

## ABSTRACT

Title: BEYOND RACIAL STEREOTYPES:  
SUBVERSIVE SUBTEXTS IN *CABIN IN THE SKY*

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The 1943 film *Cabin in the Sky* holds an important place in cinematic history as one of the first “all-Negro” pictures produced by a major Hollywood studio. The movie musical reflects a transitional period in American racial politics and popular culture, when long-established stereotypes and themes associated with blackness were still prevalent, but were shifting to reflect more progressive attitudes. On the surface, *Cabin* seems to reinforce reductive and conventional notions. It presents a folkloric story of Southern blacks, the corrupting influence of modern urbanity, and the redemptive power of marital devotion and religious piety—replete with the entire pantheon of Negro caricatures. Upon careful analysis, however, the film’s stereotypical topics are rendered superficial by subversive undercurrents. In addition, Ethel Waters’ appearance as herself exposes the story and characters as fictional constructs, and paves the way for a more liberal image of blackness to emerge.

BEYOND RACIAL STEREOTYPES:  
SUBVERSIVE SUBTEXTS IN *CABIN IN THE SKY*

By

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## Note on Terminology

The history of African-American arts and entertainment poses challenges in respect to language and terminology. Outdated racial titles such as *Negro* and *colored* carry with them a history of discrimination that makes the terms offensive by today's standards. However, use of such terms in their appropriate historical contexts is customary in scholarly works such as this. Therefore, I have generally tried to use the titles *Negro*, *black*, and *African American* where suitable. In some cases, however, I have interchanged the terms more freely to avoid redundant prose.

## INTRODUCTION

The 1943 film *Cabin in the Sky* was one of only six “all-Negro” pictures produced by major Hollywood studios during the years 1927 to 1954.<sup>1</sup> It is a powerful reflection of a transitional period in American racial politics and popular culture, when the long-established stereotypes and themes associated with blackness were shifting to reflect more progressive tendencies. However, in 1943 the United States was still a segregated society (the Supreme Court ruling to desegregate schools was not made until 1954), and racist images maintained a powerful influence in popular arts and entertainment. In the case of Hollywood, these images were propagated primarily because films were written, produced, and directed by whites, and were created to generate large profits by appealing to a wide variety of audiences. The six all-black films mentioned above fit into this category, and as James Naremore points out in his essay “Uptown Folk: Blackness and Entertainment in *Cabin in the Sky*,” they are all based upon a white conception of African Americans as “fun-loving, ‘rhythmic’ people,” along with a “vivid binary opposition between city and country that structured both classic Hollywood and many aspects of the culture at large.”<sup>2</sup> This image of blacks and the accompanying city/country dichotomy were deep-seated, stereotyped notions of African-American culture that had been prevalent in literature and stage entertainment since the previous century, and they were

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<sup>1</sup> James Naremore, “Uptown Folk: Blackness and Entertainment in *Cabin in the Sky*,” in *Representing Jazz*, ed. by Krin Gabbard (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 169. The six films include *Hallelujah!* (MGM, 1929), *Hearts in Dixie* (Fox, 1929), *The Green Pastures* (Warner Brothers, 1936), *Cabin in the Sky* (MGM, 1943), *Stormy Weather* (Twentieth-Century Fox, 1943), and *Carmen Jones* (Twentieth-Century Fox, 1954). Naremore excludes from his list Paramount’s *Tales of Manhattan* (1942) and Disney’s *Song of the South* (1946) because the former includes one episode involving blacks, and the latter was animated.

<sup>2</sup> Naremore, 170.



often accompanied by reductive racial caricatures and discrimination that was concealed under the cloak of religious morality. In spite of this, some of these films still represent modest gestures toward progressivism, and in the case of *Cabin in the Sky*, one may argue that the gesture was considerable, though not explicit.

On the surface, *Cabin in the Sky* seems to be a typical religious story of Southern black folk, the corrupting influence of modern urbanity, and the redemptive power of marital devotion and religious piety—replete with the entire pantheon of Negro caricatures. Upon closer inspection, however, the film's approach to religion and its negotiation of the city/country theme seem insincere. Its treatment of religious personas and topics is comical, and though the script adheres to a rural/urban dichotomy with moral overtones, this opposition is undermined by director Vincente Minnelli's aesthetic of excess and the film's glorification of urban sophistication. In addition, the movie's reductive characterizations are tempered by the story's open ending, which allows for a more progressive reading to emerge. Furthermore, by introducing actress Ethel Waters within the narrative, the movie exposes its own scenario and caricatures as a sham, and offers an alternative image of female blackness that counters racial stereotypes. Thus, *Cabin in the Sky* undermines the clichéd representations of its conservative storyline. In doing so, it offers a moderately liberal portrayal of blacks, while still functioning within the strictures of a segregated, white-dominated society.

This thesis aims to situate the film within its appropriate historical context, and thereby to facilitate an informed interpretation and evaluation of its subject matter, themes, performances, and characters. Chapter one details the musical's origin and

history, including its creation and first incarnation as a Broadway stage production in 1940, its subsequent stagings in 1953 and 1964, and its adaptation to film through the efforts of MGM producer Arthur Freed and director Vincente Minnelli. Chapter two discusses the picture's principle themes: the rural/urban opposition, religion, and folklore. The origin and prevalence of these topics in popular arts and literature is demonstrated and explained, with particular emphasis on their presence in musical theater, followed by an analysis of *Cabin in the Sky*'s subversive treatment of them. Chapter three includes detailed histories of each of the work's racial caricatures: the tom, coon, mulatto jezebel, black brute, and mammy. These histories construct an artistic, social, and political context through which the characters of *Cabin in the Sky* may be accurately viewed and evaluated. An analysis of each major persona of the film is offered, with Ethel Waters' role as Petunia examined in depth. Finally, chapter four consists of a biography of Waters, a discussion of her transformation within the narrative from Petunia Jackson to her real-life stage persona, an examination of how this metamorphosis is accomplished musically and visually, and an interpretation of its implications concerning the film's conservative storyline and representation of blacks.

This study offers the most comprehensive examination to date of the film and its themes and stereotypes. James Naremore's essay "Uptown Folk: Blackness and Entertainment in *Cabin in the Sky*" is a valuable analysis of how the film reflects several discourses on blackness in America. Likewise, Susan Smith's *The Musical: Race, Gender, and Performance* discusses how the performance scenes and open ending make for a more progressive image of blackness than the film's storyline suggests. While I

draw upon these two authors' ideas, my essay constructs a more complete historical framework through which the film's topics and characters may be considered. I accomplish this by discussing the roots of each theme and caricature, and how these stereotypes have been propagated and treated in literary works, stage shows, film, and even scientific writings. This study is the first to tie the film's rural/urban opposition and religious folklore to important trends in black musical theater during the 1920s and 1930s. It is also the first to offer an analysis of all the film's leading characters and how they relate to popular racial caricatures. While I espouse Naremore and Smith's contentions that the film's semantics are insincere, my study offers a new reading of Ethel Waters' performance scenes, which result in a more liberal image of female blackness than even Smith suggests. Furthermore, I discuss the *music's* role in subverting the story's conservative overtones. This task, which has been largely neglected by other writers, proves critical to consideration of the musical's treatment of race.

## CHAPTER 1 ORIGINS AND PRODUCTIONS

### VERNON DUKE'S STAGE MUSICAL

*Cabin in the Sky* is based upon Vernon Duke's Broadway musical of the same name, which opened on 25 October 1940 at the Martin Beck Theatre in New York. The stage version was produced by Albert Lewis and Vinton Freedley, directed by George Balanchine and Lewis, with sets and costumes by Boris Aronson, and choreography by Balanchine and Katherine Dunham. The original cast included Ethel Waters (Petunia), Dooley Wilson (Little Joe), Rex Ingram (Lucifer Junior), Katherine Dunham (Georgia Brown), and Todd Duncan (Lawd's General), along with the Katherine Dunham Dancers, and J. Rosamund Johnson and his Singers.

The musical began as a libretto, originally titled *Little Joe*, by scriptwriter Lynn Root. After passing through the hands of Larry Hart, Doc Bender, and George Balanchine—all of whom liked the script—it eventually made its way to Vernon Duke, who writes in his autobiography *Passport to Paris*: “On reading the script, my first impulse was to turn it down because much as I admired the Negro race and its musical gifts, I didn't think myself sufficiently attuned to Negro folklore.”<sup>3</sup> He loved Root's libretto, however, and agreed to write music for it, even after Jack Robbins, the head of MGM's publishing company, told him: “I don't need you for colored shows. For those I already have the right Duke—Ellington.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Vernon Duke, *Passport to Paris* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955), 383.

<sup>4</sup> Vernon Duke, “Liner Notes,” Vernon Duke Archive at the Library of Congress, Box 123. In Duke's *Passport to Paris*, he offers a slightly different quotation from Jack Robbins: “I don't need you for

After rejections from Ira Gershwin and Yip Harburg, Duke chose Johnny Latouche as lyricist, and the two began work at Virginia Beach. According to Duke, he and Latouche went there hoping to absorb aspects of the local African-American culture, but in the end, they “decided to stay away from pedantic authenticity and write our own kind of ‘colored’ songs.”<sup>5</sup>

Rehearsals for *Cabin in the Sky* began in late September of 1940 at the Martin Beck Theatre. The combined Russian trio—Duke, Balanchine, and Aronson—and all-black cast made for interesting rehearsals. Duke quotes writer George Ross’s description from the *Telegram*:

Pit a threesome of turbulent Russians against a tempestuous cast of Negro players from Harlem and what have you got? Well, in this instance the result is a lingual ruckus approaching bedlam. At least half a dozen times at the rehearsal of ‘Cabin in the Sky,’ Ethel Waters, Todd Duncan, Rex Ingram, J. Rosamund Johnson, Katherine Dunham and her dancers have paused in puzzlement while the argumentative trio of Muscovites disputed a difference of opinion in their native tongue. The Russian vowels and consonants fly as thick as borsht. After ten minutes of such alien harangue and retort, Miss Waters asks what it is all about. ‘George,’ Duke generally interprets, ‘just said the answer is ‘yes!’” and then rehearsals are resumed under the flag of truce until the next vocal flare-up.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of these unusual circumstances, the collaboration between Balanchine and Dunham resulted in a synthesis of their two approaches, which was, if not entirely convincing, then at least a “curious” combination—as one writer for the *New York Times*

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colored shows—I already have Duke Ellington. Why don’t you write me some modern-American instrumentals that the schools would go for? Vernon, Vernon, when will you learn?” (p. 383).

<sup>5</sup> Duke, *Passport to Paris*, 384.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 389.

described it—that elicited interest from spectators and critics.<sup>7</sup> Duke’s interaction with the performers was more successful, and his communication with Waters, in particular, proved critical to the show’s success. Just three days before the opening, Duke replaced one of the show’s numbers, Petunia’s lullaby “We’ll live all over again,” after Waters expressed dissatisfaction with it. The result was the show-stopping song “Taking a Chance on Love,” which by all accounts, was the highlight of the premiere performance. Brooks Atkinson’s wrote in his review that Waters “stood that song on its head last evening and ought to receive a Congressional medal by way of reward.”<sup>8</sup>

The score of *Cabin in the Sky* was perhaps the greatest achievement of the stage musical, with numbers such as the highly successful “Taking a Chance on Love,” as well as “Cabin in the Sky,” “Honey in the Honeycomb,” and “My Old Virginia Home.” In a letter to the *New York Times* drama editor, one audience member wrote that, “the opening songs of Ethel Waters will sing away in our hearts for a long time, maybe until we die.”<sup>9</sup> Portions of the 1940 production were preserved on a 78-rpm record by Liberty Music Shop Records featuring Ethel Waters, Max Beth and the Martin Beck Theatre Orchestra.<sup>10</sup> The recording includes five tracks: Overture, “Taking a Chance on Love,” “Honey in the Honeycomb,” “Cabin in the Sky,” and “Love Turned the Light Out.”

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<sup>7</sup> Writer John Martin wrote that the combination of Dunham and Balanchine was a “curious” one that proved fruitful. He commended Dunham’s portrayal of Georgia Brown, as well as the choreography for “Honey in the Honeycomb,” but he criticized Balanchine for forcing dancers “into his own patterns,” which Martin claimed resulted in “lost flavor.” See Martin, “Katherine Dunham and George Balanchine Swing ‘Cabin in the Sky,’” *New York Times*, 10 November 1940.

<sup>8</sup> Brooks Atkinson, “Ethel Waters Heads Players of ‘Cabin in the Sky,’ a Musical Fantasy With a Negro Cast,” *New York Times*, 26 October 1940.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Bennett, “In the Drama Mailbag,” *New York Times*, 5 January 1941.

<sup>10</sup> This recording is now available in digital format from AEI Records (AEI-CD 017).

Though the entire musical score is not available in recorded form, Duke prepared a piano/vocal score (See Table 1), which was published by Miller Music in 1940, while the show was still on Broadway.<sup>11</sup>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>TABLE 1:</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Musical Score of <i>Cabin in the Sky</i></b> <b>(Miller Music, 1940)</b> <b>Table of Contents</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Overture Opening Chant Junior's Entrance Fleet Foot's Theme General's Entrance The Man Upstairs Taking a Chance on Love Cabin in the Sky Do What You Wanna Do Finale Act I Entr'acte Fugue In My Old Virginia Home Vision Ballet Not So Bad Love Me Tomorrow Love Turned the Light Out Honey in the Honeycomb Savannah Storm General's Recitative General's Entrance Opening Last Scene Last Scene</p>
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<sup>11</sup> A writer for *Time* magazine noted that the accompaniment for one of Katherine Dunham's numbers was "true, improvised boogie-woogie by Pianist Sidney Tuscher," as opposed to Duke's written music. "New Plays in Manhattan," *Time*, 4 November 1940.

*Cabin in the Sky* finished its run at the Martin Beck Theatre on 8 March 1941, after 156 performances. Its closing was followed by a national tour that included stops in Boston and Chicago. In the summer of 1953, producers Ratcliffe and Macmillan revived the show at Seacliff, Long Island under the direction of Herbert Machiz, with stars Juanita Hall, Josephine Premice and Nipsey Russell. Again in 1964, the musical was restaged, this time by producers Arthur Whitelaw and Leo Friedman at the Greenwich Mews Theater in New York. The 1964 revival enjoyed a successful run of 47 performances and was recorded and released by Angel Records. *Cabin in the Sky's* greatest success, however, occurred in 1943, when Hollywood producer Arthur Freed “took a chance” on the all-Negro musical by turning it into a major motion picture.

#### THE MGM FILM

On 7 February 1943, in an article titled “Hollywood Takes a Hint From Washington: Two Big Negro Musicals Are Underway,” the *New York Times* announced the expected arrival of the first all-black Hollywood pictures since *The Green Pastures*, *Stormy Weather* and *Cabin in the Sky*. The “hint from Washington” of the article’s title was the Roosevelt administration’s advocacy of black actors in major roles of important motion pictures, which they claimed would help to increase employment in fields of industry that had previously been off limits.<sup>12</sup> This initiative was consistent with Roosevelt’s efforts to create jobs for African Americans and other minority groups through his New Deal relief programs during the 1930s and his executive orders to ensure

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<sup>12</sup> Fred Stanley, “Hollywood Takes a Hint From Washington,” *New York Times*, 7 February 1943.



fair employment practices during the early 40s, but it also was indicative of increased demands for better treatment and representation by black civil rights leaders and organizations. Immediately before World War II, Walter White, the executive secretary of the NAACP met with Hollywood executives and actors to discuss “the limitation of the Negro to comic and menial roles,”<sup>13</sup> and in 1942 at the organization’s national convention and in a speech to the East Coast Committee on Public Relations of the Motion Picture Producers Association, he “called for an end to racial stereotyping and greater participation by black workers in Hollywood craft unions.”<sup>14</sup> The result was a promise from the Producers Association to “effect as rapid a change as possible in the treatment of Negroes in moving pictures.”<sup>15</sup> That summer, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer began shooting *Cabin in the Sky*.

MGM’s all-black musical of 1943 was launched by Arthur Freed who, after collaborating as a lyricist with composer Nacio Herb Brown in creating such classics as “Singing in the Rain” and “You Were Meant for Me,” began working as a producer at MGM in 1939. The first picture he solo produced was *Babes in Arms* (1939), a successful cinematic musical based upon the earlier Broadway show. Although not credited for his work, Freed also contributed significantly to the success of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) by insisting that the song “Over the Rainbow” be kept in the film. Shortly thereafter, Freed recruited stage director Vincente Minnelli to join his production unit,

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<sup>13</sup> *The Papers of the NAACP*, December 1940; quoted in Naremore, 173.

<sup>14</sup> Naremore, 173.

<sup>15</sup> *The Papers of the NAACP*, April 1942; quoted in Naremore, 173.

and following Minnelli's almost yearlong apprenticeship at the studio, Freed offered the Hollywood novice the opportunity to direct *Cabin in the Sky*.<sup>16</sup>

In his autobiography, *I Remember It Well*, Minnelli writes that *Cabin in the Sky* was his first big opportunity at MGM, and it was one that Freed had played a very important role in securing:

To those in charge, I was just a one-year apprentice... and there were many more where I'd come from. Under contract at the studio with first call on the best properties were such master journeymen as Sam Wood, Victor Fleming, Clarence Brown, and George Cukor. If *Cabin in the Sky* hadn't been a small picture—and a risky one too—I would have had to wait much longer for that first break. But I interpreted the assignment, with more freedom than I'd dreamed possible, as just reward for past contributions. Arthur allowed me that conceit. I didn't learn until years later how hard he'd had to fight on my behalf.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to defending Minnelli as director, Freed also battled for sufficient funding, but in the end, *Cabin* still remained the lowest-budgeted musical in the history of the Freed unit.<sup>18</sup> In spite of this, the studio did invest in a cast of star performers, as well as a team of talented screenwriters, and Minnelli managed to produce a visually stunning and innovative work.<sup>19</sup> He presented the lead characters within a humble yet idyllic cabin setting (which he had to fight for after the art department produced sketches of a slovenly abode), and he used mobile camera shots—his proudest contributions to the film—as

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<sup>16</sup> Freed had originally wanted to film *Porgy and Bess*, but the opera was not available for purchase.

<sup>17</sup> Vincente Minnelli, *I Remember It Well* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 120.

<sup>18</sup> In interviews with the black press, Freed promised to “spare nothing” on the production. Naremore contends that his statements were disingenuous; however, Minnelli claims that Freed had to fight Hollywood executives for a decent budget (Naremore, 175; Minnelli, 120).

<sup>19</sup> Although Shrank received sole credit for the screenplay, Naremore states that Marc Connelly and Elmer Rice also worked on it (p. 175).

well as dissolves (as opposed to fade-outs) to heighten the dramatic action.<sup>20</sup> His choice of sepia tone helped to soften the actors' appearances and contribute a magical radiance to them and the scenery, thereby reinforcing the film's whimsical and fantastic qualities.<sup>21</sup>

For the movie's cast, Minnelli first approached Lena Horne, whom he had directed in the musical numbers of *Panama Hattie* (1942) during his apprenticeship at MGM. On one of their occasional dinner dates, Minnelli proposed doing *Cabin* with her, and she responded enthusiastically to the project. After that, he recruited Ethel Waters to play the part of Petunia, as she had done in the earlier stage version. Initially, Minnelli had wanted Dooley Wilson to repeat the part of Little Joe, but the director was overruled, and Eddie "Rochester" Anderson—who had a bigger stage and radio name—got the part. The film's other performers include many of the period's top entertainers, including Rex Ingram (Lucifer Junior), Kenneth Spencer (Lawd's General), Oscar Polk (Deacon and Fleetfoot), Butterfly McQueen (Lily), Ruby Dandridge (chatty churchgoer), John "Bubbles" Sublett, Duke Ellington, and Willie Best, Mantan Moreland, and Louis Armstrong as the devil's henchmen.

The soundtrack of the MGM picture includes the popular numbers from Vernon Duke's 1940 musical, but it differs considerably from the earlier version because several

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<sup>20</sup> In his autobiography, Minnelli tells how the art department initially presented "sketches of a dirty cabin," which provoked his temper. Minnelli wanted the audience to be aware of Petunia and Joe's "simple goodness" through a tidy and attractive setting. He suggested inexpensive wicker furniture for the cabin and used everyday objects as "a realistic framework for the fantasy." His moving camera effects were inspired by the work of Max Orphul (pp. 121-22).

<sup>21</sup> Minnelli stated that he did not know whether he or Arthur Freed was responsible for suggesting the sepia tint since they experimented with it together (p. 126).

songs were dropped and replaced with interpolations by different composers (See Table

2). MGM turned to composer Harold Arlen and lyricist Yip Harburg to write several new

**TABLE 2:**

**Motion Picture Soundtrack of *Cabin in the Sky***

1. Main Title, G. Bassman
2. Little Black Sheep, Arlen-Harburg
3. Old Ship of Zion, traditional
4. But the Flesh is Wea, R. Edens
5. The Prayer, R. Edens
6. The First Revelation, R. Edens
7. Saint Petunia, R. Edens
8. Happiness Is Just a Thing Called Joe, Arlen-Harburg
9. Dat Suits Me, traditional
10. Beside the Still Waters, R. Edens
11. Cabin in the Sky, Duke-Latouche
12. Ain't It the Truth, Arlen-Harburg
13. Ain't It the Truth, Arlen-Harburg
14. Taking a Chance on Love, Duke-Latouche
15. The Meek and the Mild, R. Edens
16. Life's Full of Consequences, Arlen-Harburg
17. Petunia in the Wilderness, R. Edens
18. Happiness Is Just a Thing Called Joe, Arlen-Harburg
19. Things Ain't What They Used to Be, M. Ellington
20. Going Up, D. Ellington
21. My Old Virginia Home, V. Duke
22. Shine, Dabney-Brown-Mack
23. Honey in the Honeycomb, Duke-Latouche
24. Love Me Tomorrow, V. Duke
25. Honey in the Honeycomb, Duke-Latouche
26. Sweet Petunia, V. Duke
27. The Third Revelation, R. Edens
28. Little Joe Throws Snake Eyes, R. Edens
29. Amen, R. Edens
30. Taking a Chance on Love/End Title, Duke-Latouche

tunes because Vernon Duke was in the Coast Guard, and John Latouche was working on another show.<sup>22</sup> According to Duke's widow, Kay Duke Ingalls, her late husband was disappointed that the studio did not use all of his songs, and he did not like the ones that Arlen wrote because they were "not in character."<sup>23</sup> Arlen's songs were added nonetheless, and so too were other pieces and arrangements by George Bassman, Roger Edens, Duke and Mercer Ellington, and Ford Dabney. The altered score and its performance by Duke Ellington and his Orchestra suggested greater sophistication and jazz "authenticity" than the earlier rendition by Max Meth and the Martin Beck Theatre Orchestra. It hinted at the chic Harlem-style entertainment that was popular among both whites and blacks in real life, and this association with fashionable black performance countered the film's image of simpleminded, rural folk.

Though Minnelli claimed that he would "never knowingly affront blacks," he did admit to having reservations about the story, which "reinforced the naïve, childlike stereotype of blacks."<sup>24</sup> He was not alone in acknowledging the reductive nature of the script. A portion of the black and liberal white press also found Lynn Root's story to contain controversial elements, as did Hall Johnson, the conductor of the black choral group that performed in *Cabin*. Johnson wrote to associate producer Albert Lewis, warning that "Negroes have never forgiven the slanderous misrepresentations of [*The Green Pastures*], and when after five successful years on the stage it was finally made

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<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, several years earlier Harburg had declined Duke's invitation to work on the 1940 stage production for its "lack of significance." Duke, *Passport to Paris*, 383.

<sup>23</sup> Kay Duke Ingalls, Email to Kate Marie Weber, 8 February 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Minnelli, 121.

into a picture, they did not hesitate to express their opinion.”<sup>25</sup> In *Time* magazine, one writer (who Naremore identifies as James Agee) charged that *Cabin*’s actors were presented as “picturesque, Sambo-style entertainers.”<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the most scathing review of all, however, was written in the African-American newspaper *Amsterdam News* by Ramona Lewis, who called the picture, “an insult masking behind the label of folklore,” and wrote:

It pictures Negroes, heads tied up, with crap shooting inclinations and prayer meeting propensities at a time when [they] are daily proving their heroic mettle in battle and defense plant.... Since box office returns convince Hollywood more than anything else that it is in the right, it’s too bad the actors didn’t have the courage to refuse to make the film in the first place.<sup>27</sup>

Though these reactions suggest otherwise, not everyone was critical of the film. In fact, several critics gave the picture rave reviews.

On 28 May 1943, the *New York Times* called the movie “a bountiful entertainment.... every inch as sparkling and completely satisfying as was the original stage production back in 1940.”<sup>28</sup> Less than one month later, Bosley Crowther echoed these sentiments in the same publication, writing that *Cabin in the Sky* “is frankly a figment of fancy, no more pretentious of reality than was *The Green Pastures*.... and, far from belittling Negroes, it treats them with affectionate respect.”<sup>29</sup> This last impression is precisely what Minnelli claimed to have intended. The fanciful décor and extravagant

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Naremore, 174.

<sup>26</sup> [James Agee], “The New Pictures,” *Time*, 12 April 1943.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Naremore, 176.

<sup>28</sup> “‘Cabin in the Sky,’ a Musical Fantasy,” *New York Times*, 28 May 1943.

<sup>29</sup> Bosley Crowther, “Cleaving the Color Line,” *New York Times*, 6 June 1943.

performance scenes seem to support this interpretation. Nevertheless, the storyline contains longstanding racial stereotypes, a mythological city/country opposition, and a folkloric treatment of Negro religion that may have been considered offensive by African Americans.

### THE MOTION PICTURE: PLOT

The story of *Cabin in the Sky* revolves around Little Joe Jackson, a poor Southern man with a propensity for backsliding, and his wife Petunia, a devout and pious woman who has a special relationship with God. As a result of Little Joe's weakness for gambling, he falls into bad company and is shot during a dice game at Jim Henry's Paradise, an urban nightclub. Petunia prays fervently for her husband's recovery, and black emissaries of God and the Devil (the Lawd's General and Lucifer Junior) are sent to battle for Joe's soul. On account of Petunia's praying and unbeknownst to Joe, he is granted a six-month reprieve from death, during which he must redeem himself lest he suffer eternal damnation. Lucifer Junior tries his best to lure Joe into sin—first, by giving him a winning sweepstakes ticket, and second, by sending the temptress Georgia Brown to entice him. Although Joe resists Georgia's advances, he is overjoyed when she tells him about his winning lottery ticket. (Joe is illiterate and therefore cannot read it himself.) Petunia walks up just as Joe hugs Georgia in gratitude. She quickly assumes that Joe is cheating on her and therefore turns him away before he has a chance to explain.

Some time later, Joe is shown at Jim Henry's Paradise with his newfound riches and girlfriend, Georgia Brown. Petunia arrives wearing a flashy dress and sporting a no-nonsense attitude to match. No longer the modest and pious Petunia, she insults her husband and Georgia, and flaunts her sexuality and independence by dancing with Domino Johnson (the man who shot Joe) and singing "Honey in the Honeycomb" for all to hear. When Domino returns her advances, however, Petunia feels threatened and calls to Joe for help. A fight ensues between Joe and Domino, and Petunia frantically prays to God: "Send down your wrath and destroy this wicked place!" Her prayer is granted as a tornado makes its way toward the nightclub, but both Joe and Petunia are fatally wounded by Domino's gunshots. They await judgment before the stairway leading to heaven, and through Petunia's strong faith, both are saved. As they ascend to heaven, the scene transforms, and Little Joe is shown waking from what was merely a dream. As he recovers from the earlier gunshot wound, spectators are left to contemplate when the fantasy began.



## CHAPTER 2 RURAL/URBAN OPPOSITION, RELIGION, AND FOLKLORE

### THE CITY/COUNTRY DICHOTOMY

The city/country dichotomy in *Cabin in the Sky* is an archetype that has appeared in numerous American literary and stage works concerning blacks since the nineteenth century, when novels and blackface minstrel shows portrayed ‘happy darkies’ on Southern plantations, an image that was meant to justify slavery as a benevolent institution. One of the works that was most responsible for starting the plantation tradition was John P. Kennedy’s *Swallow Barn* (1832). Author Sterling Brown describes it as, “an idyllic picture of slavery on a tidewater plantation. The narrator, imagined to be from the North... comes to Virginia, expecting to see a drastic state of affairs. Instead, he finds a kindly patriarchy and grateful, happy slaves.”<sup>30</sup> What is notable about *Swallow Barn* is that it pitted the Northern city dweller against the Southern rural slave owner.<sup>31</sup> This scenario recurred throughout the next century, and became most pronounced during the Civil War (1861-1865) and Radical Reconstruction period (1865-1877), for obvious reasons. Further complicating the rural South/urban North duality was the addition of religious associations to the Southern rural stereotype, which may be attributed to two factors. First, the stereotype’s religious associations were propagated by Southern slave owners to suggest that northern abolitionists were corrupt and immoral, whereas life in

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<sup>30</sup> Sterling Brown, “Negro Character As Seen by White Authors,” *Journal of Negro Education* 2 (April 1933); reprint in *Callaloo* no. 14/15 (Feb.-May, 1982): 58-59.

<sup>31</sup> Since *Swallow Barn* is a proslavery novel, the opposition between Northerner and Southerner is eventually dissolved when the Northerner concludes that slavery is a benevolent institution. However, the reference to opposition between North and South is still relevant here.

the South was bathed in the light of religious purity. Second, the image of good-natured, God-fearing slaves was popularized by works like Harriet Beecher Stowe's antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853) and the stage shows it inspired.

During the twentieth century, the city/country opposition continued to exert widespread influence and impact discourse on black art, music, and entertainment. James Naremore describes how the term "jazz" was a symbol of the rural/urban dichotomy. Used to describe the popular songs of Tin Pan Alley, the music of African-American urbanites like Duke Ellington, or the folk-based traditions that grew out of the South, "jazz" came to be an "ambiguous, highly flexible signifier."<sup>32</sup> The opposition manifested in the term "jazz" mirrored a duality in black arts in general, and this is especially clear in musical theater, which reflected the city/country dichotomy for two decades.

Inspired by the success of Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles' show *Shuffle Along* (1921), a string of musical revues was launched throughout the 1920s and 1930s that combined an urban aesthetic of high-energy performance with stereotypical librettos about rural life in the South. These shows served as vehicles for talented African-American entertainers, and placed primary emphasis on song, dance, comedy, and specialty acts, as opposed to dramatic development. Although revues celebrated performers' talents above all—a sensibility that grew out of city theaters and nightclubs, especially those in Harlem—many of them were set in Southern pastoral locales and featured comical, simpleminded coons in blackface.<sup>33</sup> This is true of *Shuffle Along*, as

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<sup>32</sup> Naremore, 170.

<sup>33</sup> For a thorough discussion of musicals of the 1920s and 1930s, see Allen Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1989). Eileen Southern also

well as *Strut Miss Lizzie* (1922), *Plantation Revue* (1922), *Liza* (1922), *Runnin' Wild* (1923), *Keep Shufflin'* (1928), and *Shuffle Along of 1933*, among others. The urban/rural dichotomy became even more pronounced when, during the latter half of the 1920s, a series of black musical revues appeared that had scenes in both Southern rural locales and urban (usually Harlem) nightclubs and cabarets.<sup>34</sup>

The first example of this trend was Clarence Williams' musical revue of 1927, *Bottomland*, which served as a vehicle for its featured performers—Williams, Eva Taylor, and Sara Martin. The story of *Bottomland* revolves around May Mandy Lee, a Southern woman who longs to be a professional singer. After receiving letters from her

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provides a list of black musicals from the period and a brief overview in *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983). Bernard Peterson's *A Century of Musicals in Black and White: An Encyclopedia of Musical Stage Works By, or Involving African Americans* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1993) is useful for overviews of each production.

The musical revue was launched after a period of stagnation in black musical theater on Broadway from 1910-1917. During those years, black stage productions flourished in New York (Harlem) and other cities throughout the country, and the "period of exile" was in reality a period of development and experimentation in theater that took place away from the white-dominated world of Broadway. (For more on this, see Woll, 50-57 and Southern, 291-293.) Black musicals thrived in African-American owned venues such as Harlem's Lincoln and Lafayette Theatres, Chicago's Pekin Theatre, and Washington, D.C.'s Howard Theatre, all of which offered black actors the opportunity to perform a wide range of dramatic and musical roles. When black musicals returned to Broadway in the 1920s, experienced actors from these theaters were the headlining acts.

In addition to these theatres, black stage entertainment was also developing on the road. A number of touring companies, such as The Smart Set, traveled the United States, playing to black audiences. In 1913, actor Sherman H. Dudley began developing a black theatre circuit that connected actors and musicians throughout the nation. By the end of 1914, his weekly newspaper column listed twenty-three black-owned or operated theatres that had shows in production (Southern, 293). His business was the first large-scale professional management that created a network through which performing companies could book engagements across the country. Although Dudley was forced to sell the company in later years, it set a precedent for later organizations like the Theatre Owners Booking Association, which continued to showcase black performers during the 1920s and 30s. It also allowed for black stage entertainment to flourish in the years preceding its success on Broadway.

<sup>34</sup> These revues reflect the growing popularity of Harlem hotspots among white audiences. In the early 1920s, only a small population of white clientele frequented Harlem clubs, and many cabarets appealed exclusively to black audiences. During the latter part of the decade, however, top nightspots including Connie's Inn, Barron Wilkins' Exclusive Club, and the Cotton Club catered to white spectators, and restricted most blacks from entering. In the case of the Cotton Club, even Eubie Blake and Ethel Waters were turned away on one occasion when Duke Ellington was performing (Woll, 116). The result of white theatergoers' interest in Harlem-style entertainment was that black cabaret began to move outside of Harlem to the theatrical stage.

friend Sally, who claims to be a successful performer in New York, May moves to Harlem, only to learn that Sally is an alcoholic, barely making a living in a second-rate cabaret. The plot includes numerous opportunities for songs and specialty acts, especially the episodes that are set in a nightclub.

Less than one month later on July 12, another revue of this type opened on Broadway at the Majestic Theatre for a successful run of 119 performances. Based on the vaudeville routines of Miller and Lyles, *Rang Tang* was yet another sequel to their success of 1921, *Shuffle Along*. Unlike earlier imitations, however, *Rang Tang*'s setting extended beyond the Southern city of Jimtown to include two other theatrically popular locales—Africa and Harlem. In this show, Steve Jenkins and Sam Peck are two barbers who escape from their creditors in Jimtown by stealing a plane and flying to Africa, where they hope to find treasure. When their plane begins to fall apart during flight, they are forced to land near the island of Madagascar, where a series of comical events ensues between them and the locals. Eventually, they strike it rich by discovering a large quantity of diamonds. With their newfound treasure, they return to the United States and arrive at a Harlem cabaret, where they show off their riches and live in luxury.

Other shows that fit this profile include *Hot Chocolates* (1929), *Bamboola* (1929), *Blackbirds of 1930*, *Blackberries of 1932*, *Swing It* (1937) and one of the longest-running and most influential musicals of the decade, Hammerstein and Kern's *Show Boat* (1927), an interracial revue that began on a Mississippi riverboat and progressed to a Chicago club.<sup>35</sup> All of these examples juxtaposed the city/country theme, though not always with

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<sup>35</sup> *Hot Chocolates* consisted of sketches and musical numbers such as "Connie's Inn" (a Harlem club), "Song of the Cotton Fields," "Negro spiritual," and "Harlem Street Scene." *Bamboola* was about a

religious connotations. As time progressed, however, musical theater began to more fully embrace the religious implications of the Southern rural stereotype, and a form of religious “folklore” (or *fakelore*) emerged.<sup>36</sup> The end result was that two types of black musical theater flourished during the 1930s: the musical revue and the religious folk fantasy.

### THE RELIGIOUS FOLK FANTASY

The shift in black entertainment toward religious “folklore” was inspired by Marc Connelly’s all-black musical drama *The Green Pastures*. Based upon Roark Bradford’s *Ol’ Man Adam an’ His Chillun*, *The Green Pastures* is a pseudo-folk fable and religious fantasy that is meant to represent a black vision of God and heaven, presented through Old Testament stories as they may have been imagined by uneducated, Southern Negro churchgoers. According to Connelly, the idea for a musical in which God was played by an African-American actor was considered too risky by most Broadway managers, and many of them declined the show before it was eventually staged at the Mansfield Theatre on 26 February 1930.<sup>37</sup> Contrary to expectations, *The Green Pastures* enjoyed a record

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girl from Savannah, Georgia who went to New York and made it big in show business. *Blackbirds of 1930* included a plantation scene and a trip to Harlem nightspots. *Blackberries of 1932* opened on a lazy river bank and included a minstrel finale and Harlem rent party. *Swing It’s* plot centered upon a group of entertainers from a Mississippi showboat who tried to find a better life in Harlem, where they put on “the show of shows.”

<sup>36</sup> The “folklore” I refer to is an inauthentic, manufactured cultural tradition, rather than genuine folklore. The term “fakelore” was coined by American folklorist Richard M. Dorson in his essay of 1950, “Folklore and Fake Lore,” *American Mercury* 70 (March): 335–343.

<sup>37</sup> Connelly recalled: “Innumerable Broadway managers declined to produce *The Green Pastures* on what to them was a reasonable assumption: that anyone would be insane to finance a religious fantasy in which the principle character, God, would be played by a Negro. They were convinced of the insanity of Rowland Stebbins, the theatrically inexperienced Wall Street broker who finally produced it [along with

run of 557 performances, followed by a U.S. tour that lasted until 1935, and Connelly's libretto earned him a Pulitzer Prize in 1930.

Today, it is easy to recognize the musical's reductive stereotyping and misrepresentation of black religious beliefs. Connelly's program notes in the playbill are evidence of the drama's continuation of such practices. He writes:

*The Green Pastures* is an attempt to present certain aspects of a living religion in terms of its believers. The religion is that of thousands of negroes in the deep south. . . . They accept the Old Testament as a chronicle of wonders which happened to people like themselves in vague but actual places, and of rules of conduct, true acceptance of which will lead them to a tangible, three-dimensional Heaven. In this Heaven, if one has been born in a district where fish fries are popular, the angels do have magnificent fish fries through an eternity somewhat resembling a series of earthly holidays.<sup>38</sup>

Elements of the plot were criticized by some writers and audience members. One spectator, writing to John Mason Brown of the New York *Evening Post*, believed that the mood of *The Green Pastures* was "one of unconscious patronizing, as if the author were constantly asking the audience the question, 'Isn't this childlike simplicity utterly charming and captivating?'"<sup>39</sup> Even those who had not seen the musical objected to its representation of Negro religion, as noted by African-American critic Randolph Edmonds in *Opportunity* magazine:

Negroes who have never seen this play criticize it sharply. They could not see how a fish fry could represent the Negro's side of heaven when they have been told all their lives about pearly gates and golden stairs. God being black is something they have never heard except as a humorous part of the Garvey movement. The Lord accepting a ten cent cigar seems to them the height of

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Laurence Rivers], when they learned that the play would open in New York without an out-of-town tryout." Quoted in Woll, 137.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 139.

absurdity, and the spirituals are just those old slave songs sung for the benefit of white people. In short, they conclude that it is just another show making fun of the race.<sup>40</sup>

Yet, in spite of the script's shortcomings, several writers noted the work's universal appeal and its sympathetic character portrayal. Edmonds, in the same article quoted above, stated that severe assessments of the musical were rarely heard from blacks who had seen *The Green Pastures*. He contended that even the harshest critics concluded, after viewing the musical, that it was a "beautiful and powerful" work of which blacks "need not be ashamed."<sup>41</sup> Sterling Brown, another African-American critic working for *Opportunity*, also wrote a complimentary review of the production:

If the play is not accurate truth about the religion of the folk-Negro, it is movingly true to folk life. Reverend Mr. Deshee's Sunday school; the fishfry (which though placed in heaven, is delightfully true to the delta country); Noah's wish for the second "kag": young gamblers starting with "frozen" dice, honkey-tonk cabarets, magicians, country folk, city scoffers, the pure in heart, and the sinful; all of these make *The Green Pastures* a vivid resume of folk types and folk experience. Most majestic of the folk scenes is the exodus: here in these marching people with their faces turned toward hope is a spectacle symbolic and moving. *The Green Pastures* is fantasy, but it is likewise simple profound reality.<sup>42</sup>

While the depictions in *The Green Pastures* may have been controversial, its record run at the Mansfield Theatre proved lucrative. Consequently, a string of imitations followed, which included *Fast and Furious* (1931), *Ol' Man Satan* (1932), *Run, Little Chillun!* (1933), and Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson's all-black opera of 1934, *Four Saints in*

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<sup>40</sup> Edmonds, "Some References on the Negro in American Drama," *Opportunity* (October 1930): 304; quoted in Woll, 139.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Sterling Brown, *Negative Poetry and Drama*, 119; quoted in Peterson, 155.

*Three Acts*.<sup>43</sup> In 1936, *The Green Pastures* enjoyed renewed popularity as a Warner Brothers' film.

The folkloric tone of *The Green Pastures* and its successors extends beyond musical theater. It was characteristic of a national consciousness during this period that was influenced by the images put forth by the federal government's Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Popular Front, as well as popular arts and entertainment. Naremore elaborates:

The entire artistic culture of the depression was in fact somewhat "folksy" in tone, ranging from public murals to Leadbelly recordings, from the American Communist party's folk-song movement to John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, and from off-Broadway theatrical productions like *Mule Bone* to Pulitzer Prize hits like *The Green Pastures*.<sup>44</sup>

Intellectuals argued that indigenous folk culture was being transformed and commodified by the media, and African-American folk art was particularly vulnerable. James Agee, author of "Pseudo-Folk," referred in 1944 to the commercial assimilation of indigenous culture as a "galloping cancer," and criticized the work of artists Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Katherine Dunham, and John Latouche—all of whom played a role in either the 1940 or 1943 *Cabin in the Sky* production.<sup>45</sup> In spite of such criticism, Broadway and

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<sup>43</sup> *Fast and Furious* presented episodes about life in a black heaven and hell. *Ol' Man Satan* depicted a black vision of Satan and the afterlife through biblical and allegorical stories as told by a mother to her young son. The stories were dramatized, and struggles ensued between biblical characters, tempters, and temptresses, with Satan choreographing the action from behind the scenes. In *Run, Little Chillun!* the plot centered upon the antagonism between Christianity and African paganism in the religious practices of Southern rural blacks. In the play, the son of a Baptist minister was seduced by a beautiful voodoo temptress who persuaded him to leave his wife and church. *Four Saints in Three Acts* was presented as a series of scenes from the lives of European saints who were shown praying, singing, traveling, seeing visions, and performing miracles.

<sup>44</sup> Naremore, 172.

<sup>45</sup> James Agee, "Pseudo Folk," *The Partisan Review*, 1944; quoted in Naremore, 174.



Hollywood were reaping considerable financial rewards from this type of entertainment, and the makers of *Cabin in the Sky* did not shy away from a chance to capitalize on the current trends in popular entertainment. They drew upon a bogus black folklore, in which happy Southern ‘darkies,’ with their intense religious devotion, are threatened by the corrupting influence of urban nightlife. Presenting *Cabin* as a religious fantasy similar to *The Green Pastures*, filmmakers infused the work with a folkloric tone and finished it with a slick Hollywood sheen, inspired by the revue format of Broadway, and heightened by the decadence and finesse of big-name performers and a Minnellian aesthetic of excess. Yet, as Naremore points out, “the nostalgia is on one level superficial,” and the urban “primitivism is transformed (for white audiences at least) into a paradoxical sophistication.”<sup>46</sup> The religious fervor, the presentation of good versus evil, and the folkloric setting and characters all seem insincere, and as a result, the film’s overt conservatism is undermined by a more progressive subtext.

### Insincere Semantics

Conceived as a substitute for *Porgy and Bess* and as a successor to Connelly’s *The Green Pastures*, *Cabin in the Sky* grew out of consumer interest in a fabricated agrarian or pre-capitalist past that carried intimations of authenticity. The film announces its folkloristic bent in the opening prologue:

Throughout the ages, powerful and inspiring thoughts have been preserved and handed down by the medium of the legend, the fable, and the fantasy. The

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<sup>46</sup> Naremore, 171.

folklore of America has origins in all lands, all races, all colors. This story of faith and devotion springs from that source and seeks to capture those values.

Like *The Green Pastures*, *Cabin in the Sky* revolves around a religious storyline and an idyllic representation of the rural South. It contains many of the same folk types as those in Connelly's play—including characters from a black heaven and hell, many of them simple and childlike—and mimics the image in *Pastures*, described by Sterling Brown in *Opportunity* magazine, of “people with their faces turned toward hope.”<sup>47</sup> (Minnelli wrote that characters in *Cabin* “would look up to the sky to pray to God just as children do,” in both the film and original staged version.)<sup>48</sup> Even the celestial fish fry of *The Green Pastures* had a counterpart in the 1940 stage version of *Cabin*, when Ethel Waters sang of heaven in the title track:

We will be oh so gay  
Eat fried chicken every day  
As the angels go sailing by.<sup>49</sup>

Therefore, by presenting parallel themes, and employing similar modes of representation, *Cabin in the Sky* and *The Green Pastures* both attempt to create a religious folkloricism, grounded in myths of the American rural South and its notions of black culture.

However, in spite of the prologue's intimations of sincerity, *Cabin in the Sky* presents a moral allegory that is rendered superficial by the film's treatment of religion and the city/country dichotomy.

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<sup>47</sup> Sterling Brown, *Negative Poetry and Drama*, 119; quoted in Peterson, 155. See note no. 40 for the entire quotation.

<sup>48</sup> Minnelli, 125.

<sup>49</sup> Lyrics from 1940 recording. Vernon Duke, *Cabin in the Sky*, Martin Beck Theatre Orchestra with Ethel Waters, AEI-CD 017. In the film soundtrack, the lyrics “eat fried chicken every day” were changed to “all we'll do is sing and pray.”

Though the script of *Cabin in the Sky* revolves around the age-old battle of good versus evil, the conflict between heaven and hell is presented in comical, even sacrilegious ways. As James Naremore points out:

It never mentions Jesus, it never shows a crucifix, and it barely alludes to scripture; instead, it offers a nonsectarian god who behaves rather like a cosmic accountant, and it proffers a few simple edicts against gambling and adultery.<sup>50</sup>

In addition, God's final judgment of Petunia and Joe is rendered ridiculous since eternal salvation, in Joe's case, has almost nothing to do with good deeds or atonement. Rather, he is given a free pass to heaven on account of Petunia's praying. Furthermore, hell is introduced as Hotel Hades, "a place filled with the creative, vibrant rhythms of jazz and as an outfit run along the lines of a Hollywood studio where Bible stories are presented as fictional constructions made up as if for a film script by Lucifer Jr's 'Idea Men.'"<sup>51</sup> Lucifer's staff works in a cushy, air-conditioned office, and his employees are mirthful and amiable coons, dressed in white bathrobes and smoking cigars.<sup>52</sup> This representation of hell is obviously tongue-in-cheek.

Subversive treatment of religion extends to other aspects of the story as well. This is perhaps most apparent in the scene at Jim Henry's Paradise, a nightclub setting that serves as a haven for the devil's work, yet at the same time, represents an alternative utopia in which the vibrant rhythms of Duke Ellington and his Orchestra mingle with lively dancing and enthusiastic singing to form a kind of celebration. Heightened by

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<sup>50</sup> Naremore, 183.

<sup>51</sup> Susan Smith, *The Musical: Race, Gender and Performance* (New York: Wallflower, 2005), 27. Naremore was the first to compare *Cabin's* hell to a Hollywood studio, saying that it, "resembles the office of an MGM producer during a story conference" (p. 183).

<sup>52</sup> For a thorough discussion of the coon caricature, see Chapter three.

Minnelli's crane-operated camera movement and "Africanist" wall murals, this house of corruption seems glorified rather than damned.<sup>53</sup> Compared to the film's first performance scene at Petunia's church, Jim Henry's seems like a more spirited and appealing house of expression. Furthermore, its impressive cast of performers makes it seem less like a domicile for immorality, and more like a showcase for world-class entertainment, the latter of which clearly has greater prestige within a Hollywood film. Thus, Minnelli's treatment of the nightclub scene runs contrary to the story's semantics, and this continues in the cabin setting as well.

The movie's folkloric claims and intimations of authenticity are countered by Minnelli's representation of the rural setting. As Naremore explains, "the quotidian, earthbound scenes in *Cabin* resemble a pure dreamworld." The country setting constitutes "a poor but utopian black universe," detached from any specific locale and exempt from the influence of white society.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, the cabin itself is a highly aesthetic and decadent interpretation of a modest abode. Decorated with Victorian art reproductions, wall paper, an embellished wooden dresser, fancy wrought-iron bed frame, and white wicker chairs with ornate filigree, the cabin seems unusually adorned, especially considering the fact that it has no electricity.<sup>55</sup> The resulting impression is that the cabin has no place in reality, and therefore is disingenuous in its claims to a folkloric American past. The movie's treatment of racial caricatures leads viewers to a comparable conclusion.

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<sup>53</sup> Naremore also suggests this (p. 182).

<sup>54</sup> Naremore, 183. This notion is reinforced by the film's title, *Cabin in the sky*.

<sup>55</sup> Naremore also describes the cabin's opulent furniture and art (p. 185).

## CHAPTER 3 CHARACTERS AND CARICATURES

At first glance, the characters in *Cabin in the Sky* are representative of a longstanding tradition of reductive racial stereotyping that may be tied to slavery-era minstrel shows and literary works. It presents the entire pantheon of stock Negro caricatures, including the tom, the coon, the mulatto jezebel, the black brute, and the mammy. In acting out the battle for Joe's soul, these characters exhibit many of the behaviors typically associated with their respective roles, behaviors that will be explicated in the following detailed discussion of each caricature. However, their general conformity to the stereotypes does not exclude possibilities for them to break free from the strictures of each persona, and as will be shown, *Cabin* pushes the boundaries of certain character types, while also exposing them as fictional constructs. The end result is a progressive subtext that, like the film's treatment of religion and scenario, undermines the conservative slant of the script.

### THE TOM

The tom was the first of several "good Negro" characters that appeared on stage in the nineteenth century and remained popular throughout the first four decades of the twentieth. The tom was depicted as a loyal, submissive, and easily contented black male, child-like in his eagerness to do anything "for massa's sake." Originally inspired by Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the stereotypical tom was a gross misrepresentation of the title character. Stowe's Tom is a kind, gentle, and dignified Christian slave, who is

forced to endure the abuse of his brutal master Simon Legree. Unwilling to provide Legree with information regarding two female runaways, Tom sacrifices himself instead, all the while demonstrating a Christian spirit of forgiveness, even as he is beaten to death.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold over two million copies within two years of its publication, but its popularity was countered by a backlash of proslavery novels—fourteen within the first three years after it appeared.<sup>56</sup> In addition, it became popular on stages throughout the United States. By 1879, there were at least forty-nine traveling companies performing it across the nation.<sup>57</sup> In these “Tom shows,” the integrity of the title character was eliminated. Writer Patricia Turner describes the inconsistencies between Stowe’s Tom and the reconstructed Tom of later stage shows:

Both are devout, stalwart Christians. Both are unflinching in their loyalty. But the reconstructed Uncle Toms are passive, docile, unthinking Christians. Loyal and faithful to white employers, they are duplicitous in their dealings with fellow blacks. Stowe's Tom is a proactive Christian warrior. He does more than accept God’s will, he endeavors to fulfill it in all of his words and deeds. He is loyal to each of his white masters, even the cruel Simon Legree. Yet his allegiance to his fellow slaves is equally strong.<sup>58</sup>

Stage toms were portrayed as simple-minded slaves, happy to live in servitude to their masters, who were much milder figures than the sadistic drunkard of Stowe’s novel.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Jeanette Reid Tandy, “Pro-Slavery Propaganda in American Fiction of the Fifties,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 21, no. 1: 41; cited in Sterling Brown, “Negro Character As Seen by White Authors,” *Journal of Negro Education* 2 (April 1933); reprint in *Callaloo* no. 14/15 (Feb.-May, 1982): 60. See also David Pilgrim, “The Tom Caricature” (Big Rapids, MI: Ferris State University, Dec. 2000), accessed 15 June 2008, available at <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/tom/>; internet.

<sup>57</sup> Patricia A. Turner, *Ceramic Uncles & Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 78; cited in Pilgrim, “The Tom Caricature.”

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Pilgrim, “The Tom Caricature.”

Thus, the stereotypical tom appealed to white racists who sought validation for slavery and discrimination. For that reason, the tom caricature proved extremely popular.

Pro-slavery novels of the nineteenth century continued to portray content slaves. This was especially true during the Reconstruction period and the years that followed, during which time authors used their books as propaganda and rationalization for the South's allegiance to slavery. For example, Irwin Russell—the first American poet to mimic Negro folk dialect in his writings—wrote verses in *Christmas Night in the Quarters* in which a slave pays tribute to his White “Mahsr John.”<sup>60</sup> Writer Thomas Nelson Page created “Marse Chan” (1892) and other stories, which depict simple Negro characters who long for the time “befoah the war,” when “dyar warn’ no trouble nor nuthin.”<sup>61</sup> Other authors, such as Joel Chandler Harris, Jeanie Woodville, and Octave Thane, wrote stories in which former slaves return to their masters to help them overcome poverty.<sup>62</sup> The Negro characters in these novels, although not necessarily based upon Stowe's Uncle Tom, propagated the myth of slave contentment and, together with minstrelsy, paved the way for the tom character in early film.

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<sup>60</sup> Irwin Russell, *Christmas Night in the Quarters* (New York: The Century Co., 1917), 63ff; quoted in Brown, 61-62.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Nelson Page, “Marse Chan,” *In Ole Virginia, or Marse Chan and Other Stories* (New York: 1892), 10; quoted in Theodore Gross, “The Negro in the Literature of Reconstruction,” *Phylon* (1960–) 22, no.1 (1961): 8. Gross names other literature with comparable depictions of happy slaves. These include Frank Stockton's *What Might Have Been Expected* (1874), *The Last Mrs. Null* (1886), *The Christmas Wreck and Other Stories* (1886), Harriet Spofford's “A Thanksgiving Breakfast” in *Old Washington* (1906), Constance Fenimore Woolson's “King David” in *Rodman the Keeper* (1886), and William Baker's *Mose Evans* (1874). “Marse Chan” is also discussed in Brown (p. 62).

<sup>62</sup> Gross, “The Negro in the Literature of Reconstruction,” 10. Among these stories are Joel Chandler Harris' “Aunt Fountain's Prisoner,” Jeanie Woodville's “Uncle Pompey's Christmas,” and Octave Thane's *Half-a-Curse* (1887). Brown also discusses these story types (pp. 61-64). Among the authors he mentions are Thomas Nelson Page, Irwin Russell, Joel Chandler Harris, and George Washington Cable, along with later writers who continued the tradition in the twentieth century.

The tom made his motion picture debut in the 1903 twelve-minute silent movie by Edwin S. Porter, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Although portrayed by a white man in blackface, Uncle Tom constitutes American film's first black character, at a time when motion pictures were in their infancy. Remakes of the famous story by Stowe appeared in other versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1909, 1913, 1914, and 1927. The 1914 film starred stage actor Sam Lucas in the title role, making him the first black man to play a leading role in a movie. The 1927 version, produced by Universal Pictures, featured lead actor James B. Lowe, who was praised by Universal as "a living black god" for his acting, as well as his "exemplary conduct." His interpretation of the role, however, did little to advance the image of African Americans in film.<sup>63</sup> Other early toms appeared in the shorts *Confederate Spy* (c. 1910) and *For Massa's Sake* (1911), both of which present loyal, simple-minded toms who sacrifice themselves for the sake of their owners.<sup>64</sup>

During the 1920s, the devout toms took a backseat to more comical Negro characters, such as the energetic pickaninnies of *Our Gang*, also known for a time as *The Little Rascals*. Before this shift to post-war levity, however, a number of films were released that featured heroic black military men. Although these movies were vehicles for government propaganda promoting wartime solidarity, they are among few films from this period to present Negro characters in a sympathetic light.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 5-6; quoting Universal press releases.

<sup>64</sup> In *Confederate Spy*, Uncle Daniel is a Negro spy for the South and dies before a Northern firing squad for the sake of his master. In *For Massa's Sake*, a former slave sells himself back into slavery in order to help his master through financial hardship (Bogle, 6).

<sup>65</sup> Bogle lists *The Greatest Thing in Life* (1918), *Our Colored Fighters* (1918), and *Our Hell Fighters* (1918) as examples (p. 20). The first of these contains a scene in which a black private aids a



In the Depression years of the 1930s, the jesters of the previous decade were replaced by what Donald Bogle calls the “respectable domestics,” Negro servant characters.<sup>66</sup> During a time of harsh financial realities, the black servants in film provided comic relief or hopeful optimism, often through their enthusiasm or unwavering loyalty. Bogle describes their role and impact:

The servants were always around when the boss needed them. They were always ready to lend a helping hand when times were tough. It was many a down-and-out movie hero or heroine who realized his Negro servant was his only real friend. During this period of bread lines, of fireside chats from President Roosevelt over the radio, of labor problems, of intellectual Leftist activities, and of WPA programs, blacks in films were used to reaffirm for a socially chaotic age a belief in life and the American way of living itself.<sup>67</sup>

In their portrayals of loyal companions to white leads, black actors and actresses individualized their roles, thereby overcoming the confines of scripted stereotypes and establishing themselves as more than mere caricatures. They became star personalities affectionately regarded by both black and white audiences, and they contributed an element of universal humanity that spectators could identify with.<sup>68</sup>

Of the toms of the 1930s, none were as significant as those played by Bill “Bojangles” Robinson. In his first feature alongside Shirley Temple, *The Little Colonel* (1935), Robinson played a well-mannered and kindhearted servant. His submissive

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white racist officer who has been shot. During his heroic act, the black soldier is fatally wounded, but before he dies, the white officer grants his final request. He pretends to be the black man’s mother and kisses the dying soldier on the lips.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 36-37. Bogle discusses how actors personalized each role, especially the comic actors of the 30s.

portrayal earned him more work in other films including *Hurray for Love* (1935) and *In Old Kentucky* (1935), but his most significant performance by far was in David Butler's *The Littlest Rebel* (1935).

*The Littlest Rebel* is set in the Old South during the time of the Civil War. It stars Shirley Temple as Virginia 'Virgie' Cary, the daughter of Southern plantation owners, and Robinson as her good-natured slave companion, Uncle Billy. When Yankees invade the plantation during Virgie's birthday party, Uncle Billy comes to her rescue, even caring for her after her mother dies and her father is captured by Union troops. Using their dancing skills to earn money, Uncle Billy and Virgie finance a trip to Washington, where they plead with President Lincoln for the release of the girl's father. Virgie's father is pardoned, and the film ends happily.

In *The Littlest Rebel*, Robinson captivated audiences with his dynamic tap dancing and the optimism he conveyed. In doing so, he brought an added dimension to his portrayal of Uncle Billy. Not only was he Virgie's loyal companion and caretaker, her rock of support; he was also the actor that spectators relied upon to deliver great performances time and time again. Thus he endeared himself through both his talent and his character's reliability, and he opened doors for black male actors who wished to advance beyond the simple tom prototype.<sup>69</sup> He contributed an air of dignity previously missing from tom portrayals in film, although admittedly, his characters still had to be subservient when in the presence of white adults.

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<sup>69</sup> Bogle distinguishes *The Littlest Rebel* as Robinson's definitive tom performance. He argues that Robinson conveyed an optimistic energy through his dancing. At the same time, he calmed anxious spectators who feared for the movie's heroine, by proving a reliable and capable support to Shirley Temple's character (p. 50).

Rex Ingram, another actor who helped to advance the image of black male characters in the movies, brought to Hollywood an impressive background as the first black man to earn a Phi Beta Kappa key at Northwestern University and a medical degree from the same institution. Although the toms of previous decades may have paved the way for Ingram, his roles extended beyond the old stereotypes. In his portrayal of Nigger Jim in the 1939 movie *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Ingram infused his character with strength and pride, rather than servitude. The same can be said of his role as the genie in *The Thief of Baghdad* (1940).<sup>70</sup> His most significant movie of the 30s, however, was *The Green Pastures*, in which Ingram played the part of De Lawd. In spite of the film's ridiculous script, Ingram managed to deliver a performance that was commanding and dignified, and through this role, he paved the way for later male actors, such as Kenneth Spencer in *Cabin in the Sky*.

In *Cabin in the Sky*, Kenneth Spencer plays dual parts as Reverend Green in the opening narrative and the Lawd's General in Little Joe's fantasy. Like Ingram, Spencer plays his part with dignity and poise. His voice is resonant and commanding, his speech articulate, and his dress befits a well-mannered and educated gentleman, or a heroic military soldier.<sup>71</sup> From the film's opening moments, spectators learn that Petunia and Reverend Green are both devout Christians, and as a result, they are endowed with

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<sup>70</sup> In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, "Rex Ingram's Nigger Jim was never servile like that of Clarence Music in the earlier version or Archie Moore in the 1960 one. Instead, his Jim was a heroic guide leading Huck to manhood. And with his large chest and thick biceps Ingram seemed so powerful that audiences knew there were no chains strong enough to hold him down." In *The Thief of Baghdad*, Ingram played a powerful genie who was freed after centuries of being trapped in a bottle (Bogle, 70).

<sup>71</sup> The white military uniform is indicative of Blacks' enlistment during World War II. Their heroic service was one of the primary arguments used to defend increased civil liberties for blacks.

wisdom and command that the film's other characters lack. In the first cabin scene, Little Joe dresses for church, and after finding some dice, worries that "the devil's got a choke hold on him again."<sup>72</sup> Reverend Green and Petunia discuss his behavior in the same manner as a father or mother might; they laugh affectionately at his simpleminded conclusion. The portrayal of these two characters as paternal and maternal figures has precedent in earlier film. Louise Beavers' performance as Delilah in *Imitation of Life* (1934) was a combination of the aunt jemima figure and the tom. She conveyed a spirit of Christian integrity and pride in a major Hollywood film, as did Ingram in *The Green Pastures*, and later African-American actors followed in her footsteps.<sup>73</sup>

Through their association with religion, black characters were granted greater authority onscreen. The threat of anger was eradicated by providing the ethical framework of Christianity. Hence, spectators were assured that Spencer's character in *Cabin in the Sky* was kindhearted and peaceful. Because of this, he was able to play the role of an intellectual and moral leader, but only within the context of an all-Negro milieu—as in *The Green Pastures*—which was exempt from racial tensions. Thus Spencer's role in the 1943 film was another much needed portrait of black males as dignified individuals in positions of leadership. However, *Cabin in the Sky* appeared seven years after *The Green Pastures* and did little if anything to improve upon what

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<sup>72</sup> Quoting Petunia in *Cabin in the Sky* (1943).

<sup>73</sup> Bogle, 59. In Judith Weisenfeld's essay "For Rent, 'Cabin in the Sky': Race, Religion, and Representational Quagmires in American Film," in *Biblical Glamour and Hollywood Glitz* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), she suggests that cinematic representations of African-American Christians were critical to the emergence of complex black characters in Hollywood films.

Ingram had achieved earlier. The male lead's eminence was still religiously justified, and once again, racial conflict was avoided by excluding whites from the story and cast.

## THE COON

The coon caricature, one of the most derogatory of the black character types, portrayed African-American men in two ways: as comical creatures with mirthful dispositions and childlike ignorance, or as “no-account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting craps, or butchering the English language.”<sup>74</sup> The coon originated during the time of slavery when whites sought justification for their treatment of blacks. Both the lazy and comical coon depictions served to reinforce the notion that Negroes were an inferior race. The comic coon asserted that slaves were content under white dominance, whereas the lazy coon suggested that blacks were not only intellectually inferior, but morally inferior as well—prone to indolence, gambling, crime, and lust.<sup>75</sup> The latter of these two stereotypes was propagated especially by slave owners who placed unreasonable demands upon Negro workers, and accused them of being slow, lazy, or stupid.<sup>76</sup> It had no factual basis and were merely a reflection of racial hatred.

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<sup>74</sup> Bogle, 8.

<sup>75</sup> The distinction between these two coon types is made for the sake of clarity and does not imply that they are antithetical. In fact, many coons retain qualities from both categories.

<sup>76</sup> In reality, most slaves worked long and strenuous hours, and many were abused by their masters. A slower work pace could be accounted for by most slaves' poor physical condition, but it was also the only form of resistance they could assert, aside from running away, which had dire consequences. David Pilgrim, “The Coon Caricature” (Big Rapids, MI: Ferris State University, Oct. 2000), accessed 16 June 2008, available at <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/coon/>; internet.

Nevertheless, the stereotype remained a common sentiment in many white communities and contributed to the emergence of the coon caricature in popular arts.

The coon has roots in nineteenth-century American literature and minstrel shows, in which Negroes were treated as laughable anomalies for the amusement of non-black readers and spectators. The coon was frequently portrayed as a slow-talking, stumbling, stuttering imbecile who did not recognize his low status in society. David Pilgrim explains:

Coon did not know his place. He thought he was as smart as White people; however, his frequent malapropisms and distorted logic suggested that his attempt to compete intellectually with Whites was pathetic. His use of bastardized English delighted White audiences and reaffirmed the then commonly held beliefs that Blacks were inherently less intelligent.<sup>77</sup>

Characterizations such as these were not only accepted in entertainment, they were also supported in scientific and “scholarly” writings as well. In 1870, for example, medical doctor J. H. Van Evrie published a study in which he gave absurd anthropological and medical explanations to support his claim that Negroes were an inferior race—  
unintelligent and prone to laziness and indulgence:

The large distribution of nervous matter to the organs of sense and consequent dominating sensualism (not mere animalism), is the direct cause of that extreme sloth and indolence universal with the [Negro] race. The small brain and limited reasoning power of the negro render him incapable of comprehending the wants of the future, while the sloth dependent on the dominating sensualism, together with strong animal appetites impelling him always to gross self-indulgence, render a master guide or protector essential to his own welfare.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> J. H. Van Evrie, *White Supremacy and Negro Subordination or, Negroes a Subordinate Race, and (So-Called) Slavery Its Normal Condition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Van Evrie, Horton, & Co, 1870), 119.

Thus, for many audience members, minstrel shows did not convey the absurdity we perceive today. Although comical, the caricatures were grounded in deeply ingrained notions of white supremacy. Thus, the image of a Negro in a dress suit—a common coon costume—was seen as particularly ludicrous because by dressing like a white man, the coon demonstrated a complete lack of sense. Although his inferiority was blatantly obvious to everyone else, he was too stupid to realize it himself.<sup>79</sup>

Visual burlesque was not achieved through wardrobe alone. Blacks' facial and bodily characteristics were targets of mockery as well. In John P. Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* (1832), for instance, the author composed descriptions of black characters that highlight their physical attributes as oddities: "His face... was principally composed of a pair of protuberant lips, whose luxuriance seemed intended as an indemnity for a pair of crushed nostrils."<sup>80</sup> This passage calls to mind images of the minstrel stage, where actors wearing burnt cork portrayed Negroes with exorbitant red lips and bulging white eyes. Indeed, the minstrel stage serves as a worthy comparison to the *Swallow Barn* excerpt quoted above because it too mocked the physical characteristics of blacks, perhaps even more forcefully, leading to blackface minstrelsy's widespread popularity, which persisted well into the twentieth century.

The blackface tradition originated during the period of slavery, when Negroes were not permitted to appear on stage. Instead, white minstrels caricatured plantation slaves after painting their faces with burnt cork. This practice continued until after the

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<sup>79</sup> Brown, 70.

<sup>80</sup> John P. Kennedy, *Swallow Barn*, 1832; quoted in Brown, 68.

Civil War, at which time freed slaves organized their own minstrel troupes. However, they too were required to darken their faces. The makeup endured in vaudeville and even on the Broadway stage. It was associated especially with coon figures such as the comedian Bert Williams, and throughout the 1920s with the comedy duo Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles. Thus the coon caricature appeared in theatrical performances well into the twentieth century, at which point it entered the world of cinema.

In early film, coons' sole purpose was to entertain at their own expense through screwball antics, ridiculous facial gestures, buffoonery, and utter stupidity. They made their way to the big screen in several guises, first as the pickaninny, and then as the pure coon.<sup>81</sup> The pickaninny, the harmless yet wildly amusing child comedian, made its debut in Thomas Alva Edison's *Ten Pickaninnies* of 1904. The 1920s saw the advent of another more successful pickaninny comedy, the series *Our Gang*—produced by Hal Roach—which was later known for a period as *The Little Rascals*. Productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* also included this caricature in portrayals of the comical slave child, Topsy, whose popularity led to the 1927 film *Topsy and Eva*. Not surprisingly, pickaninnies were enthusiastically added to the list of stock Negro film characters because, like the tom, they were intellectually inferior to whites and provided a desirable service—in this case, amusement.

The pure coon was introduced onscreen in *Wooing and Wedding of a Coon* (1905), which portrayed a honeymooning black couple as buffoons. This was followed by a series of slapstick comedies in 1910-1911 (several involving thievery and poultry)

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<sup>81</sup> Bogle, 7-8. Bogle adds to this a third coon type, the uncle remus, which emerged in the 1930s and 1940s.



including *How Rastus Got His Turkey*, *Rastus in Zululand*, *Rastus and Chicken*, and *Chicken Thief*. Other coons appeared in the 1920s, such as the character of Romeo Washington, played by white actor Porter Strong in D.W. Griffith's *One Exciting Night* (1922). The story centered upon Romeo's ridiculous antics as he ran around a haunted house, scared out of his wits. As comical and successful as these early coons were, no one acted out the caricature quite as convincingly as Stepin Fetchit.

Stepin Fetchit became the quintessential coon starting with the MGM film *In Old Kentucky* (1927). *Variety* magazine described his character as "a lazy, no good roustabout, wheedling money out of colored help."<sup>82</sup> Similar roles followed in films such as *The Ghost Talks* (1929), *Show Boat* (1929), and *Fox Movietone Follies* (1929), but his first major hit was the all-Negro Fox picture of 1929, *Hearts in Dixie*. In *Hearts of Dixie*, Fetchit played Gummy, a "languid, shiftless husband whose 'mysery' in his feet prevents him from being of any earthly good as far as work is concerned, although once away from his wife's eye he can shuffle with the tirelessness and lanky abandon of a jumping jack."<sup>83</sup> With his signature slow gait and inarticulate stammer, Fetchit captured the attention of spectators across the country, and his career took off. From 1929 to 1935 the actor appeared in twenty-six films. The four movies in which he costarred with Will Rogers—*David Harum* (1934), *Judge Priest* (1934), *The County Chairman* (1935), and *Steamboat 'Round the Bend* (1935)—are prime examples of his contribution to the coon

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<sup>82</sup> *Variety*; quoted in Donald Bogle, *Blacks in American Films and Television: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 388.

<sup>83</sup> Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 86; quoted in Pilgrim, "The Coon Caricature."

caricature. In each, Fetchit's coon, no matter how eccentric or flamboyant, was never portrayed as a threat. At heart, his characters "were harmless creatures who, during crucial moments, would 'come through.'" <sup>84</sup> Thus, Fetchit developed a coon that could occupy a central position on the big screen because there was nothing intimidating about his presence. He was too much of a dunce to realize the inhumanity of his master's behavior, and even if he had, he probably would have been too lazy to do anything about it.

Several comedians followed in the footsteps of Stepin Fetchit, adopting elements from his routines and thereby continuing his legacy of coon depiction. Among these were Willie Best, Mantan Moreland, and Louis Armstrong, all of whom appeared in *Cabin in the Sky*. The first of these, Willie Best, was tall and slim like Fetchit, and portrayed the same types of simple, self-demeaning characters. In his films of the 1930s, he played dimwitted coons who were easily contented, terrified of ghosts, seemed perpetually half asleep, and asked ridiculous questions such as, "Why is a shoe called a shoe?" <sup>85</sup> His performance in *Cabin in the Sky* as one of the devil's henchmen stays true to the coon prototype. As Lucifer Junior and his henchmen try to think of ways to lure Little Joe into sin, Best—portraying a good-for-nothing "idea man"—lies half asleep in a bathrobe, smoking a cigar. When he finally decides to contribute an idea, he offers the same one the others came up with moments before, thereby revealing that he had slept through their conversation.

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<sup>84</sup> Bogle, *Toms*, 43.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-72.

Mantan Moreland was another coon favorite. After getting his start in black nightclubs and cafes, Moreland attained popularity in film during the 1930s, and his career endured into the early 70s. Unlike the traditional coons, Moreland played a “faithful right-hand man.” But unlike the tom caricature, “Mantan was always there *until* his white friend needed him. Then he took off for the hills.”<sup>86</sup> In *Cabin in the Sky*, he plays another one of Lucifer Junior’s sidekicks—complete with bathrobe, cigar, and devilish horns. Though he contributes more to the conversation than the sedate Willie Best, he also proves to be an unreliable figure. When his boss Lucifer Junior shows up at the office, Moreland—who is supposed to be working—is instead having a grand time dancing to the music of trumpeter Louis Armstrong. Junior, upset by his employees’ lack of productivity, is quick to point out that Moreland and the rest of the henchmen have not had a decent idea in ages. “You’s growin’ stale, all of ya!” he shouts. Thus, Moreland’s character is portrayed as another lazy, “no-good” character.

The last of the three Fetchit imitators was Louis Armstrong, who is remembered today as one of the jazz greats. His roles in film often combined his musical and comical talents. Although he appeared with his band earlier in *Ex Flame* (1931), his acting debut was in Bing Crosby’s *Pennies from Heaven* (1936), in which Armstrong played a bandleader at Crosby’s Haunted House Café. His rendition of “Skeleton in the Closet” alluded to the stereotype of blacks as superstitious and easily frightened. Later performances also included elements of the coon caricature, but it was primarily his

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 74.

trumpet playing that distinguished him from other actors and helped him to stay on the big screen for four decades.<sup>87</sup>

Like Best and Moreland, Armstrong plays one of the devil's henchmen in *Cabin in the Sky*, and he too is berated by Lucifer Junior for slacking on the job. However, Armstrong proves himself more capable than his counterparts, not only through his skill as a trumpeter, but also because he comes up with the idea to corrupt Little Joe by giving him a winning sweepstakes ticket, and then sending Georgia Brown to finish the job. Through his charisma, Armstrong persuades viewers that he is, in fact, quite clever, although his nonsensical English would suggest otherwise. Furthermore, his excessively enthusiastic performance highlights the absurdity of the scenario and contributes to the film's tongue-in-cheek treatment of religion.

The final important representation of the coon stereotype in *Cabin in the Sky* is Little Joe. Joe is not a coon in the pure sense, but elements of his personality, such as his affinity for gambling and women, draw upon the caricature. Moreover, he fits the profile because of his diminutive stature and dependency on his wife.<sup>88</sup> For instance, in the opening cabin scene, Joe turns to Petunia to explain his weakness for gambling, since he is unable to understand it himself. Then, spectators learn from Petunia, as she fixes Little Joe's tie, that her prayers are responsible for her husband's newly acquired job.<sup>89</sup> Thus,

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>88</sup> As Pilgrim states in "The Coon Caricature," if the coon "was married, his wife dominated him. If he was single, he sought to please the flesh without entanglements."

<sup>89</sup> In the opening narrative, Joe has just been hired to work in an air-conditioned hotel downtown. In his dream, Joe imagines that hell is a hotel. Thus, his place of employment is equated with his idea of the underworld. His association between Hades and work corresponds to Joe's fulfillment of the coon stereotype because it shows a propensity for laziness.

his ability to financially support Petunia—a fundamental symbol of masculinity—is not *his* accomplishment, but his *wife's*, and he is shown incapable of performing even the simple task of dressing himself. Examples like these abound throughout the film, and in its culminating moment, Joe's salvation is—like everything else—granted because of the good deeds of his wife.

On the other hand, aspects of Joe's character betray the coon stereotype, such as his loyalty to Petunia and his desire to resist temptation and “be good.” A character of this type appeared earlier in the 1929 MGM film directed by King Vidor, *Hallelujah*. Set on an idyllic Southern farm, the story of *Hallelujah* revolves around a good colored boy, Zeke, who is lured into a life of sin by the sexy cabaret dancer, Chick. Zeke abandons his family, spends all of their hard-earned money, and accidentally shoots his brother Spunk on the night he first meets Chick. Though Zeke tries to reform, his weakness for Chick leads him to further iniquity. In the end, he murders her and her lover in a jealous rage, then returns to his family farm, where he repents of his sins and once again lives in peace and tranquility.

Although Little Joe's wicked deeds are undoubtedly milder than those of Zeke, the premise remains the same. He is presented as a good-natured character at heart, who is simply too weak to fight all of his sinful urges. In this sense, Little Joe and Zeke may be compared to the tom, who is also good-natured, but unintelligent and infirm. In the case of Joe, however, the comparison is more convincing. Like the tom, who is presented within the context of a master-servant relationship, Joe is subservient and accountable to his loving wife. Since she exhibits traits customarily associated with white characters—

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Christian virtue, wisdom, and leadership—Petunia is the ideal substitute for the typical white master, who is impossible to cast within an all-black milieu. Thus, Joe occupies a unique position in film as part tom and part coon. Though it would be a stretch to suggest that he subverts reductive stereotypes, his unusual combination of characteristics, as depicted by Eddie “Rochester” Anderson, make him an endearing personality that audiences can sympathize with, in spite of his shortcomings.

### THE MULATTO JEZEBEL

The Jezebel stereotype has been used for centuries to portray black and mulatto women as lascivious, seductive, and immoral. The name is derived from the biblical Jezebel, wife of Ahab, king of Israel during the 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C.<sup>90</sup> Though still encountered in popular culture today, the “lascivious Negress” may be traced as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when European travelers encountered indigenous cultures in Africa and interpreted their partial nudity, polygamy, and dance rituals as evidence of sexual promiscuity and savagery. The writings of these Europeans also resulted in the black brute myth, which English colonists adopted in order to justify slavery.<sup>91</sup>

The Jezebel stereotype was also used to legitimize the sexual abuse of female slaves. Black women were characterized as having uncontrollable sexual appetites and were often raped or made concubines by male slave owners and their sons. In some

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<sup>90</sup> Jezebel encouraged the worship of Baal, suppressed worship of Jehovah, and persecuted Hebrew prophets. Thus, her name is used to characterize a deceitful and immoral woman. The Bible tells her story in First Kings 18 and 19, and Second Kings 9. See David Pilgrim, “Jezebel Stereotype” (Big Rapids, MI: Ferris State University, July 2002), accessed 21 June 2008, available at <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/jezebel/>; internet.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. For more on the brute caricature, see Chapter three’s “The Black Brute.”

cases, female slaves would consent to sex with their masters in order to avoid being beaten, raped, sold, or taken away from their families. This “willful” submission was used as evidence of the stereotype’s validity. Unfortunately, owing to the fact that slaves were legally considered property, the sexual abuse of slaves was not recognized or punishable by law. The rape of black women continued to go unpunished for many decades after the fall of slavery, especially in the South, where no white male was convicted of raping or attempting to rape a black woman until the late 1960s.<sup>92</sup>

The characterization of black women as lascivious was common after slavery as well, particularly in the American film industry. The first major motion picture to propagate the Jezebel stereotype was D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a groundbreaking work that cost a hundred thousand dollars and took more than six months to make. Unlike its cinematic predecessors, which were typically ten or fifteen-minute shorts, *Birth of a Nation* was over three hours in length, and it pioneered cutting-edge developments in camerawork, lighting, and editing. From a purely technical standpoint, it was a masterful artistic achievement. Its social message, however, was one of racial bigotry, and it sparked a flood of anti-Negro sentiment throughout the nation and prompted a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>93</sup>

In *Birth of a Nation*, the Jezebel stereotype is embodied in Lydia Brown, the mulatto housekeeper and mistress of a powerful abolitionist, Senator Austin Stoneman. Stoneman is portrayed as largely responsible for the civil unrest and devastation that Southern whites face during and after the Civil War, because he upsets the “natural

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Bogle, *Toms*, 10-12.

order” by arguing for black equality. Lydia Brown—who is lustful, power hungry, and envious of whites—is identified in the film as “the great leader’s weakness that is to blight a nation.” Because of her white blood, she is ambitious, but her Negro blood betrays her animalistic sexuality.<sup>94</sup> It is implied that Senator Stoneman’s civil rights beliefs are due his intimate relationship with Lydia. Thus, the mulatto temptress uses her sexual appeal to ultimately impair the country.

Unlike the mammy, who was typically dark skinned, overweight, and de-sexualized, the Jezebel was frequently played by slender, light-skinned mulattoes with Caucasian features.<sup>95</sup> This casting practice finds its historical antecedent in slavery, when many of the blacks sold into prostitution were light-skinned.<sup>96</sup> Because they resembled white women, mulattoes were considered more sexually desirable than dark-skinned blacks. However, they were legally considered “Negroes.” Therefore, they had no rights and could be sexually abused and exploited. This practice—which violated prohibitions against interracial sex—was reconciled by depicting the mulatto woman as “a seductress whose beauty drove white men to rape her.”<sup>97</sup> Interestingly, this association between temptress and mulatto was established as early as 1852, when author Reverend Josiah Priest alluded to it in his retelling of Jezebel’s demise:

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<sup>94</sup> “George M. Fredrickson, author of *The Black Image in the White Mind*, claimed that many White Americans believed that mulattoes were a degenerate race because they had ‘White blood’ which made them ambitious and power hungry combined with ‘Black blood’ which made them animalistic and savage.” Quoted in David Pilgrim, “Tragic Mulatto Myth” (Big Rapids, MI: Ferris State University, Nov. 2000), accessed 22 June 2008, available at <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/mulatto/>; internet. Sterling Brown says nearly the same, but he claims that White blood was traditionally thought to be responsible for “intellectual strivings” (p. 76).

<sup>95</sup> For a detailed discussion of the mammy caricature, see chapter 3, “The Mammy.”

<sup>96</sup> Pilgrim, “Jezebel Stereotype.”

<sup>97</sup> Pilgrim, “Tragic Mulatto Myth.”



But this Jezebel came finally to a fearful end; for when Jehu came to the throne of Israel, and immediately after the death of Ahab, he caused her to be cast headlong from the window of an upper room of the palace, out of which she but a moment before had looked, having *tired* her head and painted her face to disguise her negro complexion, and if possible thereby to seduce the new king, Jehu.<sup>98</sup>

In this rewording of the biblical text, Jezebel transforms herself into a light-skinned Negro to suggest further moral corruption and lasciviousness.

The association between light-skinned blacks and the Jezebel stereotype persisted for many years after *Birth of a Nation*, often in conjunction with the tragic mulatto myth. Born to a white slaveholder and his female black slave, the mulatto was portrayed as a tragic figure, because despite her white blood, she was confined to the life of a Negro, often after living for years as a white person. She was introduced to the literary world in two short stories by Lydia Maria Child, “The Quadroons” (1842) and “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes” (1843), and later was portrayed in film as well. David Pilgrim describes how the tragic mulatto was depicted during the twentieth century:

Literary and cinematic portrayals of the tragic mulatto emphasized her personal pathologies: self-hatred, depression, alcoholism, sexual perversion, and suicide attempts being the most common. If light enough to “pass” as White, she did, but passing led to deeper self-loathing. She pitied or despised Blacks and the “blackness” in herself; she hated or feared Whites yet desperately sought their approval. In a race-based society, the tragic mulatto found peace only in death.<sup>99</sup>

Portrayals of this nature are illustrated in several twentieth-century novels, including Joel Chandler Harris’s *Gabriel Tolliver* (1902), which features a married mulatto woman who

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<sup>98</sup> Reverend Josiah Priest, *The Bible Defense of Slavery; and Origin, Fortunes, and History of the Negro Race* (Glasgow, KY: Rev. W.S. Brown, M.D., 1852), 192. The original version in 2 Kings 9:30 says that Jezebel painted her eyes and arranged her hair.

<sup>99</sup> Pilgrim, “Tragic Mulatto Myth.”

attempts to seduce a white carpetbagger; Vera Caspary's *The White Girl* (1929), about a mulatto who drinks poison after her Negro blood is discovered; and Geoffrey Barnes' *Dark Lustre* (1932), in which a mulatto woman dies during childbirth, passing on her suffering to her multiracial baby.<sup>100</sup>

In film, there were several important tragic mulattos who demonstrated the caricature's association with the Jezebel stereotype. One of these was Peola, played by the beautiful Fredi Washington in *Imitation of Life* (1934). Peola is the mulatto daughter of a black servant (played by Louise Beavers). She is ashamed of her mixed race and wants to live as a white woman, which includes marrying a caucasian man and hiding her race. In the end, she rejects her ethnicity and her mother to pass for white, but happiness for the mulatto character is unattainable. When her mother dies, she weeps remorsefully for rejecting her race and the woman who raised her. The 1959 remake of *Imitation of Life* stars a white actress (Susan Kohner) as a mulatto who runs away to work in a trashy nightclub and pass for white. When her caucasian boyfriend discovers her Negro blood, he beats her and leaves her in a gutter. Both movies present the heroine as a pathetic figure, but one that is nonetheless deceitful, immoral, and bent on seducing a white man. Other characters of this type appear in Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* (1930), and the movies *Show Boat* (1936) and *God's Step Children* (1937). All three feature mulatto characters who pass for white and eventually meet tragic downfalls. In *Show Boat*, the mulatto Julie ends up an alcoholic. In *Passing* and *God's Step Children*, the female leads die.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

In addition to portraying the tragic mulatto, light-skinned actresses also played *pure* Jezebel roles. Fredi Washington, for example, played the part of a promiscuous Harlem temptress opposite Paul Robeson in *The Emperor Jones* (1933). Nina Mae McKinney, another significant multiracial actress, played Zeke's mulatto seductress—the cabaret dancer Chick—in *Hallelujah* (1929). Perhaps the greatest mulatto siren of the first half of the century, however, was Lena Horne. In the early 1940s, she was discovered by an MGM talent scout while performing at West coast nightclubs and became the first black woman to be “fully glamorized, publicized, and promoted” by her studio.<sup>101</sup> She got her start in Hollywood by starring in brief musical episodes, first in *Panama Hattie* (1942)—which featured her in two scenes directed by Vincente Minnelli—and later in *Thousands Cheer* (1943). Her big breaks, however, were *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* (1943), both of which represented the epitome of wartime escapist entertainment.

In *Cabin in the Sky*, Horne plays a temptress and agent of the devil, the irresistible Georgia Brown. Wearing her finest perfume and revealing her midriff, Georgia sets off to find Little Joe and seduce him. Using little more than a beckoning gaze, sultry smile, and sexy saunter, Lena plays the quintessential “economy class siren.” Vincente Minnelli, who used the preceding phrase to describe Georgia Brown in his autobiography, had originally intended to introduce her in a steamy bubble bath, but censors at the Hays office rejected the scene and made Minnelli drop it.<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless,

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<sup>101</sup> Bogle, *Blacks in American Films and Television*, 404.

<sup>102</sup> Minnelli, 122.

Horne emanates sex appeal, and effortlessly pulls off the role. Her performance in the episode at Jim Henry's Paradise is particularly noteworthy.

Appearing alongside Little Joe, Georgia Brown is the center of attention at Jim Henry's, and although she shamelessly flaunts her glamorous attire along with her God-given "accessories," she does not come across as a tramp. Rather, as Donald Bogle suggests, Georgia is "more a tease than anything else."<sup>103</sup> She playfully acknowledges her own flirtatious behavior, thereby inviting audiences to laugh with her, rather than condemn her. Indeed, her beauty and sexuality are glorified throughout the film, especially in her rendition of "Honey in the Honeycomb," and it is not until the movie's final moments that the tragic mulatto myth comes into play. After Little Joe is shot, Georgia cries out his name in terror and desperation, then falls to her knees with eyes toward heaven. Spectators learn in the succeeding judgment scene that Georgia has repented her sinful deeds and given all of her belongings to the church as her first act of atonement.

In some ways, Georgia Brown propagates the stereotypes associated with the Jezebel and tragic mulatto. She plays a light-skinned temptress who uses her sexuality to corrupt men and exploit them for sex and money. In typical fashion, she ends up poor, man-less, and accountable for her sinful lifestyle. On the other hand, Georgia Brown defies stereotypical mulatto representations because her beauty and flirtatious humor are what endear her to spectators. Furthermore, her long-term future is hopeful. She has turned over a new leaf and may find happiness one day because of her newfound faith. This is never realized in the movie, though, and in the end, her very existence may have

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<sup>103</sup> Bogle, *Toms*, 127.

been merely part of a dream. Nevertheless, in 1943 her role represented a somewhat liberal interpretation of a longstanding racial stereotype, and it signified a small step forward for black actresses at a time when the mammy was the only black female on screen who was not vilified or emotionally disturbed.

### The Black Brute

The next racial caricature to make its way to the big screen was the black brute, a menacing figure who was portrayed as innately savage, animalistic, predatory, and sexually aggressive. Unlike the more popular caricatures—the tom, coon, and mammy—the brute was far from harmless. Toms and mammies were instruments through which slavery could be rationalized as a paternalistic institution in which slaves were the content “children.” However, the brute defied notions of Negroes as docile. The brute stereotype was based on the assumption that blacks were inherently feral and violent, a belief that was fabricated during the Radical Reconstruction of 1865-1877 as a last-ditch effort to defend and revive slavery through more forceful means—namely, fear. Proponents of slavery argued that white dominance suppressed and controlled blacks’ innate criminal nature, and that without such enforcement, Negro men would wreak havoc on society—raping innocent white women and inflicting violence. The prevalence of this belief is evident in literature from the period.

The mythical black brute was featured in numerous novels, newspapers, and even scientific journals during the latter half of the nineteenth century. In 1852, Reverend

Josiah Priest, author of *The Bible Defense of Slavery; and Origin, Fortunes, and History of the Negro Race*, expounded theories on Negro inferiority, using Biblical stories to support his claims. In addition to asserting that Negroes were lewd, lascivious, unfeeling, and even cannibalistic (!), he also stated that they were “not human,” but were instead comparable to beasts that, if set free, would be the ruin of society:<sup>104</sup>

To set the negroes free in all America, and to bestow upon them political equality...there would arise out of such a state of the case all the horrors of hatred and confusion, violence and assassinations, that can be conceived of. There is a natural dislike of the races toward each other, on which account, were the negroes made politically free, without the privilege of intermarrying with whites, there would soon arise quarrels and discontent; as the possession of mere political liberty, without all the other immunities of white society, would not and could not satisfy them....The races are two kinds of men, constituted entirely different, in both body and soul; on which account there can be no union or fellowship between the two, on the ground of common equality, except by amalgamation; which would be...a universal retrograde from the moral image of God toward the condition of brutes; inasmuch as that the intellectuality of the white race would be destroyed from off the earth, and merged in the thick skulls of the negroes.<sup>105</sup>

Other authors, such as J.H. Van Evrie and Charles Carroll expressed similar notions.

Carroll's book *The Negro A Beast* (1900) depicted black men as ape-like murderers and rapists.<sup>106</sup> Van Evrie, alluding to black males' supposed savage lust, referred to the Negro's “gross organism, and semi-animal instinct,” and he approached the subject of racial mixing with horror and contempt, calling it, “the hideous affiliation, the monstrous

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<sup>104</sup> Priest, 181.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>106</sup> Pilgrim, “Brute Caricature” (Big Rapids, MI: Ferris State University, Nov. 2000), accessed 27 June 2008, available at <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/brute/>; internet.

admixture of blood, the vile obscenity that they may term marriage.”<sup>107</sup> Van Evrie presented his bigotry in the guise of “scientific” writing by providing anthropological and medical explanations to support his ideas. Although literature such as this shaped racial perceptions for much of America, the single most influential depiction of the black brute was not in a literary work, but in a motion picture, D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).

Based upon Thomas Dixon’s novel, *The Clansman*, Griffith’s film tells the story of a good-natured and decent Southern family, the Camerons, who enjoy an idyllic life with their content, childlike slaves until the outbreak of the Civil War. During the war, the Camerons are terrorized by a Negro militia that raids and sets fire to their home, but Confederate troops rescue them and their town before all is destroyed. Their sons Duke and Wade, soldiers on the warfront, are killed during the fighting, and their eldest, Ben, is wounded and falsely accused of spying by the North. Pardoned by President Lincoln, Ben is able to return to his family, but his homecoming is somber owing to his family’s devastation. All hope is lost when news arrives that Lincoln has been assassinated.

The second part of the film begins during the Reconstruction period. Austin Stoneman, an abolitionist leader in the National House of Representatives, sends his mulatto protégé, Silas Lynch, to the South. Lynch, along with other northern Negroes and carpetbaggers, exploits and corrupts the former slaves, causing them to rise up in violent opposition to Southern whites. Blacks take over the political polls and the state legislature, and hold a Congressional session in which Negro legislators are portrayed as

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<sup>107</sup> Van Evrie, *White Supremacy and Negro Subordination or, Negroes a Subordinate Race, and (So-Called) Slavery Its Normal Condition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Van Evrie, Horton, & Co, 1870), 328-29.

arrogant, idiotic, and uncivilized. They abuse former slaves who prefer the pre-war days of subjugation, and they pass two laws: one that allows interracial marriage and another that requires whites to salute Negro officers in the streets.

The film's culmination ensues when two lusty black men demonstrate sexual interest in white women. The emancipated slave Gus pursues Flora Cameron, who, frightened by his advances, flees him until eventually falling to her death from a rocky cliff. Meanwhile, Silas Lynch tries to force Elsie Stoneman, the abolitionist's daughter, to marry him, and mobs of violent blacks try to attack the innocent Camerons. With only moments remaining, Ku Klux Klan members arrive on horseback and rescue Elsie from her pursuer, and the Camerons from the angry tyrants. White supremacy is restored, and everyone lives happily ever after (everyone white, that is).

Owing to its anti-black message and explicit glorification of the Ku Klux Klan, *Birth of a Nation* met with a fury of opposition from civil rights activists. The NAACP picketed the film's New York premiere, along with subsequent screenings in Chicago and Boston. In 1915, black critics protested its message in newspapers and speeches, and the resistance persisted decades later, when attempts were made to revive the film in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>108</sup> Yet in spite of vehement opposition from select groups, *Birth of a Nation* was extremely popular across the nation. It fueled the myth that black men were inclined toward sexual aggression against whites and led to a revival of the Ku Klux

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<sup>108</sup> Bogle, *Toms*, 15-16. In 1946, the Museum of Modern Art temporarily stopped showing *Birth of a Nation* due to "heightened social tensions." In 1947, the NAACP picketed New York's Republic Theatre where the film was to be shown. In 1950, opposition arose when word got out that Hollywood planned to remake the movie with sound, and in 1959, plans to show it on television were abandoned after protests.



Klan, along with anti-Negro sentiment and lynching.<sup>109</sup> It became a dangerous emblem of racial tensions in the United States, and Hollywood moved toward safer territory by depicting mainly toms and coons during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. Nevertheless, the brute caricature remained in the American psyche, and its impact helps to explain several aspects of *Cabin in the Sky*.

A perusal of stock images from *Cabin in the Sky* reveals a panoply of jolly plump mummies and mirthful devils and coons, mugging and grinning with wide-eyed enthusiasm. The sultry siren Georgia Brown also appears as gay as can be, even though she play's the devil's own. Lucifer Junior, the very definition of evil, is nothing more than a comical corruptor, brimming with laughter and merriment. In fact, even the movie's villain, Domino Johnson, spends most of his screen time grinning ear to ear, dressed like a dandy in a fine suit and hat. Not only that, but his one solo performance is the number "Shine," a song that was not part of the original musical and was a strange choice for a stock villain since in it, he boasts:

'Cause my hair is curly,  
And because my teeth are pearly,  
And just because I always wear a smile,  
And suits to dress up in the latest style....

Just because my color shade's  
A *wee* bit different maybe.  
That's why they call me Shine.

Far from the menacing brute, Domino Johnson appears more like a dandified coon than a villain, and the lyrics of "Shine" support such an interpretation of his character. When he

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<sup>109</sup> The most explicit demonstration of the stereotype's widespread acceptance and potency was the Dyer Bill debate of 1921-1922, in which several Southern Congressmen argued against federal punishment for lynching, claiming that penalties for lynching would facilitate the rape of white women by black men. See Pilgrim, "Brute Caricature."

proudly sings of how he “made a shoestring into a tie” or “cut the corners off the end of [his] coat so they wouldn’t fly,” the implication is that in attempting to wear refined clothing, he makes a fool of himself. Hence, white folks, because his “color shade’s a *wee* bit different maybe,” recognize his ludicrous attempt to dress up, and call him Shine, an obvious insult in light of the song’s lyrical content. The impression conveyed by the song “Shine,” however, is inconsistent with Domino’s clothing, which is in actuality formal and stylish. Nor is the song compatible with the role of Domino in the film’s narrative.

When separated from John Sublett’s mugging and grinning, the character of Domino Johnson fits the description of the black brute. He shoots Little Joe at the beginning of the film, and shoots him again, along with Petunia, at the movie’s close. His other activities include hanging around promiscuous women, gambling, drinking, and spending time in prison for attempted murder. He also makes sexual advances toward the film’s most innocent character, Petunia, thereby frightening her to the extent that she screams for Little Joe’s help. Apart from his perpetual grin and affinity for fine attire, Domino is the mythological ‘black beast.’ In fact, it seems as though “Shine” was inserted with the sole purpose of distracting audiences from that fact.

Although *Cabin in the Sky* presents a story of good versus evil, none of its evildoers is frightening, sinister, or beastly. The story is complete with Lucifer and his henchmen, the wanton seductress, and the sexually aggressive and violent brute. Yet, all of these characters are charismatic and irresistibly charming. In fact, Domino Johnson is the only personality onscreen who remains villainous, and that is merely on account of

his scripted actions. Thus, *Cabin in the Sky* presents all of the typical caricatures. However, because of heightened racial tensions and the controversy surrounding the brute stereotype, the movie's creators glossed over the true nature of Domino Johnson by giving him the exterior of a dandy and a comical coon. In essence, filmmakers replaced one cookie-cutter character with another. While the replacement was less threatening, it was still reductive and propagated the practice of assigning black actors to a very small range of roles. Thus, Domino did little to advance the representation of African Americans in film.

### THE MAMMY

The last of the popular caricatures to appear in *Cabin in the Sky* is the mammy. Like the tom, the mammy was created to justify the institution of slavery by depicting female slaves as jovial, content, and loyal to their white masters. In contrast to the mulatto character, which was frequently portrayed as promiscuous or immoral, the mammy was desexualized through her strong maternal presence and appearance. Since sexual desirability was associated with thin, young, light-skinned women, the mammy was portrayed as overweight, middle-aged, and dark in complexion. Her appearance suggested that she was unattractive by "white" standards, and therefore posed no threat to her master's marriage or family life. In fact, the mammy was *more* devoted to her

master's family members than her own, and often they constituted her only friends and companions.<sup>110</sup>

Mammies played the role of house servant to middle and upper class white families in both real life and fiction during the first half of the twentieth century. Due to racial discrimination, black women were limited in career opportunities; often the only job available to them was that of domestic worker, a low-salaried position involving cooking, cleaning, laundry care, and child rearing. Although fictional representations of mammies featured them performing many of the same tasks, the reality was not nearly as optimistic as literary, stage, and motion picture portrayals. Many black women had to juggle full-time jobs and raise families of their own. Some of them, such as Ethel Waters' grandmother, Sally Anderson, lived at their employers' homes throughout the week, only seeing their families on weekends. Anderson was also a single parent, raising four children of her own and Ethel, the offspring of her daughter who was raped and impregnated at the age of twelve.<sup>111</sup>

One influential mammy was Harriet Beecher Stowe's Aunt Chloe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Chloe was the prototype: overweight, nurturing, de-sexed, extremely loyal, and good-natured. Stowe writes of her: "Her whole plump countenance beams with satisfaction and contentment from under a well-starched checkered turban."<sup>112</sup> Like the

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<sup>110</sup> David Pilgrim, "Mammy Caricature" (Big Rapids, MI: Ferris State University, Oct. 2000), accessed 2 July 2008, available at <http://www.ferris.edu/JIMCROW/mammies/>; internet.

<sup>111</sup> Ethel Waters with Charles Samuels, *His Eye is On the Sparrow* (New York: Pyramid Books, 1950), chapter one.

<sup>112</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: New American Library, 1966), 31. Quoted in Pilgrim, "Mammy Caricature."

tom, her appearance in minstrel shows across the nation helped to popularize the stereotypical image, and this was reinforced by commercial advertisements during the late nineteenth century. According to David Pilgrim, professor of sociology and curator of the Jim Crow Museum at Ferris State University:

The mammy image was used to sell almost any household item, especially breakfast foods, detergents, planters, ashtrays, sewing accessories, and beverages. As early as 1875, Aunt Sally, a Mammy image, appeared on cans of baking powder. Later, different Mammy images appeared on Luzianne coffee and cleaners, Fun to Wash detergent, Aunt Dinah molasses, and other products. Mammy represented wholesomeness.<sup>113</sup>

The most popular of the commercial mammies was Aunt Jemima. Originally created in 1889 by Charles Rutt and Charles G. Underwood to market their pancake recipe, Aunt Jemima was inspired by a popular vaudeville song and show. Unable to promote their product successfully, Rutt and Underwood sold the recipe and idea to the R.T. Davis Mill Company, which hired an elderly former slave, Nancy Green, to play the part of Aunt Jemima. She told idyllic stories about the old South, sang songs, and cooked pancakes. By 1900, she was one of two most trusted icons in American advertising, along with the Armour meat chef.<sup>114</sup> She remains a household name today.

Following decades of popularity on the stage and in commercial advertising, the mammy entered the world of cinema. In 1914, she made her screen debut in the comedy *Coon Town Suffragettes*, which was about “a group of bossy mammy washerwomen who

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<sup>113</sup> Pilgrim, “Mammy Caricature.”

<sup>114</sup> Stanley Sacharow, *Symbols of Trade: Your Favorite Trademarks and the Companies They Represent* (New York: Art Direction Book Company, 1982), 62; cited in Pilgrim, “Mammy Caricature.”

organize a militant movement to keep their good-for-nothing husbands at home.”<sup>115</sup> The following year, another mammy figure appeared in *The Birth of a Nation*, staunchly defending her white master’s home against Union soldiers. She embodied the loyal slave, happy in servitude and willing to do anything for her master. The trend continued in the 1930s, when the female house servant gained prominence in movies featuring Mae West. In *I’m No Angel* (1933), *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), and *Belle of the Nineties* (1934), West was surrounded by black domestics, who “were always overweight, middle-aged, and made up as jolly aunt jemimas,” complete with “patch-work dresses and colorful kerchiefs tied about their heads.” Like Bill “Bojangles” Robinson in the films starring Shirley Temple, the female domestics of West’s movies became trusted friends to the female lead. Thus, their characters demonstrated greater humanity and more pronounced personalities than in many earlier mammy depictions.<sup>116</sup>

One of the most significant mammies of the 1930s was Louise Beavers’ character in *Imitation of Life* (1934). Beavers played Aunt Delilah, a black widow who joins forces with a white widow, Miss Bea. Delilah tends to domestic matters, while Bea assumes the role of breadwinner. When Bea learns of the delicious family pancake recipe that has been passed down through generations to Delilah, she decides to market the flour, offering Delilah twenty percent of the profits. Delilah, acting as a loyal and self-sacrificing house servant and faithful companion, rejects Bea’s offer of financial independence and chooses to remain her devoted domestic. The two friends enjoy financial success; however, their domestic lives are marked by disappointment. Delilah’s

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<sup>115</sup> Bogle, *Toms*, 9.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-46.

light-skinned daughter Peola rejects her mother and attempts to pass as white. Delilah deals with her daughter's behavior by offering Christian guidance: "Open up and say, 'Lord I bows my head.' He made you black, honey. Don't be telling him his business. Accept it, honey. Do that for your mammy, your mother dear."<sup>117</sup>

The significance of Aunt Delilah to the mammy caricature is that she endowed the role with a sense of dignity. As mentioned earlier, Louise Beavers, in her portrayal of Aunt Delilah, was among the first black actors to communicate Christian virtue and authority. She made audiences believe that Delilah was a character with profound moral integrity, wisdom, and unwavering devotion to the people she loved.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, by offering advice to her daughter consistent with white society's expectations of mixed-race individuals, she proved that a black character could offer "sound judgment" that reinforced societal norms.

The last truly significant mammy to appear before Ethel Waters in *Cabin in the Sky* was Hattie McDaniel, an assertive and boisterous actress whose mammies were outspoken, no-nonsense women who changed the onscreen dynamic in master-servant relationships. In *Alice Adams* (1935), McDaniel plays the part of a cook, hired to prepare and serve a dinner to a poor white family that is putting on airs to impress their wealthy guest. Rather than play the typical housemaid, McDaniel talks back to her masters and highlights the absurdity of their attempts to pass as social elite.<sup>119</sup> In other films, such as

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. Bogle writes that Beavers' "Christian stoicism... 'elevated' the Negro character in films by endowing him with Christian goodness far exceeding that of any other character."

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 84.

*The Mad Miss Manton* (1938) and the 1939 classic *Gone With the Wind*, McDaniel continues to assert herself in servant roles. In both films, she plays a bold maternal figure who reprimands the white leading ladies and expresses opinions freely, as a social equal and valued family member.<sup>120</sup>

Both Louise Beavers and Hattie McDaniel were important predecessors to Ethel Waters' character Petunia in *Cabin in the Sky*, as were the more stereotypical mammies that preceded them. The early mammies of Stowe's *Uncle Tom* and subsequent minstrel shows and commercial advertisements helped to establish the typical physical characteristics of the mammy, as well as her good-natured and loyal disposition and Christian beliefs. In *Imitation of Life*, Louise Beavers reinforced that image but added to it greater warmth, humanity, and dignity. Because of her strong Christian virtues, Aunt Delilah was lent greater authority than most other cinematic Negro characters. Beavers made the role believable and therefore validated Delilah's—and consequently, blacks'—Christian integrity and wisdom. Hattie McDaniel, on the other hand, stepped outside the submissive mammy stereotype by depicting bold and outspoken house servants. Thus black women were able to assert themselves onscreen, even in traditional roles. The influence of these mammies may be detected in Waters' portrayal of Petunia, a character who defies simple categorization because she both embodies and subverts conventions, thereby offering a caricature that demonstrates the changing nature of racial politics in the United States and how it was reflected in popular culture.

Like the conventional mammy figure of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *Cabin in the Sky*'s Petunia is middle-aged and overweight, and frequently

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 85-89.



dressed in frumpy, patterned dresses and kerchiefs. In the movie's opening scenes (before the dream episode), she is introduced as a desexualized domestic character through her maternal treatment of Little Joe and her performance of menial household tasks. Furthermore, she is portrayed as the epitome of Christian goodness and piety through her unwavering devotion to Little Joe, her kind and forgiving spirit, and her faithfulness to God and the church. When her husband betrays her good faith by gambling and consequently getting shot by Domino Johnson, Petunia not only accepts him back lovingly, but comes to his aid. She seems desperate to help Joe and tirelessly prays for his recovery. While these aspects of Petunia suggest that her character reinforces racial stereotypes, they do not tell all because the dream episode in the film creates an entirely different impression.

In Little Joe's fantasy, Petunia is depicted as a bewilderingly complex woman, distinguished by glaring inconsistencies in behavior and character. Sometimes, she retains her status as the innocent and naive Christian mammy and devout wife. Other times, she demonstrates keen street smarts, a no-nonsense attitude, musical sophistication, sexual confidence, unbridled expression, and an outright rejection of her former role as housewife. In the end, however, spectators must confront the fact that Petunia's more controversial characteristics appear in Joe's imagination. For when he awakes, the two of them are back in the cabin bedroom, where Joe is recovering from his gunshot wound. Thus, the battle for Joe's soul was merely a dream. At first glance, it would appear that the surprise ending eradicates the facets of Petunia's personality that deviate from racial stereotypes. However, close consideration of the dream episode, along

with the film's closing scene, suggests that Joe's fantasy and the portrayal of Petunia contained therein is more significant than the plot alone implies.

### JEMIMA MEETS JEZEBEL: PETUNIA'S INCONSISTENT IDENTITY

There are several critical indications of the dream episode's significance within the film. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is the ample span of time it occupies. The vast majority of the movie is an enactment of Little Joe's fantasy, and although it is exposed as a dream, it still occupies a central and dominant position within the picture. Secondly, Joe's fantasy contains the film's most memorable moments—performances by top-notch entertainers including Ethel Waters, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, Bill Bailey, Lena Horne, Louis Armstrong, John "Bubbles" Sublett, and Duke Ellington and his Orchestra. These performers' musical and choreographed numbers are undeniably the motion picture's strongest selling points, and as Susan Smith notes, they play a "vital role...in producing a sense of diversity and individuality of expression that runs counter to the notion of racial stereotyping."<sup>121</sup>

The other indication of the dream episode's relevance to a discussion of Petunia's character takes place in the movie's final scene. After Joe wakes from his slumber, thereby exposing the preceding events as a dream, Petunia sings an excerpt from "Taking a Chance on Love," the song that was performed in the cabin scene of Joe's fantasy. The appearance of this song during the "real" portion of the story calls into question the assumed fallacy of Joe's fantasy, and spectators are prompted to reconsider Joe's dream

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<sup>121</sup> Smith, 30.

with newfound knowledge that aspects of it were, in fact, grounded in reality, and not merely the aspects that reinforce Petunia as a loyal God-fearing wife and prototypical mammy, but those that present her as a more complex and controversial character.<sup>122</sup>

Thus, the scenes in which Petunia exceeds the confines of racial stereotypes are rendered potentially valid, even within the film's "real" narrative. They should therefore be considered in any discussion of the mammy caricature in *Cabin in the Sky*.

The first segment of the dream episode that allows Petunia to break free from the mammy caricature is the garden scene, in which she outwits two gamblers, Jim Henry and Dude, who have come to collect the money Joe owes them. By acting as though she knows nothing about gambling, Petunia convinces the two men to shoot dice with her to settle Joe's debts. Jim Henry and Dude believe they will rob her blind, but she craftily steals Jim's trick dice and rolls them herself. What is particularly telling in this scene is that Petunia uses the same naïve persona to trick the gamblers as she uses in other "sincere" scenes of the movie. (She meekly casts her eyes downward and fidgets with one of the buttons on her dress). As Susan Smith points out, she acts in precisely the

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<sup>122</sup> Smith suggests this as well. She writes: "By allowing Petunia to sing the song that had earlier signalled, in such pleasurable fashion, the emergence of a more deviant side to her character, the film re-evokes these impulses in a way that gives them an independent life and ongoing validity outside of the dream, thereby resisting, in turn, the more conservative implications arising from the couple's return to the cabin sphere" (p. 49).

The blurring of the dreamed and real narratives, though exposed in the final scene, also occurs in other portions of the film. In fact, Minnelli seems to have purposefully concealed the distinction. Without changing scenes or even interrupting the camera shot, Joe's fantasy begins exactly where the "real" narrative leaves off. The only indication that anything has shifted is the mysterious lighting of an oil lamp and the corresponding musical sound. These two signals are too subtle and ambiguous to alert spectators to the fact that the subsequent section is a dream. Furthermore, the fantasy's content and characterizations remain deceptively similar to those of the opening narrative. Petunia continues to pray for the salvation of Little Joe, while making the same promise as in the previous "real" episode, and Joe's struggle to choose between good and evil continues as God and the devil fight for his soul. The entire fantasy is presented in the same everyday setting as the film's real narrative, and likewise, Joe's downfall takes place at Jim Henry's Paradise.

same manner when she receives the washing machine from Joe.<sup>123</sup> Therefore, the gambling scene exposes this element of her personality to be merely an act, and this opens the door for another “authentic” identity to emerge.

The next scene in which Petunia defies the rigid confines of the mammy caricature is in the number “Taking a Chance on Love,” performed by Waters, Anderson, and Bailey in the little cabin kitchen. After Joe surprises Petunia with an electric washing machine for her birthday, he urges her to sing him a song: “the one you sang the first time we....” Initially reluctant and embarrassed, she bashfully fidgets with her apron until Joe finally convinces her. Smiling sheepishly, Petunia begins to sing:

Here I go again.  
I'm hearing trumpets blow again.  
All a-glow again.  
Takin' a chance on love.  
Here I slide again.  
About to take that ride again.  
Starry eyed again.  
Takin' a chance on love.  
I thought the cards were a frame up  
That I never would try,  
But now I'm takin' the game up  
And the ace of hearts is high.  
Things are mending now.  
I see a rainbow blending now.  
We'll have our happy ending now.  
Takin' a chance on love.

As Smith explains, the lyrics of “Taking a Chance on Love” demonstrate a significant deviation from the mammy caricature. Petunia’s “use of a gambling metaphor to articulate what is a very secular notion of romantic love (one based more upon the forces of chance and good luck rather than upon divine ordination)” suggests “an impulse on her

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

part to break free from the restrictions of her role as the ‘good Christian black woman’ within the narrative.”<sup>124</sup> Furthermore, her use of vocal improvisation and scat singing signal a release from the stereotypical limitations of her role.<sup>125</sup> The scene culminates with Petunia unleashing a guttural vocal growl, accompanied by unrestrained dancing. Though the outburst lasts only a moment, it reveals an expressive boldness previously absent from Petunia’s personality.

Further deviation from the mammy caricature occurs in the film’s culminating extravaganza, the scene at Jim Henry’s Paradise, in which Petunia appears as a no-nonsense vixen—sassy, sexy, independent, and intent on teaching Joe a lesson:

Petunia: I’m sending my lawyer round to see you, and he better find you in.  
Joe: What for?  
P: Money. What you think? And if you ain’t saved my half, Brother, start sprouting wings.  
J: What’s wings?  
P: That’s one way of getting out of jail. I know all about that sweepstake money, and I’m solid collecting my half, cash on the line.  
J: Well, I don’t know if I got that much left, Petunia.  
P: No? Then you’re just in the correct suit to be laid out in.

A moment after this dialogue, she offers to buy Domino Johnson (the man who shot Little Joe at the beginning of the film) a drink and, wearing a sexy, form-fitting sequined gown, performs a rendition of Georgia Brown’s seductive song “Honey in the Honeycomb”:

Oh, there’s honey in the honeycomb.  
There’s nectar in the peach.  
There’s candy in a coconut shell,  
And mussels on every beach.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 34. Smith discusses Waters’ diction along with her melodic improvisation and scatting.

Oh, there's money in the savings bank  
And I person'ly guarantee,  
If there's honey in the honeycomb then, baby,  
Look out! 'Cause oh, there's love in me.  
Oh, there's honey in the honeycomb and baby,  
There's love—love—Baby, there is love in me. Yeah!

The number's suggestive lyrics are heightened by Waters' elongation of voiced consonants, breathy delivery of "h-honey," and coquettish inflections on "Baby, look out! 'Cause *oh*, there's love in me." Moreover, the sexual innuendos are reinforced by her flirtatious advances toward Domino, along with her sultry strut and hip-shaking dance. In "Honey in the Honeycomb," Waters strays so far from the mammy caricature that Petunia is hardly in sight. However, the digression does not last long, for Petunia—feeling threatened when Domino reciprocates her advances—calls out to Joe for help and returns to her former role as devout wife and Christian. In spite of this, her nightclub persona makes an enduring impression and influences viewers' impression of Petunia's true nature.

Upon viewing *Cabin in the Sky* for the first time, spectators do not realize that the majority of the film takes place in Joe's imagination until the movie's final scene, because the distinction between "real" and dream episodes is concealed in earlier segments. Thus, while some viewers may wait until the end to draw conclusions, others may attempt to understand Petunia's inconsistent behavior mid-film. In the former case, viewers may construct tailor-made conceptions of Petunia (after the film's conclusion) that incorporate as many or as few of the character's progressive tendencies as they see fit. In the latter case, viewers are forced to confront glaring contradictions in Petunia's personality and behavior that raise the question, "What is genuine and what is feigned?"

Since the cabin and nightclub scenes end with Petunia returning to the mammy role, it seems reasonable to infer that Petunia truly is a pious Christian and devout wife. However, her alternative persona is conveyed so convincingly that spectators would be hard-pressed to accept the depiction as mere acting on the part of Petunia, and without explanation, they are forced to conclude that her naivety and Christian goodness are feigned. Thus, viewers are left with discrepancies that cannot easily be explained within the confines of the narrative. What emerges is an alternative interpretation of the musical scenes that departs from the world of Petunia and Little Joe, and enters the sphere of Ethel Waters, the performer.

## CHAPTER 4 TRANSFORMATIVE PERFORMANCE

### ETHEL WATERS TAKES CENTER STAGE

Ethel Waters was born in 1896 in Chester, Pennsylvania to Louise Anderson, a twelve-year-old rape victim who never fully accepted the role of mother to her illegitimate child.<sup>126</sup> She was raised instead by her grandmother, Sally Anderson, a strict and religious woman who single-handedly reared five children, in addition to working six days a week as a housekeeper for a white family, with whom she lived. Owing to the Anderson family's poverty and Waters' lack of supervision, she grew up in rough neighborhoods and learned harsh realities at a young age. In her autobiography, she states:

I just ran wild as a little girl. I was bad, always a leader of the street gang in stealing and general hell-raising. By the time I was seven I knew all about sex and life in the raw. I could outcurse any stevedore and took a sadistic pleasure in shocking people.<sup>127</sup>

Waters learned early how to expertly steal food and alert the neighborhood prostitutes when police were in the area, but she also acquired knowledge that ultimately kept her out of trouble. When one of her relatives died as a teenager after succumbing to syphilis and cocaine addiction, Waters was deterred from engaging in drug use. In addition, her

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<sup>126</sup> In Waters' first autobiography *His Eye Is On the Sparrow*, she claimed that her date of birth was 31 October 1900. However, in her second autobiography *To Me It's Wonderful*, she admitted that she was in fact born in 1896. Scholars have accepted 1896 as her actual year of birth.

<sup>127</sup> Ethel Waters with Charles Samuels, *His Eye is On the Sparrow* (New York: Pyramid Books, 1950), 1.



aunts' alcoholism and promiscuous lifestyles impelled her to rigorously avoid sex as a young woman and alcohol throughout the rest of her life.

Although Waters endured hardship as a child, she also had experiences that proved critical to her later success as an entertainer. Her relationship with music and dancing was established early on because her family and neighbors were frequently engaged in song. As Waters put it, "Singing and dancing were nothing among us colored people. They came natural as breathing."<sup>128</sup> At the age of eight, she began attending vaudeville shows on South Street in Philadelphia. She enjoyed them so much that she would stay until the manager kicked her out, then travel home to imitate what she had seen and heard. At the age of eleven, she started performing at a local dance hall, where she won many dancing contests and learned to shimmy and shake. As a teenager, she honed her performing talent by practicing in the hotel rooms that she cleaned as a chambermaid:

I'd lock the door, stand in front of the full-length mirror, and transform myself into Ethel Waters, the great actress. I played all sorts of roles and also the audience, mugging and acting like mad.... When I'd finish portraying all the roles I'd seen played by Negro stock companies, I'd imitate the acts I'd seen at the Standard Theatre in Philadelphia.... Sometimes I'd be so carried away by my own magnificent performance that I'd forget where I was and what I was doing.<sup>129</sup>

Waters' first big break happened in 1917 when, encouraged by friends, she entered a talent contest at a local tavern called Jack's Rathskeller and was discovered by two black vaudeville performers, Braxton and Nugent, who offered her ten dollars a week to join their tour. As part of their show, Ethel became the first woman ever to sing the

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 67-68. Also quoted from a newspaper interview in Susannah McCorkle, "The Mother of Us All," *American Heritage* 45, no. 1 (Feb-March, 1994): 60-62, 64, 66-73.

famous standard “St. Louis Blues,” and she originated a style of blues singing that was clear and soft, in contrast to the robust voices of other blues giants, such as Bessie Smith. Billed as Sweet Mama Stringbean, Waters continued on the vaudeville circuit, eventually appearing on the same bill as the legendary Bessie.

Waters’ New York career began with a stock show at the Lincoln Theatre in Harlem, which was promoted by actor-producer Joe Bright. After the production, Waters stayed in the Big Apple and began working at Edmond’s Cellar, a nightclub at 132<sup>nd</sup> Street and Fifth. It was there that she learned she could characterize and act out popular ballads such as “Dear Old Pal of Mine,” “My Buddy,” “Rose of Washington Square,” and “A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody,” just as she did with her blues songs. As her reputation grew, Waters found work in a Sunday-night show at the Lafayette Theatre and went on tour with the blackface comedy *Hello, 1919!* She returned to Edmond’s Cellar, however, where she was approached by a talent scout for Black Swan records. In 1921, she made her first hit record, which included the songs “Down Home Blues” and “Oh, Daddy.” During the first few months after its release, the recording sold over 100,000 copies.<sup>130</sup> Waters subsequently went on tour with Fletcher Henderson’s Black Swan Jazz Masters from October 1921 to July 1922 to promote the record. One of the tour highlights was an April 1922 live concert broadcast to five states as well as Mexico, which made Waters the first black woman to sing on radio in the United States.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> David Davis and Ivo De Loo, “Black Swan Records, 1921 to 1924: From a Swanky Swan to a Dead Duck,” BNET (Nov. 2003), accessed on 6 July 2008, available at [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3933/is\\_200311/ai\\_n9326347/pg\\_1?tag=art](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3933/is_200311/ai_n9326347/pg_1?tag=art) Body; internet.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

Owing to the success of her *Black Swan* album, Waters was in high demand and her salary increased to \$500 per week when she joined forces with pianist Pearl Wright to tour the country. Shortly after, the Harlem entertainer Earl Dancer convinced Waters to try the “white time.” Convinced that she would flop, Waters went onstage in front of a white audience anyway. She was met with great acclaim and hailed by white critics as “the greatest artist of her race and generation.”<sup>132</sup> This was followed in 1924 by another milestone in her career. Taking the place of legendary performer Florence Mills at the Plantation Club revue in Manhattan, Waters made a splash with her version of “Dinah,” the first international hit song ever to emerge from an American nightclub.

Waters continued to appear in clubs and stage shows, including *Miss Calico* and *Africana* (her first Broadway musical), and in 1929 she performed two musical numbers in the Warner Brothers’ film *On With the Show*. The next major breakthrough in her professional life occurred when songwriter Irving Berlin heard her perform “Stormy Weather.” Impressed by her somber and heartfelt rendition, he asked her to make a dramatic appearance in his show *As Thousands Cheer* (1933), singing the song “Supper Time,” a heart-wrenching dirge about a black woman who prepares dinner for her husband, who has been lynched. Drawing upon her real life experiences in Macon, Georgia with the family of a lynched boy, Waters delivered a performance that stopped the show. At the same time, she became the first African American to star in a sponsored coast-to-coast radio show, accompanied by the Jimmy Dorsey orchestra. A few months later, she became the highest-paid female performer on Broadway (bringing in up to

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<sup>132</sup> Susannah McCorkle, “The Mother of Us All.”

\$4000 a week), and when *As Thousands Cheer* went on tour, she was the first black to be given equal billing with white stars south of the Mason Dixon line.

Waters next big show was the Schubert's 1935 musical revue *At Home Abroad*, which was a geographical revue that featured numbers set in Europe, Africa, Japan, and the West Indies. It marked her first work with director Vincente Minnelli, and although it was successful, it paled in comparison to her show of 1939, *Mamba's Daughters*.

Waters wrote in her autobiography that the opening night of *Mamba's Daughters* was "the most thrilling and important experience of my life as a performer. And my whole life, too, except for when I found God."<sup>133</sup> The role of Hagar was Waters' chance to tell the story of her mother—her sorrow, harsh circumstance, and stubborn perseverance. Consequently, she embraced the opportunity and gave the performance of her life. She took seventeen curtain calls on the show's opening night and became the first black actress to star on Broadway in a dramatic play.

In addition to Waters' illustrious stage career in the years preceding *Cabin in the Sky*, she also produced numerous recordings with jazz greats including Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, James P. Johnson, Benny Goodman, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Jack Teagarden, Gene Krupa, Joe Venuti, Eddie Lang, and Fats Waller, among others. In 1933, the Popular Song Association presented her with an award for having introduced fifty songs that became hits. By 1943, she was a megastar in the recording industry, the vaudeville circuit, Broadway, film, Harlem nightclubs, and radio. As one of the most successful black performers, she was a pioneer in the entertainment industry and worked

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<sup>133</sup> Waters, 246.

her way into the consciousness of American pop culture. The cabaret singer and pianist Bobby Short shared his first impression of Waters when he saw and met her at the RKO Palace Theater in Chicago as a child:

She was the greatest black performer I have ever seen.... I saw her from a distance, and I was awestruck. She was every bit the star in her demeanor, carriage, and performance. You really knew you had met somebody. And God knows where it all came from.<sup>134</sup>

While it would be a stretch to suggest that *all* viewers of *Cabin in the Sky* were familiar with Waters' illustrious and multifaceted career, it is safe to assume that a large number of them had come across her work at some point, and, as evident in Bobby Short's vivid recollection, it was highly unlikely that they would forget her irresistible charm or show-stopping talent.

#### FROM CABIN TO CLUB: "TAKING A CHANCE ON LOVE"

The first time that Ethel Waters enters the film's narrative as herself, rather than as Petunia, is the cabin scene in which she performs "Taking a Chance on Love." It is a transformative episode, during which the rustic cabin evolves from a humble dwelling into a venue for sophisticated entertainment. In his book *Manly Arts: Masculinity and Nation in Early American Cinema*, David Gerstner also notes the metamorphosis and compares the modest abode to "a Minnellian stage on which [Waters] has before performed on Broadway."<sup>135</sup> The accompanying tap routine of Bill Bailey and comical

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<sup>134</sup> Quoted in McCorkle.

<sup>135</sup> David Gerstner, "The Queer Frontier: Vincente Minnelli's *Cabin in the Sky*," in *Manly Arts: Masculinity and Nation in Early American Cinema* (London: Duke University Press, 2006), 205. Gerstner suggests the transformation, but does not explain how it is accomplished.

dancing of Eddie “Rochester” Anderson certainly reinforce such a reading, and the metaphor could be extended further to include the New York City nightclubs in which entertainment of this nature was also frequently presented, often with Waters center stage. The scene’s three featured performers are largely responsible for enacting such a transformation onscreen, but equally important is the musical backdrop that supports and frames them.

Based upon the original music by Vernon Duke, the score was orchestrated by George Bassman and performed by Duke Ellington and his Orchestra.<sup>136</sup> It begins by evoking the quiet rural setting of the film’s Southern locale, but as the performance progresses, the music becomes increasingly syncopated, percussive, and improvisatory. Thus, it comes to exemplify the Big Band jazz of *real* New York nightclubs where Ellington and his Orchestra appeared during the early 1940s, and consequently, Petunia—appearing conspicuously out-of-place amidst such a sophisticated soundscape—is replaced by a more appropriate lead singer, Ethel Waters.

The introduction to “Taking a Chance on Love” sets the stage for an intimate, folk performance in a pastoral setting through its use of guitar, humming, and whistling. Waters adopts a cheerful and modest disposition. Her singing tone is clear and youthful, and her delivery of the text is nuanced, playful, and affectionate. Both her demeanor and

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<sup>136</sup> Before working for MGM, Bassman had been an arranger for Fletcher Henderson in New York and subsequently became part of the Big Band scene there. In the early 1930s, his song “I’m Getting Sentimental Over You” (words by Ned Washington) became a hit for the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra. Duke Ellington had been playing in Broadway and Harlem nightclubs since the 1920s (Hollywood Club, Kentucky Club, Cotton Club, to name a few), and this continued throughout the next two decades, during which period he also appeared in film, went on international tours, and made hundreds of recordings.

vocal timbre are characteristic of her role as Petunia, the modest and good-natured mammy.

The first two verses of the song also remain comfortably within the realm of Petunia and Joe's simple and idyllic life. Waters continues to sing the melody sweetly, with little variation, save her expressive diction. Anderson inaudibly strums his guitar, and Bailey remains firmly in place, pretending to play some type of aerophone. The instrumental music, though scored for big band, remains relatively inconspicuous as a musical accompaniment to Waters' singing. Interestingly, in addition to being unobtrusive, the instrumental portion in these two verses retains clear ties to the musical's original orchestration of 1940. Brass and reeds make interjections primarily at phrase endings, and the piano provides harmony, a steady quarter-note pulse, occasional melodic doubling, bass register lead-ins, and punctuating gestures at phrase endings. In addition, expressive string gestures mimic the vocal line and contribute dynamic contour. The musical atmosphere is still rather mild, and not nearly as complex or expressive as what is to come.

The transformation begins with the opening of verse three. As Bailey starts to tap dance, the camera zooms out to capture his large arm and leg gestures and his movement across the cabin's kitchen. The theatrical nature of Bailey's performance, along with the wider camera angle, suggest that the cabin represents a stage, and the music reinforces this impression. From its very first measure, the instrumental arrangement of verse three demonstrates a striking contrast with the preceding music through punchy, staccato articulations in the wind and brass sections. Waters exchanges the original melody for a

more syncopated, improvisatory delivery, which contributes to a lively rhythmic counterpoint, and matches the greater syncopation and swing of the increasingly prominent brass and winds. The metamorphosis is completed in Anderson and Waters' performances during the song's last section.

The final verse is the culmination of the progression from rural cabin to sophisticated jazz nightclub or Broadway stage. As Anderson begins an entertaining dance solo—thereby leaving behind his submissive, child-like role as Joe—Waters completely abandons lyrics and melody, adopting an improvisatory style of scat-singing instead. Although the entire scene is shot within the confines of Joe and Petunia's kitchen, the highly syncopated and percussive big band arrangement foreshadows the later scene at Jim Henry's Paradise and aurally transforms the setting to one in which Waters performs as lead singer of The Duke Ellington Orchestra. The performance peaks when she abandons all sense of inhibition, letting out an impassioned vocal growl and dancing vigorously.

The performances during the final verse are so far removed from the setting and scenario of the film's narrative that the spectator is forced to confront an incongruous juxtaposition. The cabin scenery and title characters remain in view. However, their expressive singing and dancing—which is elevated by the musical accompaniment—challenge previously established ideas regarding their personalities and capabilities, and show refinement well beyond that of the story's simple characters. Thus, although Petunia began the performance, the context that frames her makes her presence seem increasingly out of place, and this conflict elicits associations with Waters' stage career in



musical theater and jazz nightclubs, associations that are emphatically reinforced by the aural backdrop of Ellington and his Orchestra. The later scene at Jim Henry's Paradise provides further support for such a reading since in it, she fulfills the role of nightclub entertainer, even performing a dance routine and singing a sultry solo, two acts that seem more appropriate to Sweet Mama Stringbean, Waters' early stage persona, than to the middle-aged Petunia.<sup>137</sup> This scene's evocation of Waters' professional life has important implications concerning the film's racial stereotyping.

If spectators recognize Ethel Waters, the performer, instead of Petunia, the Christian mammy, during the "Taking a Chance" number, then the suspension of disbelief that allows them to emotionally invest in the characters and scenario is destroyed. The act of performing becomes transparent, and consequently, the characters and narrative are exposed as mere fiction. Thus the film reveals that its racial caricatures have no relevance outside of the cinematic sphere. In addition, Waters' appearance as herself highlights a striking contrast between her stage persona and the role of Petunia. In Waters' real life, she was known as a savvy world-class entertainer who appeared in top theaters and clubs, alongside seasoned performers. As a blues singer, she sang about life's trials and tribulations, relationships, and even sex ("My Handyman," for example). Thus, the role she plays in the dream episode of the film, both in "Taking a Chance" and in the scene at Jim Henry's Paradise, is closer to her real-life image than to the housewife

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<sup>137</sup> Women of Ethel Waters' age (forty-six) and size were not cast as sexy songstresses. In the scene at Jim Henry's, I believe that Waters performance elicits associations with her earlier career as Sweet Mama Stringbean, when she was slim and would frequently shimmy and shake on stage. Adam Knee also suggests this in "Doubling, Music, and Race in *Cabin in the Sky*," in *Representing Jazz*, ed. by Krin Gabbard (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 202.

of the film's opening narrative.<sup>138</sup> In the film's subtext then, the relationship between reality and fantasy is reversed. The dream episode emerges as more *real* than the movie's supposed "real" narrative, further exposing the mythology of the movie's caricatures and scenario.

Waters' appearance as herself does even more than expose the artifice of the production, though. It beckons an open and perceptive audience to look beyond her stage persona to see the actress underneath. When spectators are alerted to the fact that Waters is *performing* the role of Petunia, they also notice how well she plays the part. She captivates viewers as a devoted wife, praying frantically for the recovery of her husband; as the street smart, no-nonsense woman who fools two gamblers in the garden; and as the sexy, razor-tongued vixen at Jim Henry's Paradise. When spectators watch Waters, they are invited to see more than just a stereotype or stage persona. They are offered an opportunity to recognize her talent, intelligence, boldness, and sophistication, and to acknowledge that underneath her many facades is a complicated human being who understands the many facets of Petunia's character because they exist in her as well. If viewers are left with this impression, then the film's final scene bears far less importance in determining whether the movie's representation of blacks is conservative or progressive because Waters has already conveyed a more modern image of African-American women than Petunia could ever have aspired to. Thus *Cabin in the Sky*, by including Ethel Waters in its narrative, ultimately succeeds in exposing the film's characters as fictional, and presents an alternative to the mythical stereotypes through

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<sup>138</sup> Though I talk about her "real-life" image, I am not suggesting that her stage persona was indicative of her personality off stage. I hope to indicate, rather, how most people *perceived* her.

Waters herself, whose transparent performance allows viewers to construct an image of female blackness that moves beyond racial caricatures.

## CONCLUSION

As demonstrated in the preceding discussion, *Cabin in the Sky* alludes to a number of discourses concerning race in America that were reflected in politics, literature, and popular arts and entertainment in the years surrounding its creation. The movie's themes, characters, and scenario seem to suggest a reductive and historically conservative representation of black culture, and this is undoubtedly why Hollywood executives felt it was a relatively "safe" all-black picture to invest in. However, a close analysis of the film reveals its insincere approach to religion, as well as its subversive treatment of the rural/urban opposition and its moral implications. In addition, the extravagance and sophistication of the film's "Taking a Chance" number and nightclub scene expose the act of performance, thereby disrupting viewers' suspension of disbelief and rendering the scenario and characters as mere fiction. Consequently, the only "authentic" image that remains is that of Ethel Waters as actress and entertainer. Waters offered a dignified, even *glorified*, image of blackness to audiences of the 1940s, and while it may not have been obvious to everyone, to those who were familiar with her career, it was undoubtedly more flattering and progressive than the racial caricatures that audiences were accustomed to seeing. Thus *Cabin in the Sky* reflects a critical moment of transition in black cinema, and in spite of its traditional exterior, its subversive subtext constitutes an important step toward more liberal representations of blacks in American popular culture.

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