

New Third Edition of the 100,000 copy Best-Seller

TOMS, COONS,



MULATTOES,



MAMMIES, & BUCKS

An Interpretive History of
Blacks in American Films

DONALD BOGLE

Toms, Coons, Mulattoes,
Mammies, and Bucks
*An Interpretive History of Blacks in
American Films*

NEW THIRD EDITION

Donald Bogle

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Frontispiece: Louise Beavers in *Imitation of Life* (courtesy Universal Pictures).

Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks



To my mother

to papa g.

to jeanne & janet & bettina

to dodson & dawson

&

to three terrific bogles:

roger & jerry & jay

PREFACE TO THE NEW THIRD EDITION

This new third edition of *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* now takes the reader through the 1980s into the rise of the new African American cinema and stars of the 1990s. The previous edition ended with the arrival of Spike Lee and other independent black filmmakers in the late 1980s. Little did I know then that so much would happen in the closing years of that decade or that American cinema would undergo such great changes in the next era.

Thus in this new third edition I have included comments on such widely seen films of the late 1980s as *Driving Miss Daisy*, *Glory*, and of course, *Do the Right Thing*. I also have been happy to have the opportunity to discuss in more detail the careers of such important late 1980s stars as Denzel Washington and Morgan Freeman. The new chapter on the 1990s charts the rise of such new African American filmmakers as John Singleton and Julie Dash as well as the ever-growing screen work of Whoopi Goldberg, Laurence Fishburne, Wesley Snipes, Alfre Woodard, and again Denzel Washington. It also comments on a number of other popular films (not made by, but) featuring African Americans such as *What's Love Got to Do with It?* and *Passion Fish*. Because of the

nature of this type of historical overview, there has not been enough space to discuss certain movies in the detail I would prefer, especially such films as *Menace II Society*, *White Men Can't Jump*, and *Daughters of the Dust*. In the new edition of my book *Blacks in American Films and Television: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, I plan to focus in much more detail on many films that are mentioned here.

There are many people to thank for their help while I researched and wrote the material for this new edition. Both Cicely Tyson and Morgan Freeman, with whom I conducted public interviews for the D.C. International Film Festival, provided insights not only into their work and careers but also on the effect of screen images in their own lives. Freeman also provided a dazzler of a surprise. Shortly before we entered the auditorium for his interview, he spoke perceptively of such actors as Mantan Moreland, Stepin Fetchit, and apparently his favorite, Dorothy Dandridge. (She's my favorite too!) He also did a flat-out brilliant impersonation of Fetchit that captured the essence of Fetchit's masterly timing and the core of his lazybones persona. He brought into sharp focus something I've always been aware of: that extraordinary link between African American performers past and present.

Also providing me with insights as they informally discussed their work during a break at a symposium in Hartford, Connecticut, were film directors Charles Burnett and Wendell Harris and television director Neema Barnette. Hearing filmmakers discuss the pressures and attitudes (racial, cultural) within the entertainment industry is always a stimulating, enlightening experience.

Finally, there have been my remarkable friends and associates who have provided great assistance and been far more helpful than they may realize. Foremost I have to express my appreciation to my researcher Phil Bertelsen, who was excellent at gathering information I needed and also in coming up with additional material I had not requested. Moreover, both he and my good friend filmmaker Kathe Sandler have been terrific people to see movies with and then to exchange ideas afterwards. The same applies to Bruce Goldstein of New York's Film Forum. Whenever I have had a pressing question or concern pertaining to movie history, I have felt exceptionally fortunate to be able to call Bruce, whose knowledge of film and film history never ceases to amaze and impress me. Jerald Silverhardt has also come to the rescue on many occasions when I have put in a call to the West Coast to check on some detail or matter about contemporary films and film production.

My thanks also go to Sarah Orrick, Joerg Klebe of German Educational Television, Ronald Mason, Rigmor Newman, Harold

and Fayard Nicholas, Tony Gittens of the D.C. International Film Festival, Jacquie Jones, Marie Dutton Brown, Linda Doll Tarrant, Barbara Reynolds, Jeff Conrad, Harry Ford, Pele Charleston, and naturally, Bettina Batchleor and Marian Etoile Watson.

Then I also want to express my appreciation to my very dear friend Anna Deavere Smith, with whom it is always an insightful pleasure to discuss film and theater. And, of course, I want to thank dear Mariskia Bogle, who sometimes griped but nonetheless sweetly adjusted her schedule on so many occasions to help me update my filing system on performers and productions.

Finally, my appreciation goes to Michael Leach of Crossroad, who has always been supportive, and most of all, to my editor at Continuum, Evander Lomke, who has provided pertinent comments and been remarkably helpful and, best of all (considering my extended deadlines), extraordinarily patient.

PREFACE TO THE EXPANDED EDITION

For this expanded edition of *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, I have added two new chapters. The original epilogue of the book, which covered films of the “blaxploitation era” in the early 1970s, has now been rewritten to examine movies of the entire decade. The other new chapter explores black performers and films of the 1980s. Since the book was originally published, a number of personalities I wrote about—such as Stepin Fetchit and Ethel Waters—have died. Consequently, I have added the dates of death for such performers and have also added some new information on the later work of other actors and actresses. No major changes in the text, however, have been made. For me, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* was as much a statement on my own evolving aesthetic and perspective as it was on the history and contributions of black performers in American films. In writing the new chapters, it struck me how much black film history has changed. The 1980s saw the emergence of such truly powerful film superstars as Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy (men with enough clout to call some of the shots in their films) and also the arrival of a black director like Spike Lee, who brought the black independent film movement mainstream. And

yet, in other respects, the history has changed very little. American films are still dominated by stereotypes and distortions. And the history of blacks in films remains one in which individual actors and actresses have often had to direct themselves; rather than *playing* characters, they have had to play *against their roles*, digging deep within themselves to come up with unexpected and provocative points of view. American movies also remain rather brutal for black women. Often they are ignored by filmmakers. Or, as in the case in a line of vibrant stars such as Dorothy Dandridge and later Lonette McKee, Cicely Tyson, and even Diana Ross, the industry on occasion has been dazzled by their talents yet has not been ready to create roles to showcase them and enable the actresses to have sustained movie careers. Serious dramatic black actors find successful film careers eluding them as well. Curiously, at this point in our history, only one dramatic black actor, Sidney Poitier, has been able to work consistently in serious roles in American films. Since Poitier's ascension to stardom in the 1950s and 1960s, no other such dramatic black actor has had as long or as impressive a film career. And, of course, even Poitier has hardly had a career that has run smoothly. Finally, the film industry still has not opened itself up to enough black writers, directors, and producers.

I should add that this edition, like the first, covers American feature films. Documentaries and television programs are not examined. Nor have I focused at any great length on African and European films dealing with the black experience. Those films are, of course, a world unto themselves, springing from another perspective, history, and cultural aesthetic.

Many associates and friends have been of enormous help to me in expanding this new edition. Foremost I would like to thank Deborah Willis and the staff of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Barbara Humphries of the Motion Picture Division of the Library of Congress, and the staff at the Theatre Collection of the Library of Performing Arts at Lincoln Center. Joerg Klebe of the German Educational Television Network has been very helpful and encouraging. Bruce Goldstein of New York's Film Forum has also provided intelligent and knowledgeable suggestions and insights. My appreciation also goes to Catherine Bogle Garcia, Sarah Orrick, Nels Johnson, Douglas Rossini, Marie Dutton-Brown, Harry Ford, Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe and Arthur Ashe, Barbara Reynolds of *USA Today*, Herma Ross Shorty, David Stewart, Stephan Henriques, Fern Robinson of Black Entertainment Television, Ronald Mason, Jerald Silverhardt of Hush Productions, Alice Richardson, Susan Peterson, Ann Marie Cunningham, Martin Radburd, Mary Corliss and Terry Geesken of the Film Stills Archive at the Museum

of Modern Art, Toni Smith, Robert Smith, Anna Deavere Smith, Phil Bertelsen, and, of course, Marian Etoile Watson of Fox Television, with whom it is always a pleasure to see movies. I would also like to express my gratitude—for their perceptive comments and very warm support—to two very special friends, Cheryll Greene of *Essence* and Catherine “Kay” Nelson. Finally, I have to thank Michael Leach of The Continuum Publishing Company and especially my very generous and thoughtful editor, Evander Lomke.

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

In the late 1950s, when I was a wide-eyed, pint-sized kid growing up in Pennsylvania and still believing in ideals and dreams, I decided one gloomy rainy afternoon to run away from home and go to live at the movies. By chance, the movie I went to “live at” was something called *Carmen Jones*. In no conceivable way has my life been the same since.

Carmen Jones was the first black film I had seen, and as I sat intoxicated by Dorothy Dandridge’s lush beauty and invigorated by the dazzling enthusiasm the cast displayed for its work, I realized the film and the actors were unlike any I had ever viewed before. It was more than the fact that these were black faces on the silver screen. I was also affected and moved because these were immensely talented and dynamic people, more colorful, more unpredictable, and more outrageous than most other actors appearing in American films. *Carmen Jones* proved to be a source of inspiration. Thereafter for the duration of my childhood in the 1950s and throughout adolescence in the 1960s, I found myself always on the look-out in movies and on television for black faces. From the old films on the tube, I caught glimpses of a variety of performers with such “bizarre” names as Stepin, Hattie, Butterfly, Bojangles,

Rochester, and Lena. At the local movie houses, I had brief introductions to Sidney Poitier, Ruby Dee, and Ossie Davis. As I silently watched, I compared and contrasted the black actors not only with white performers but with one another. To my surprise and delight, the old-timers came off best. They seemed outfitted with a charm, a spontaneity, and an individuality the modern performers lacked. As my interest in the old-timers mounted, I longed for more information about them. How many pictures had Stepin Fetchit made? Had Hattie McDaniel ever played a *submissive* servant? Was there a movie in which Bojangles did not dance?

Seldom was I able to find answers to my questions. There was not one reference work in the library that I could go to for information. But perhaps more disappointing was the apathy of others about all black actors, old and new. Among my schoolmates, there was hardly any concern about a black face—other than Sidney Poitier's—and if one dared mention a Fetchit or a Rochester, he was soon informed that these people were “villains,” “betrayers,” nothing more than toms and handkerchief heads. Eventually in this age of great conformity, I learned to keep my mouth shut about any black actor I really did care about. But when alone I still responded to and ultimately came to love the performances of certain black actors.

That love continued through high school, through college, through graduate school, right on up to the beginning of my professional life. Subconsciously, I think I was writing a history of movie blacks in my head. Then two “traumatic” experiences not only heightened my interest in blacks in American movies but served better than anything else as catalysts for the writing of this book.

The first experience occurred in the plush office of film director Otto Preminger, where I was employed as a story editor. One day in the middle of an interoffice debate, I was asked who had played the character Sam in the 1942 movie *Casablanca*. Preminger was certain a black actor had performed the role. But I self-righteously declared that Hoagy Carmichael had played the part. To my everlasting chagrin, I learned that Dooley Wilson, an obscure black actor, was the performer in the picture. Afterward I felt pitifully inadequate for not knowing something that was a part of my own cultural heritage.

My second traumatic experience occurred shortly afterwards while I was a staff writer for *Ebony* in Chicago. Having recently seen the reissued *Gone with the Wind*, I suggested to the managing editors of the magazine that we do a feature story on Butterfly McQueen, who portrayed Prissy. There was a renewed interest in her career because of the film and also her comeback on the stage in *Curley McDimple*. She was a nostalgic favorite for older readers, I

assumed, and I had hoped that an article on McQueen might serve as a kick-off for a series on other forgotten black performers. To my surprise, I heard the *Ebony* editors sounding off like my former grade-school classmates. They dismissed the old-time actors as toms and mummies and spoke of them with boredom, disgust, contempt, and even condescension—as if our bright new movies with their bright new black actors had arrived at something called cinematic integrity!

The attitude of the *Ebony* editors, however, simply pointed out the sad state of black film history in America. There was no history. And it seemed to me that a number of talented people were dismissed or ignored or even vilified because no one knew anything about the nature of their work and the conditions under which they performed. No, I thought. The past had to be contended with. It had to be defined, recorded, reasoned with, and interpreted. And I felt it my task to do so.

Once I decided to write the book, I returned to New York City, where I began an intense and alternately gratifying and frustrating period of research. I watched film after film at almost any place I could—at the Museum of Modern Art, at the Jewish Museum, at the Studio Museum in Harlem, at the Library of Congress, at the homes of friends, at rundown theaters on Forty-second Street, and often in my apartment in front of the friendly tube. My great ambition was to see every motion picture in which a black had ever worked. But that obviously proved impossible. Those black films I was unable to see I read about, going through albums of pictures and clippings at the Schomburg Library, through personal scrapbooks of black personalities at their homes, and through reams of old yellowed newspaper movie reviews. At one point, I seated myself at the library and went through every copy of *Ebony* ever published to track down information on films and actors.

When I checked into what had been written on the subject, I found only one formal piece of work, by an Englishman, Peter Noble. Written in the 1940s, Noble's *The Negro in Films* proved disappointing because it was so much the typical, unintentionally patronizing, white liberal "tasteful" approach. He deplored—rightfully—the stereotyping of Negroes in American movies. But what he clearly failed to see was what certain black actors accomplished with even demeaning stereotyped roles. Noble was ready to dismiss Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen as mere mammy and pickaninny. But anyone who had seen them in *Gone with the Wind* and left the theater with no more than that impression really missed or ignored the strength of the performances, and at the same time denied black America a certain cultural heritage. In the opening

sections of the book, I have had to cover much of the same historical territory as Noble. But what we have each gotten from the experience of blacks in American cinema has been vastly different. From my point of view, the history of blacks in American films is one in which actors have elevated *kitsch* or trash and brought to it arty qualities if not pure art itself. Indeed, the thesis of my book is that all black actors—from Stepin Fetchit to Rex Ingram to Lena Horne to Sidney Poitier and Jim Brown—have played stereotyped roles. But the essence of black film history is not found in the stereotyped role but in what certain talented actors have done with the stereotype.

My final source of information was the personal interview. Many black actors refused to talk to me, perhaps out of some fear that I might demean them even more than their old films had. Some of the newer ones were remote and difficult. One older actress, a particular favorite, promised an interview only if I paid her a thousand dollars. Another prominent actor/singer refused to see me but requested that I send him galleys of my book before publication. However, those who consented to interviews, formal or informal, were most helpful. In Hollywood Mantan Moreland was lively and full of fun as he reminisced on his early movie roles. Clarence Muse proved a bit cantankerous when I visited him at his California ranch, but he was nonetheless informative as he discussed his career in the 1930s and 1940s. Sidney Poitier, standing tall and sleek at Kennedy Airport, was so gracious, polite, and charming during the few minutes that I talked with him, that I was ready to forgive him for all his recent bad movies. Behind his massive marble desk in Manhattan, Otto Preminger sat like a monarch as he casually discussed his two all-black films and provided capsule analyses of black actors he had worked with. At a Manhattan restaurant Robert Hooks was first guarded, then thoroughly at ease as he reviewed his roles in *Hurry Sundown* and *Last of the Mobile Hot Shots*. King Vidor was extremely helpful as we talked in his office in Beverly Hills and later as we lunched at Farmer's Market. An enormous treat for me was a special cocktail party arranged by Lorenzo Tucker, once an important leading man who had been called "the black Valentino." At Tucker's party, I came face to face with "the sepia Mae West," "the colored Cagney," and many others. And I learned not only about their careers but about those of others who had worked in American films. One important black actor ended his days as a redcap. Another became a notorious Harlem pool-shark. Some became hustlers of all sorts. At least two vivacious leading ladies ended up as domestic workers. Other black

luminaries drifted into alcoholism, drugs, suicide, or bitter self-recrimination.

For me, the most exciting and at the same time depressing interview was a startling, delirious eight-hour chat with Vivian Dandridge, the sister of Dorothy. From Vivian, there emerged the clearest, most articulate definition of black movie stardom (and its differences from white stardom) that I had ever heard. The embarrassments, the humiliations, the affronts her sister endured were distressing. Dorothy's final self-destructive bent was clearly an outgrowth of her experiences as a black woman in a white movie colony.

Once the research was completed, I gathered my material and tried fitting it into some order. As I did so, I saw emerging something more than history. Having come of age at a time when it has been almost impossible to keep politics and aesthetics apart, I felt compelled to interpret the past from my own point of view, that of a black looking at other blacks in motion pictures, that of a black under twenty-five reviewing the work of his cultural ancestors. When I watched *Stormy Weather* with an all-black audience that openly mocked the stereotypes on screen, or when I saw *The Birth of a Nation* with a black audience that openly cheered for the black villains to defeat the white heroes, or when I viewed *The Emperor Jones* with a young black audience that openly admitted it was there simply to "understand" the legendary Robeson whom their parents had worshiped, I knew I was seeing reactions far different from those that initially greeted these three films and other black movies. I was also aware, while sitting in a Times Square theater one afternoon and listening to black teen-agers howling and deriding Juano Hernandez's weathered janitor character in *They Call Me MISTER Tibbs*, that somehow or other I had to make them understand what this man had been like in the early 1950s. These teen-agers had to see that without an actor like Hernandez in the 1950s, there might never have been a *They Call Me MISTER Tibbs*. What I have tried to do is put black films and black personalities in their proper historical perspective, at the same time trying to say what these films and actors mean to us today.

Another problem for me in writing the book was deciding whom to include or exclude. Had it not been that the critics of their time were so impressed by performers Hazel Scott and Clarence Muse, I might have referred to them only in passing. Instead I included them and am now glad I did. At the same time, I would have preferred spending more time discussing Hernandez and James Edwards and less on Sidney Poitier. But it was obvious to me that