looking at the relationship between Doughboy and Mrs. Baker While Jane has strong feelings of contempt for her parents and uses many expletives to describe them to her friends, she never uses that language in talking to her parents. Doughboy, on the other hand, constantly uses foul language in speaking to his mother Even at young ages, Doughboy and Tre used profanity in their address to their parents. Jane respects her parents' presence and their home, Doughboy sits on the front porch of his house with his friends, drinking malt liquor While some of the feelings are shared in both movies, their manifestations are noticeably different

Another noteworthy difference between Carolyn, Mrs. Baker and Reva is their income and professional status Carolyn is a real estate agent, living in an upper-middle class neighborhood and driving a sports-utility vehicle. While Reva's financial position is unclear (though lower middle-class is likely the case towards the end of the film), Mrs. Baker is certainly not of affluence. She appears not to have a

job and does not have any significant money Carolyn is depicted as educated and successful while Mrs. Baker is shown to be without goals and a layabout.

Other Films

This time period has the most films from which to choose and offers a greater range of types of roles and types of mothers. Unlike the two periods preceding it, this time span does not require black mothers be maids or servants. In *The Bodyguard*, Rachel Marron is a famous singer and actress. Stella is a powerhouse stockbroker in *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, Drew is a buyer in *Jungle Fever* and Gloria is a hairdresser in *Waiting to Exhale* The financial status of the characters vary as well, from poor to affluent.

However, there are two major factors that remain consistent in this time period. All of the women are single mothers (or in the process of becoming single mothers) who are medium to dark-skinned (with the exception of Lonette McKee in both areas). The more disturbing tie, however, is the limited relationship they have with their children. In *The Bodyguard*, Rachel Marron is seen with her son Fletcher in only six scenes Of those scenes, she says the following to him: "What are you looking at?", "Wipe your mouth.", and "Fletcher, go to the plane." While she appears to be concerned about his well-being, she is not involved with him at all For the family to be going through such an emotional disturbing time with a stalker trying to kill her, one would think she would be a little more engaged with her son. Instead, the white bodyguard has more of a parental role in Fletcher's life than does Rachel.

In one scene, Fletcher says to Frank, "She told me she doesn't understand why you're being so shitty to her." In response, Frank tells him that he doesn't like it when he uses language like that. This is a case where the roles seem to be reversed, with the mother using bad language around her child and the employee correcting him. The same holds true for *How Stella Got Her Groove Back, Waiting to Exhale,* and *Jungle Fever* In *Soul Food,* the matriarch is recognized as the crucial glue that holds the family together, but this only takes place after she falls critically ill. Vivica Fox's relationship with her son and new daughter seem more like key plot elements than genuine involvement, though her level of interest in her son's life is greater than most in this period

Another noteworthy occurrence is that of the updated mammy figure. In films such as *Clara's Heart, Corrina, Corrina,* and *Passion Fish,* we have a modern day black woman who is still in servitude to a white person or family in neglect of her own. In *Passion Fish,* Chantelle has to successfully care for May-Alice in order to prove to her father that she is fit to take care of her daughter. Clara, who was unable to successfully raise her son in Jamaica, comes to the States to care for a white family and help them save their son. While her son turns out so vile that he rapes a local girl, then rapes his mother Clara, followed by his suicide, she can pour all of her love and energy into the son of the family for which she is working. These characters do have lives outside of the people they tend to, but they still have the lingering mammy connotations of the care of the whites is paramount to the care of their own families

In examining the mammy figure, one must consider the immensely popular and controversial film, *The Color Purple.* This film gives an odd mix of mother and mammy figures within the context of the black family. Celie has children, yet they are taken from her at birth. She becomes a stepmother to Mister's children, yet she does not have any type of maternal relationship with them. They and Mister treat her as the help, and she assumes the role While Sophia has children, she is never seen in a relationship with them except making sure they are not present when she is being attacked by white men or making sure that one of the babies gets a bottle After the attack and a prison stay, she is reduced to being a demure mammy, knocked back in her place and forced to put the white family she works for above her own. While the film has a tremendously negative message about the relationship between black men and black women, the mothers/ maternal figures in this film resort to old stereotypes with a slightly new flair.

Section 4: Television

Film vs. Television

In a glaring yet intriguing comparison of film and television, it is evident that the role of the black mother in television had a dramatically different evolutionary track than did the black mother in film. From the initial appearance of the black character in a television show in *Beulah* in 1950 to the varying images seen in contemporary television, the role, attributes, character and persona of the black mother is far more complex and multi-faceted than her silver screen contemporaries.

While there are several maternal images in American television families, the three key occurrences in television are the situational comedy *Julia*, the Norman Lear shows and *The Cosby Show*.

Beulah, which ran from 1950 through 1953, was the story of a black maid who worked for a white family, the Hendersons This role, which was portrayed by the three greatest mammy figures – Ethel Waters, Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers, relied heavily on the Hollywood rendition of the mammy figure. Again, Beulah is a servant who lives to serve her white family. She has no life and no definition outside of them However, in 1968, *Julia* debuted on network television. Julia Baker was a widow who was struggling to raise her son while working as a nurse in Los Angeles. Portrayed by Diahann Carroll, Julia was a new face to the black mother. She was attractive, middle-class and had a balance between her work and home life. She voiced her opinions to her boss Dr. Chegley, yet she was polite and professional She interacted with her son, offering love and discipline. Additional family members appeared on the show, and she also had romantic suitors. Instead of the shallow, one-dimensional portrayal that had plagued black mothers in film, *Julia* offered a more comprehensive and well-rounded viewpoint. While films in the desegregation era were offering more complex black mothers as characters, it is important to note that Julia was the first to be portrayed as being educated and living above the poverty line.

The post-desegregation era took somewhat of a downward turn in film. Children became more obstinate, mothers became less involved and the parental

relationship became much more of a plot point convenience that a driving force in these women's lives. However, television brought about a complete reversal to this mode of Hollywood portrayals. Normal Lear was a major force in television industry, creating several popular and controversial shows. His series, *All In The Family*, revolved around the bigoted and sexist antics of Archie Bunker However, that show produced the spin-off series, *The Jeffersons*, which revolved around the antics of the equally prejudiced, black, dry-cleaning tycoon George Jefferson and his wife Louise. *The Jeffersons*, which ran from 1975-1985, depicted an upwardly mobile black couple and the differing relationships in their lives. Whereas George was hot-headed and well-tempered, Louise was calming and often the voice of reason George and Louise had an adult son, Lionel, who married during the show's run Because of his age, Louise did not interact with Lionel as often, but her strong parental force was still present She obviously loves her son and is actively involved in his life. However, she is a vocal and participatory wife, she has friends such as Tom and Helen who reside upstairs, and she has opinions and beliefs While no great social commentary is made through her character, she does offer a full-fledged black mother instead of a paper etching of one.

It is also important to note that Florence, the Jeffersons' maid, does not fit the mammy stereotype. She is young, thin and has a lighter complexion than Louise does. She is quick to express her opinion and is certainly not living to please the family for which she works. Though it is never explored, she often gives indications of having a life beyond her employment duties

Another key Norman Lear creation is yet another spin-off. On his hit series *Maude*, Esther Rolle portrayed Maude's housekeeper, Florida Evans. In 1974, Lear developed a sitcom around Florida's family, entitled *Good Times* The Evans family, consisting of Florida, her husband James, and their children J.J., Thelma and Michael, was battling poverty in their Chicago tenement apartment. By tackling issues such as poverty, welfare, unemployment, discrimination, crime, drugs and child abuse, *Good Times* put human faces to the plight of many African-Americans living in the urban ghetto. While the show did receive some criticism for preaching about social ills and turning the older son, J.J., into a modern day, Stepin Fetchit-type baffoon, it did provide an intriguing look at black mother-child relationships Florida was involved in her children's lives, from making sure they ate their oatmeal to encouraging them to study in order to improve their grades to disciplining them for talking back to her. In the early part of the series, Florida and James presented a strong parenting team. They were affectionate and loving with each other, as well as sharing their worries, concerns and fears with one another. After James's death, Florida continued to provide a disciplined, loving environment for her children.

Physically, Esther Rolle has the appearance of the mammy figure. She is dark-skinned, overweight, and has big, round cheeks. In addition, her character was first introduced as a maid. However, *Good Times* gave insight to Florida's feelings about her own family, not just the white family for which she worked. She had a life beyond her work, with her family and her friends. Her best friend, Willona, also added a sexier, non-traditional face to motherhood when she provided an adoptive

home for Penny to rescue her from her abusive mother. This variety within the show provided a look at black mothers from different vantage points and with varying perspectives.

The final major era in black television mothers is that of *The Cosby Show*. In 1984, Bill Cosby brought his family creation to the small screen The Huxtables were an upper middle-class family residing in New York. The family consisted of Heathcliff (Cliff), an obstetrician; Claire, an attorney; and their five children, Sondra, Denise, Theo, Vanessa and Rudy. This top-rated sitcom gave a sophistication to the black family that had been missing in some of its predecessors. None of the baffoonish antics that had plagued shows like *The Jeffersons* and *Good Times* were incorporated into this show. There was no ax to grind with white society nor did the Huxtables have to constantly battle the many social ills of society. Instead, *The Cosby Show* did more to address parenting and family relationships.

The black mother in this show, however, is dramatically different from any of the other mothers seen before. Claire was very attractive and thin, exuding poise and grace. She was happily married, enjoying her husband and her children. During the show's run, Claire became a partner in her law firm. She was articulate and outspoken, from controlling her temper when Vanessa goes to Baltimore without permission to crying tears of joy when her son graduates from college. She demands and receives respect from her children, her husband and her friends. Portrayed by Phylicia Rashad, Claire Huxtable became the "supermom," balancing career, family and friends In addition to Claire, Cliff's mother often appeared on the show, and

Claire's mother made a few appearances as well Defying many of the stereotypes set before it, *The Cosby Show* established varying types of black mothers, from the young Sondra to the middle-aged Claire to the senior Anna. By providing educated, affluent, loving and provocative mothers, *The Cosby Show* permanently changed the view of the types of black families that could be successful on television.

Television does provide a more intimate medium than does film. It is easier to develop more complex characters that audiences see week after week as opposed to one time for two hours Television also leans towards family life whereas movies tend to focus more on action and plot lines. While the previously mentioned three eras are key pinpoints in the development of the black television mother, there are several additional shows that also feature black mothers in a prominent role, such as *What's Happening, Baby I'm Back, Melba, 227, That's My Mama, Charlie & Company, Family Matters, Palmerstown USA* and *Frank's Place.* In addition, there are also shows that featured black women in maternal roles, such as *Gimme A Break* and *Sanford and Son*

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

After reviewing the primary and secondary research subjects, the following conclusions have been made in reference to the research questions presented.

1) How has the role of the black mother in film evolved in terms of physical features, demographics, behaviors, religious beliefs, and place within family and society?

The role of the black mother has made some drastic evolutions in some categories and has remained pretty much the same in others As far as physical features are concerned, mothers still tend to be of a darker hue, implying that light-skinned women should be saved for the glamour roles and darker-skinned women can have the grit roles such as mothers. A color line that began with dark-skinned women being mammies and light-skinned women being beauty queens remained throughout the evolution of black mothers has continued to be a present force. All of the mothers tend to be in their thirties and older, omitting the stories of those younger mothers in their teens and twenties.

Demographically, black mothers have had a consistent portrayal, with a few variances interspersed. During the Segregation Era and the Desegregation Era, black mothers were consistently portrayed as being poor domestics. While there is a greater economic range for black mothers during the Post-Desegregation Era, the majority of mothers are still in the lower economic bracket. With the exception of *Claudine*, the

majority of black mothers have one or two children. Religion has also diminished throughout the evolutionary process. During the Segregation Era, continuing through the Desegregation Era, religion and a belief in a higher being were mainstays in the lives of black mothers However, during the Desegregation, the integration of religion into the lives of cinematic black mothers began to disintegrate. During the Post-Desegregation, religion is barely a mention, even for women who appear to be religious. In the film *Waiting To Exhale*, the only time religion is addressed is a quick shot of the four main characters walking out of a church. A spiritual belief system, which was a crucial element in the composure of black mothers in the beginning of film, has disappeared as an important factor to include and address with black mothers in the Post-Desegregation Era.

The relationships black mothers have with their children and other family members seems to have peaked and then plummeted. At first, the relationships were melodramatic and somewhat unrealistic in order to maintain the happy, submissive servant image During the Desegregation Era, the emotions seemed to be real and complex, allowing feelings to run the gambit and adding a sense of truth to the characters. However, that seems to have fallen by the wayside in the most recent time period. Emotional relationships with children tend to be strained, full of disrespect, or non-existent. The amount of respect that mothers receive from their children has continued to slide downward, from the intense respect shown in *Imitation of Life* to the complete lack thereof in *Boyz N the Hood*. While some scholars might argue that the time periods did more to affect the content than any

other reason, that argument is negated by the complete opposite development of black mothers in television. The reason for the disparity in film and television is not readily apparent nor is the reason that the quality of parent-child relationships has greatly decreased, especially after a rise in the quality during the Desegregation Era.

2) Does this evolution provide an accurate portrayal of black women in American society?

This question really becomes directed at the number of films about black mothers that have been and are being made. Because of their limited number, they can only depict a small amount of the types of black mothers that exists within the American society However, the mammy figure is not in line with the accurate picture of the black mother during the early part of the century While the majority of black women did serve in a domestic capacity, they were still intensely involved with their own families and their families' needs The films of the Desegregation Era probably hold the closest to true, showing the range of motherhood. The matriarchal figure within the extended family as well as the struggling single mother were closely aligned to the plight of many black women at the time, therefore allowing audiences to resonate with the characters. The modern films have taken a turn back towards the Segregation Era, depicting a false level of involvement with their children, regardless of their financial situation. Mothers have lost their place as matriarch in the family, with children not respecting their mothers and mothers not respecting their children Children have become inconvenience in the lives of black mothers, with children being plot points instead of crucial and important factors in the lives of these women.

The ebb in the development of black mothers in film is of critical importance when examining the effect of cinema on society at large. Film is an art form that depends on mass consumption for viability, which means that its impact is far reaching Cinema has a noted effect on the population, and racial harmony and understanding have yet to fully occur in this country. By offering a limited view of a culture that is not the majority, the population can be easily misled into believing that these films are an accurate portrayal of black mothers in society.

Films are also reviewed to examine the cultures of past. In order to provide an accurate perception that is not tainted by politics, racism and sexism, black mothers need a wider variety of roles depicting them as more complete, holistic characters. As is noted in film theory, "the motion picture had to relate closely to contemporary tastes and preoccupations, which it in turn helped to shaped" (Ellis, 2). By offering a wider variety of roles in greater quantity, film can more accurately portray the many facets and roles that black mothers fill, thus providing a better impetus in shaping those tastes and perceptions in society.

This study has limitations due to the manner in which the content analysis was conducted. Additional coders should be used for further study, and a larger number of films should be incorporated into the study. A suggestion for future study would also include more comprehensive research to compare black mothers in film to those in television as well as contrasting black mothers and white mothers in film. A more comprehensive study might also include television movies, such as *Roots, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman,* and *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. With

prominent black characters on television through the Desegregation and Post-Desegregation eras, this would provide an interesting contrast.

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VITA

ReGina Fae Newkirk was born in Fort Collins, Colorado on April 20, 1971. She attended public schools in Ettrick, Virginia; Lisle, Illinois; and Nashville, Tennessee. She graduated from John Overton High School in Nashville in May of 1989. She attended Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia, but then she transferred to New York University in New York City where she graduated, with highest honors, with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Dramatic Writing from Tisch School of the Arts in December of 1993. She returned to Nashville, where she worked at First American National Bank. She held the position of Assistant Vice President of Community Development for three years and then became Assistant Vice President of Internal Communications during her last year. In February of 1998, she moved to Knoxville to begin working on her Master's degree in Communications with an emphasis on Public Relations. A recipient of the Black Graduate Fellowship, she has focused her studies on grant writing and fundraising The Master of Science degree will be conferred in December, 2000.

During her tenure in Knoxville, she has worked as a contract grant writer for The Carpetbag Theatre and as an admissions counselor for The University of Tennessee. She is relocating to Washington, D.C. to pursue a career in development and establish her writing career. She will be published in the Knoxville Writers' Guild Anthology in the fall of 2000 and is currently working on a novel about the lives of three African-American women.