

Beyond the HELP!: The role of the African American Maid on the Silver Screen

Exhibit Premise:

Is to examine the pivotal role of the Black maid in the shaping of stereotypes and misconceptions portrayed by the cinema as bottle washers and mammies. Their acting roles, often seen as accommodating and supportive of their employers, provided a microcosm of society's acceptance of second-class citizenship during transitional periods of social change in America.

Hollywood's casting system of Black women during the 1930s, 40s and mid-50s, created a mammy characterization that has left a tattoo of attitudes on how Black women are viewed today. *Beyond the Help* shows that these down-trodden women of the kitchen, nursery and mothering, provided generations of White families with a support system. In segregated America, these women offered advice, as nurturing mid-wives in complex social and family situations that were disturbingly honest then and eventually became the genesis of systemic racism today.

Featured Personalities:

LOUISE BEAVERS - another overweight mammy figure who was always generous, forgiving and apologetic in submissive roles as a maid, servant or slave. Often insightfully gifted, she bashfully played down her intellect to accommodate her bosses. She is best known for her relaxed and easy-going role as Aunt Delilah, in the 1934 film classic *Imitation of Life*, that prides itself on racial harmony, as both White and Black families overcome family challenges of raising teenage daughters.

HATTIE MCDANIEL - a big-boned woman, with an ebony complexion, big hips, and a toothy smile, projected the optimistic, sentimental Black woman whose sweet, sunny disposition and kindheartedness almost always saved the day. To get her point across, her booming angry voice was often coated with humor. The former comic became a successful actress appearing in such mega hits as *Blonde Venus* and *I'm No Angel*, and later starred in the first TV sitcom starring an African American, *Beulah*. In 1940, McDaniel would become the first African American woman to win an Academy Award.

BUTTERFLY MCQUEEN - with a high-pitched voice, the diminutive maid had the gift of operating in a world of her own, with her riveting role as Scarlett O'Hara's maid in *Gone with the Wind*, with some unforgettable quotes. She is best known for playing helpless hysterical maids, not worthy of employment.

JUANITA MOORE - a very underrated actress who is best known for her role as Annie Johnson, the ever-smiling, accommodating, soft-spoken Mom in the 1959 version of *Imitation of Life*. Her gentle character would follow her in subsequent roles in several TV series, including *Dragnet*, *Adam-12*, and *Marcus Welby, M.D.*

ETHEL WATERS - is another Black matriarch myth in American pop culture. Perhaps better known as a blues and gospel singer, she was nominated for a Best Supporting Actress Academy Award in 1949 for the film *Pinky*, a film about a light-skinned African American nursing student passing for White. Paradoxically, the role of *Pinky* was played by Jeanne Craine, a White actress.



Other significant maid actresses featured are: **RUBY DANDRIDGE**, **VIOLA DAVIS**, **JACKIE "MOMS" MABLEY**, **SISTERS LILLIAN & AMANDA RANDOLPH** and **OCTAVIA SPENCER**.

Why is "Beyond the Help" important?

It is to understand why the mammy caricature contains a tiny truth surrounded by a larger lie. These women showed great love for their White "families" despite being treated as isolated objects by their stage families. Although they may have had children, they were often viewed as desexualized, with their sweaty head-scarves, drooping bosoms, and dirty aprons. The Black women in the *Beyond the Help* exhibit had no authentic Black friends as the White families consumed their entire world. Obviously, the mammy caricature was more mythical than an accurate portrayal of the ideal Black mother. However misconceptions can die a hard death, as these ideals would become staples of today's modified behavior with misleading assessments of Black women by the masses.