

KILLING “DIXIE”: THE NAACP, THE BLACK PRESS AND THE BATTLE TO END BLACK CARICATURE CULTURE IN HOLLYWOOD, 1950-1968

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ABSTRACT: During the early twentieth century, Hollywood’s television and film industries created its depictions of African Americans. Many of the images were derived from “Dixie,” a term used to reference the antebellum American South, during a time when African Americans were enslaved. This article examines the account, given by the African American Press, of the ongoing dispute over black imagery between Hollywood and the NAACP. The heightened voice of the African American Press ultimately helped to push for the infusing of black presence in popular culture with the goal of depicting the possibilities of an integrated American society. The NAACP and the African American Press emerged as the leading voices in challenging Hollywood’s black caricature culture, after recognizing that harmful black representation was injurious to the burgeoning civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century.

KEYWORDS: *Black Caricatures, Black Press, Hollywood, NAACP, and Walter White*

I. INTRODUCTION

During the early twentieth century, Hollywood spawned its depictions of African Americans. Many of the images of African Americans in television and film, were derived from “Dixie,” a term used to reference the antebellum American South, during a time when African Americans were enslaved.¹ The highly offensive caricatures of “Dixie,” which showed African Americans as subservient and unintelligent, became standard in many Hollywood productions. These representations ultimately helped to perpetuate racism in a manner that was considered acceptable in mainstream America and helped to solidify the perception that African Americans were meant to live lives of servitude and submission.

Although demeaning black images were Hollywood norms, members of the African American community refused to accept these images. These objections culminated in the form of protest, causing many of the negative black Hollywood images to die a natural death. The death of these racist figures would not come easy but the desire to destroy them would become relentless and Black Media coverage of this desire would be constant and forthcoming. Several factors led to the demise of Hollywood’s inaccurate summation of black culture. Some of these factors included pressure from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), continuous attacks from the Black Press and the civil rights initiatives taken by many of Hollywood’s African American actors. The illumination of the NAACP’s campaign against Hollywood, by the Black Press, helped to expose the reasons for this crusade, namely the removal of derogatory black images from the American psyche.

Fixated with slavery and the Civil War era, many of the earliest Hollywood films produced degrading black characters that attempted to interpret black life for mass consumption.² Putting forth negative black imagery in an already racially polarized nation did nothing to move the country toward racial equality. For white America, racist black caricatures defined what it meant to be black, even though in most instances the writers, producers and directors of these scripts were white Americans as well.³ Black culture was being constructed by

¹ Hans Nathan and Daniel Decatur Emmett, “Dixie,” *The Musical Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1949), 61.

² Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, Fourth Edition (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001), 27.

³ Ibid.

Hollywood in an attempt to pacify mainstream culture, with the goal of not challenging the status quo. Racist black caricatures helped to sustain Hollywood's love affair with "Dixie" and the culture of the Old South.

According to historian and Hollywood expert Donald Bogle in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, the problem that haunted African American actors for the first half of the twentieth century was the country's fixation with *blackface* or what mainstream America perceived black culture to be. Bogle argues that by having black actors portray a flawed depiction of black reality, the actors themselves became a black man or woman in blackface.⁴ Bogle's work reveals how depictions of African Americans in television and film have evolved over time. This study seeks to emphasize that this evolution was not voluntary on the part of Hollywood, but was instead a forced evolution, largely resulting from the NAACP's campaign against negative representations of blacks in television and film and the airing of grievances by the African American Press.

In *Art for Equality: The NAACP's Cultural Campaign for Civil Rights*, Jenny Woodley highlights the NAACP's cultural campaigns against the negative images of African Americans in television and film. Woodley asserts that the NAACP feared the effects that the portrayal of race in the film would have on white Americans' attitude toward African Americans and also worried that Hollywood films would reinforce every negative stereotype that whites had about blacks.⁵ Woodley demonstrates how the NAACP used its publication, *The Crisis*, to fight against Hollywood's injurious depictions of African Americans. This study will illustrate how other black publications, outside of the NAACP, joined in the battle against Hollywood over positive black representation in media.

In *The African American Press: A History of News Coverage During National Crises*, Charles A. Simmons explores the role of the African American Press in the fight for civil rights. Simmons asserts that historically the black press has occupied two significant roles: 1) the "fighting press," which championed causes designed to bring forth equality and 2) conveyor of black community news, which sought to report on topics related to black America.⁶ Simmons stresses that these two roles helped to expose the realities of the disparate treatment of African Americans in all aspects of life. This study will demonstrate how both roles allowed the African American Press to impress upon America the need for change in black representation in Hollywood, not just through its reporting, but as an active participant in the battle over negative black imagery.

While the NAACP's role in dismantling Jim Crow through the legal system is often celebrated, the organization's role in dismantling Hollywood's black caricature culture is often underestimated. Similarly, the role of the African American Press in the black freedom struggle has been heavily examined. However, the involvement of the Black Press in destroying Hollywood's affinity for black characters, inspired by the antebellum American South, has not received adequate historiographical attention. As a result of the inexorable efforts of these two entities, black caricatures soon came under heavy attack and Hollywood would no longer be able to sustain its manufactured versions of African Americans. A movement was emerging and about to explode and this movement desired to claim Hollywood's offensive depictions of black life as some of its casualties. Yet, this battle over African American representation in the media would not occur behind closed doors, but would instead be exposed for the entire world to see.

II. ORIGINS, BLACK CARICATURES: MYTHS PERSONIFIED

During the years of Hollywood's earliest motion pictures, unflattering and highly offensive stereotypical images of African Americans emerged. These offensive characters could be classified into five major categories: Mammy, Tragic Mulatto, Uncle Tom, Coon and Buck.⁷ Each of these caricatures awakened discontent for most African Americans and a false sense of reality in the minds of white Americans. As a result of these ingrained perceptions, black characters in film and television surfaced with attributes that attempted to perpetuate myths regarding African Americans.

The black female caricature of Mammy originated from the era of slavery in the American South and was an unmistakable byproduct of "Dixie" culture. Even though Mammy did not truthfully depict much about the realities of black womanhood, she was sometimes accepted as a black cultural standard. Mammy was depicted as an overweight, dark-skinned, desexualized black woman who had a maternal nature and was unthreatening to white people and the people that she served. The Mammy caricature first appeared in films

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jenny Woodley, *Art for Equality: The NAACP's Cultural Campaign for Civil Rights* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2014), 6.

⁶ Charles A. Simmons, *The African American Press: A History of News Coverage During National Crises*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2005), 91.

⁷ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 4.

around 1914.⁸ Images of Mammy sought to solidify the persona of the faithful and dependable black servant, which existed in the American memory as a result of the era of slavery.⁹

The 1934 classic film, *Imitation of Life*, depicted another negative African American caricature, the Tragic Mulatto. The Tragic Mulatto was often represented as a depressed, suicidal individual who struggled with black identity, self-hatred and the woes of being the product of an interracial relationship. The Tragic Mulatto also despised his or her own “blackness” and the expression of self-hatred often manifested itself in the form of “passing” as white. A film, like *Imitation of Life*, that produced a black character masquerading as white implies that whiteness is more desirable and that “blackness” is undesirable and inferior.¹⁰

Another problematic African American caricature present in television and film, helping to keep “Dixie” alive, was that of Uncle Tom. The character of Uncle Tom derived from the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe intended for the character of Uncle Tom to be viewed as admirable and highly regarded. In the book, Uncle Tom stood firm in his beliefs, used passive resistance against his oppressors and was a God-fearing Christian.¹¹ Additionally, Uncle Tom was not a pushover nor was he content with his position in society as a servant. However, Uncle Tom took on a different form in the realm of television and film. The caricature of Uncle Tom in film and television showed the loyal and happily submissive servant and was often the male counterpart to the Mammy caricature. The Uncle Tom character was depicted as a happy, jovial, dark-skinned, desexualized, older black man who enjoyed serving his white master or employer. Like Uncle Tom and Mammy, the Coon caricature was birthed out of American slavery and the minstrel show tradition. The Coon caricature was represented in television and film as a lazy, unintelligent, and unreliable black figure with minimal skills. The character typically went out of his way to avoid hard work and usually spoke using exaggerated black dialect.

The 1915 film, *The Birth of a Nation*, provided several racially offensive representations, including the Buck caricature. The Buck caricature attempted to paint black males as muscular, savage, violent, animalistic and infatuated with and sexually attracted to white women.¹² In *The Birth of a Nation*, the Buck was embodied in the characters of Gus and Silas Lynch, menacing former slaves, played by white male actors in blackface.¹³ Throughout the film, these black male characters pursued white female characters, giving audiences the impression that they intended to kidnap and rape them. The Ku Klux Klan emerged as heroes in the film, successfully rescuing white females from the threatening black male characters.¹⁴ The Buck caricature vilified black men and promoted the perception of the African American male as a sexual predator.

III. THE NAACP AND THE BLACK PRESS ATTACK!

In the United States, the 1950s marked the beginning of the burgeoning classic phase of the modern civil rights movement. This movement sought to challenge the disparate treatment of African Americans in all arenas. Some of the major events of this time period included the brutal murder of a 14-year-old African American boy named Emmett Till; Rosa Parks’ act of insubordination on a segregated bus in 1955, which led to the Montgomery bus boycott; the Little Rock Nine and their integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957; the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957; and the emergence of Martin Luther King, Jr. as a national civil rights leader.¹⁵ The continued denial of basic civil rights caused disappointment and indignation to fester throughout the African American community.

As a result of this tension and anger felt by African Americans, the NAACP and the Black Press emerged as leading voices in championing the cause for black civil rights. The NAACP was founded in 1909 to ensure that the civil rights afforded to African Americans, by virtue of the U.S. Constitution, were not being impeded. The NAACP felt it necessary to not only combat *Jim Crow* and other forms of institutional racism, but also the negative images of blacks put forth through advertising, film and television.¹⁶

⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁹ Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 4.

¹⁰ Ibid., 126.

¹¹ “About Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” *Harriet Beecher Stow Center*, 2015, <https://www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org/utc/> (accessed February 1, 2015).

¹² Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 12.

¹³ Stephanie Laufs, *Fighting a Movie with Lightning: “The Birth of a Nation” and the Black Community* (Hamburg: Anchor Academic Publishing, 2013), 56.

¹⁴ Laufs, *Fighting a Movie with Lightning*, 57.

¹⁵ Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality* (New York: Hill & Wang Publishers, 2008), 55.

¹⁶ Walter White, Letter to Dorothy Parker, February 2, 1942, NAACP Papers, Group II, Series A, General Office File.

The Black Press sought to inform the public of the NAACP's initiatives in Hollywood by providing constant coverage of the happenings related to the fight for better roles. For example, the *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper was noted for their stories relating to the NAACP's battles with Hollywood. Under the headline, "Film Studios Pledge Dignified Negro Roles," the paper reported that the Hollywood studios had agreed to work with the NAACP to create more positive roles for blacks.¹⁷ Baltimore's *Afro-American* newspaper also inserted itself into the debate by hosting a roundtable with several African American actors and the NAACP regarding the treatment of black actors and the stereotypical roles existing in Hollywood.¹⁸ During the roundtable, which was held at the home of actor Ben Carter, the newspaper focused the discussion on the offensive black caricature of Uncle Tom.¹⁹ These stories were designed to provide readers with a ringside seat to the escalating tensions between Hollywood and the NAACP. Both the NAACP and the African American Press took an active role in helping to dismantle black caricature culture.

Walter F. White, who served as the Executive Secretary of the NAACP from 1931-1955, was one of the organization's most vocal combatants of negative black imagery in Hollywood.²⁰ White, a blond-haired, blue-eyed African American man, joined the organization to effectuate change in America's existing policies toward race.²¹ He turned his attention to Hollywood because he believed that the NAACP could assist in revolutionizing Hollywood's depiction of African Americans and aid in opening industry opportunities to them as well.²² Walter White and the NAACP were not opposed to African American actors playing servant roles, but took issue with Hollywood refusing to see African Americans as anything else. White's dream later came to fruition in the form of the NAACP Hollywood Bureau. News of the Hollywood Bureau first broke in *The Afro-American* newspaper. The newspaper reported that the NAACP planned to set up its first full-time Hollywood Bureau to step up pressure for wider job-opportunities for black artists and a "more truthful" portrayal of black citizens in the mass media.²³



Figure 1. Executive Secretary Walter White of the NAACP in 1942 (Public Domain/Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.).²⁴

¹⁷ Herman Hill, "Film Studios Pledge Dignified Negro Roles," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 15, 1944.

¹⁸ Brando Simeo Starkey, *In Defense of Uncle Tom: Why Blacks Must Police Racial Loyalty* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 139.

¹⁹ Ida Peters, "Clarence Muse, 89, Actor 50 years founded Lafayette Players, made 219 Films," *Afro-American*, October 13, 1979.

²⁰ Meagan E. Williams, "The Crisis Cover Girl: Lena Horne, the NAACP, and Representations of African American Femininity, 1941-1945," *American Periodicals: A Journal of History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 16, no. 2 (2006), 202.

²¹ Tom Dyja, *Walter White: The Dilemma of Black Identity in America* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publishing, 2008), 15.

²² Kenneth Robert Janken, *Walter White: Mr. NAACP, Mr. NAACP* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006), 266.

²³ "NAACP Plans New Hollywood Branch Bureau," *Afro-American*, July 26, 1966.

²⁴ Gordon Parks, *Walter Francis White of the NAACP, 1942, Library of Congress*, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1998023661/PP/> (accessed March 9, 2015).

The NAACP also focused its sights on television and organized formal protests against ABC's *Beulah* and CBS's *Amos 'n' Andy*. After the first episode of *Beulah* aired, the NAACP expressed its grievances with the show instantaneously. The NAACP argued that the show was unprogressive in its depiction of African American women and its representation of the old negative black caricatures from the early days of film. The character of *Beulah* represented for the NAACP, the Mammy caricature that had been a perpetual fixture in Hollywood films where African Americans were cast. They argued that the comedic and naïve nature of the black characters worked against positive imagery of African Americans and that *this* type of show would hinder the movement in the fight for African American civil rights.²⁵

While the NAACP took action to raise its voice in protest against *Beulah*, its attack on the *Amos 'n' Andy* show was more lethal and abrasive. Immediately after its debut, the NAACP sought to call for its cancellation.²⁶ As reported by the *Afro-American* newspaper, the NAACP had redoubled its drive to rid television of *Amos 'n' Andy*.²⁷ In this article Walter White was quoted as stating,

The fight against the 'Amos 'n' Andy' television show, which was launched at the NAACP's Atlanta convention is continuing with unabated strength and enthusiasm. Protests against this offensive show continue to go to television stations and the sponsors of the program.²⁸

Many of the actors involved with the show defended it by saying that it was just comedy and nothing more. They felt that the NAACP was taking the show too seriously and that having a large amount of African American actors working in Hollywood was something to be celebrated, not condemned. The NAACP, however, did not believe that negative representation of African Americans was better than no representation at all. They decided to push forward with the protest.

As a result of the pressure applied by the NAACP and its threat to boycott the sponsors of the *Amos 'n' Andy Show*, the show was cancelled by CBS in 1953. To the cast of *Amos 'n' Andy* it meant an end to a regular paycheck but to the NAACP it meant another notch on the stepladder, which elevated black pride and dignity.²⁹

Although *Amos 'n' Andy* had been cancelled once sponsors withdrew as a result of boycotts implemented by the NAACP, the show remained on the air in syndication for a number of years. In 1961, *Ebony* magazine published an article entitled, "The Tragedy of *Amos 'N' Andy*," which expressed the NAACP's dissatisfaction with having the show's presence on television at all and the organization's decision to raise its voice against the show again. The article read, "Their argument was simply that racial stereotypes were injurious to the image of the Negro community."³⁰ In 1961, the NAACP launched a major protest against the television and film industries' discriminatory hiring practices. As a result, a Congressional investigation was instituted.³¹ Additionally, the NAACP's national labor secretary, Herbert Hill, delivered an ultimatum to Hollywood and threatened to disqualify Hollywood's unions with the National Labor Relations Board.³²

Details regarding the NAACP's struggle with Hollywood could also be found among the headlines of *Jet* magazine, another African American publication, on a weekly basis. During the civil rights movement, *Jet's* coverage of the NAACP's mission to take Hollywood to task for its black representations increased. For example, in August of 1961, *Jet* reported that the NAACP had announced a speed-up in its campaign for integration of blacks in major phases of movies and television.³³ *Jet* reported about NAACP Hollywood Chairman Maggie Hathaway's scheduled conferences with the studio producers.³⁴ In 1963, *Jet* also reported that seven Hollywood studios had pledged cooperation with the NAACP in improving the number and quality of roles offered to blacks.³⁵ The studios included were Warner Bros., Twentieth Century-Fox, Columbia, Revue, MGM, Disney and Paramount.³⁶

On May 29, 1965, the *Afro-American* reported that the NAACP had renewed its campaign for Hollywood roles for black actors.³⁷ In an attempt to play hardball, Acting Executive Director of the Los Angeles

²⁵ "NAACP Plans New Hollywood Branch Bureau," *Afro-American*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ "Drive On 'Amos 'n' Andy Redoubled," *The Afro American*, September 22, 1951.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Edward T. Clayton, "The Tragedy of *Amos 'N' Andy*," *Ebony*, October 1961.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ "NAACP Bulletin," *Amos 'n' Andy Old Time Radio Show*

<http://www.amosandandy.org/2012/09/naacp-bulletin.html> (accessed February 1, 2015).

³² *Ibid.*

³³ "Speed-Up Move to Help Negroes in Movies, TV," *Jet*, August 10, 1961.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ "Film Studios Pledge Job Increase for Negroes," *Jet* October 31, 1963.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ "NAACP Renews Campaign for Hollywood Jobs," *Afro-American*, May 29, 1965.

NAACP, Ike Adams, stated that a campaign for increased black employment in Hollywood would reopen.³⁸ Adams assured that the NAACP would not let up on its pressure until real equality was attained.³⁹ After much consideration, CBS decided to remove *Amos 'n' Andy* from the air for good in 1966 and many credited the NAACP for the show's disappearance from the airways.

The NAACP and the Black Press forced Hollywood to move with the changing times. As a result of the pressure applied to the television and film industries, the African American community and black actors would begin to see the fruits of their labor. The 1960s began to produce more progressive images of African Americans in Hollywood. Television and film depicted both working and middle-class images of African Americans and black entertainers were now present in the living rooms of mainstream white America. NAACP and Black Press demands helped to create film and television characters that evoked racial pride for African Americans at a level never seen before in this medium. It also produced more opportunities for African American actors to escape typecasting designed to ease the fears of an inevitably changing American society. African Americans' advances in Hollywood were joyfully reported in many black publications. For example, in its July 2, 1964 issue, *Jet* magazine revealed that an NAACP released survey showed that 82 roles for black actors were included within the last 35 films produced by Hollywood.⁴⁰ Progress was being made in the fight to end Dixie-based caricatures and the results were now tangible.

IV. POITIER PROGRESSIVISM

In *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era*, Thomas Cripps says of actor and director Sydney Poitier,

Poitier is the perennial hero we might liken to Gawain in the medieval legend: At first, he knows nothing of the nature of his quest but only that he must make it; only later does he come to understand that his object is the Holy Grail. And with Poitier as with Gawain it turns out that the stakes in the search are as much political as individual.⁴¹

To many, Poitier was not simply an amazing actor. He also represented the change that many civil rights organizations and activists had been lobbying for in Hollywood.⁴² Film opportunities garnered by Poitier enabled him to break away from the old negative black Hollywood caricatures that had been ingrained in American memory and to portray African American characters that possessed dignity and refinement at a level that many had not seen on film before. His presence on screen drastically shifted the racial paradigm for black actors in Hollywood films because he provided white audiences with a more accurate depiction of African Americans.⁴³ The progress that the NAACP and the Black Press had hoped for in Hollywood was now personified in Sydney Poitier. Poitier also made history by becoming the first African American to win an Academy Award for Best Actor for his performance in *Lilies of the Field* in 1963.⁴⁴

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ "Picture Brightens for Negro in Hollywood, TV," *Jet*, July 2, 1964.

⁴¹ Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 251.

⁴² Bill Goodykoontz, "Oscar Win Proved Sidney Poitier Was Second to None," *USA Today*, February 25, 2014.

⁴³ Margaret Perry, "Sidney Poitier and The Civil Rights Movement in Hollywood," *The Great Katharine Hepburn Blog Spot*, August 4, 2012.

⁴⁴ Aram Goudsouzian, *Sidney Poitier: Man, Actor, Icon* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 217.



Figure 2. Sidney Poitier (right) with Ruby Dee and Louis Gossett in *A Raisin in the Sun*. (Public Domain).

Through his work on-screen, Poitier proved that a black man could present himself with just as much dignity as a white man. In the April 1968 edition of *Ebony* magazine, the publication profiled Poitier's career and the groundbreaking impact of his career on black Hollywood.⁴⁵ His work as an actor also opened the door for many actors to come by showing mainstream America that the characters that he portrayed were possible. Additionally, Poitier's characters helped to illustrate the evolution of black imagery in film, which many credited to the power of the civil rights movement and the NAACP's ongoing clash with Hollywood's love for "Dixie."

V. TELEVISION BECOMES AN INTEGRATED WORLD, *I SPY* AND *STAR TREK*

Television would show evidence of the NAACP and the Black Press' mission to end Hollywood's allegiance to "Dixie" with the 1965 debut of the NBC television show, *I Spy*. The show ran from 1965 to 1968, starring Bill Cosby and Robert Culp as undercover agents, traveling the world as tennis players but working undercover for the Pentagon. As reported in the February 1969 edition of *Ebony* magazine, the show made history for being the first television drama with an African American in a leading role.⁴⁶ The show also made history by garnering three Emmy Awards for Cosby for Best Actor in a dramatic series. *I Spy* entered uncharted television territory by providing middle-class white America with a glimpse into the life of an African American who was not a servant. *The Afro-American* newspaper raved about the popularity of the show in its August 27, 1966 issue.⁴⁷

The thing that also made *I Spy* groundbreaking television was the fact that Alexander Scott, Bill Cosby's character, was not submissive or subservient to Kelly Robinson, the character of white actor Robert Culp. In fact, Alexander Scott was often depicted as the brain of the agent duo. In an interview regarding television and the civil rights movement, Dr. Aniko Bodroghkozy, Professor of Media Studies at the University of Virginia and the author of *Groove Tube: Sixties Television and the Youth Rebellion*, discussed the significance of *I Spy* and Cosby's character, Alexander Scott. She states,

Cosby's character can't just be a spy, though: he's a Rhodes scholar who speaks eleven languages and is clearly superior to everyone around him, except that his white buddy gets all the girls. *I Spy* gives us a color-blind, post-integrationist world where our two heroes can range around the world to Cold War hot spots and represent a black-and-white America that doesn't have anything to do with racism.⁴⁸

In 1966, a pivotal year in the civil rights movement, the science fiction television show *Star Trek* emerged in an attempt to, "boldly go where no man [had] gone before."⁴⁹ The show accomplished this mission by creating one of the first African American female characters on television in a non-stereotypical servant role.

⁴⁵ Charles L. Sanders, "Poitier: The Man Behind the Superstar," *Ebony*, April 1968.

⁴⁶ Louie Robinson, "TV Discovers Black Men," *Ebony*, February 1969.

⁴⁷ "Culp-Cosby 'I Spy' TV Series Renewed," *Afro-American*, August 27, 1966.

⁴⁸ Aniko Bodroghkozy, Interview by Henry Jenkins, September 26, 2012, *The Official Blog of Henry Jenkins*, <http://henryjenkins.org/2012/09/television-and-the-civil-rights-movement-an-interview-with-aniko-bodroghkozy-part-two.html> (accessed February 7, 2015).

⁴⁹ "Star Trek," *Star Trek Tagline (1966-1969)*, *IMDb* http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0060028/?ref_=ttqt_qt_tt (accessed March 1, 2015).

Lieutenant Nyota Uhura, played by African American Actress Nichelle Nichols, was the communications director for the Starship Enterprise for three seasons on the original *Star Trek* series. Additionally, Nichols broke ground as one of the first black actors to appear in a science fiction production.⁵⁰

Much like Bill Cosby's character in *I Spy*, the character of Uhura was depicted as equal to her white co-stars.⁵¹ She was portrayed with intelligence and dignity and was never subservient to any of the other characters. Additionally, the show made television history when Lieutenant Uhura and Captain James T. Kirk, played by white actor William Shatner, shared an on-screen kiss. This was the first black-white interracial kiss executed by fictional characters on American television.⁵²

VI. ENTER JULIA!

Another major achievement in television came in 1968 with the premier of NBC's sitcom, *Julia*. *Julia* became the first television show to star an African American woman in a non-stereotypical leading role.⁵³ The character of Julia was also a strong and intelligent middle-class black woman, something that had not been seen before on network television. Actress Diahann Carroll played the lead character of Julia. Carroll's character was a widow and single mother who worked as a nurse in a doctor's office. Her husband had been killed in the Vietnam War and she was raising her son on her own.⁵⁴

On the show, *Julia* was presented as a professional woman and even enjoyed romantic relationships with male suitors. In an interview with *Ebony* magazine, Diahann Carroll talked about the significance of showing African American relationships on television. She said, "I am always fascinated when a script includes love scenes and the difficulty of man-woman relationships between black people because normally we see so little of it in films."⁵⁵ Another factor that made *Julia* groundbreaking was the integrated cast.



Figure 3. Diahann Carroll as Julia Baker with young Marc Copage and Lloyd Nolan in the Hit Series *Julia*. (Public Domain).

Television producer and *Julia* show creator, Hal Kanter, was led to create *Julia* after hearing NAACP leader Roy Wilkins speak at a fundraiser in Hollywood in 1967 about the challenges facing African Americans and the importance of the civil rights movement. As a result, Kanter decided to use television and humor in support of civil rights.⁵⁶ While *Julia* met with some controversy over the fact that Julia's family was fatherless,

⁵⁰ Jason Motes, "Black History Month: Top 10 Black Characters in Sci-Fi," *Science Fiction*, 2012, <http://sciencefiction.com/2012/02/20/black-history-month-top-10-black-characters-in-sci-fi/> (accessed February 2, 2015).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ "Julia: Another Step in TV's Evolution," *Ebony*, November 1968.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

the show was still groundbreaking for its journey into new territories and for showcasing the lives of middle-class African Americans.

VII. OTHER INNOVATIVE TELEVISION SHOWS

As the 1960s progressed, having African American characters on major network television shows almost became standard. Several shows included lead black characters that were represented as equal in regard to their white co-stars. In 1969, ABC premiered the dramatic comedy, *Room 222*. The show depicted an American history class set in room 222 of Walt Whitman High School. History teacher Pete Dixon, portrayed by African American actor Lloyd Haynes, was the central character.⁵⁷ *Jet* magazine emphasized that this show was innovative because it not only depicted an African American educator in an integrated classroom, but it also showed an on-screen love interest between two African Americans in addition to an interracial friendship between Mr. Dixon and the school's principal.⁵⁸

Other major shows with central black characters were ABC's hit show, *Mob Squad*, featuring Clarence Williams, III as Detective Linc Hayes, *Peyton Place* also airing on ABC and CBS's *Mission Impossible* with actor Greg Morris as Impossible Mission Force (IMF) Agent and electronics genius, Barney Collier. *Ebony* magazine highlighted all of these shows and the black characters starring in them in its February 1969 issue. The common thread with all of these television shows was that the African American characters were seen on equal footing with the shows' other characters.⁵⁹ Reflective of the times, television sought to desegregate popular culture in an attempt to more accurately represent what was happening in America.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The early days of Hollywood were reflective of a flawed representation of African Americans, which exacerbated and perpetuated the racist perception of blacks in mainstream America. The roles played by African Americans in early television and film confirmed the entrenched American view that African Americans should only be viewed as servants or slaves and nothing more. In its attempt to hold on to the racist caricatures that were birthed out of American slavery and "Dixie" or the Old South, Hollywood initially confined African American actors to servant roles or stand-alone scenes that could later be edited out of the film for southern viewing pleasure. This injurious status quo, however, could not be maintained given the strength and power of the pressure applied by the NAACP and the activism through reporting, carried out by the African American Press.

As the images of the black caricatures of old Hollywood and "Dixie" culture began to fade away, new characters emerged giving a more diverse representation of the African American experience. The activism of the NAACP and the Black Press' coverage of Hollywood's forced evolution demonstrated and emphasized that the black experience was more than blacks serving whites. The African American experience was vast and full and should be portrayed as such.

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