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A desire for buffoonery and song

‘Whites have been fascinated by blacks and have paid to watch them perform in one way or another since at least the early nineteenth century.’

Joice Heth. Ever heard of her? Her name isn’t up there with Rosa Parks (1913–2005) or Billie Holiday (1915–59), Shirley Chisholm (1924–2005) or Angela Davis (b.1944), all black women who, in different ways, set their impress on American culture. Heth did make her mark, though not as an inspiration behind the civil rights movement, or a chanteuse of the Jim Crow era (1876–1965), or as an indefatigable politician with designs on the presidency. Heth was a freak – an exhibit at a show in which unusual or grotesque people were displayed and customers paid to see them. In the first half of the nineteenth century, this counted as entertainment.

Entertainment is never *just* the provision of amusement or enjoyment: it’s an opportunity to learn, if we know what questions to ask. For example: why were white audiences entertained by white performers pretending to be black who toured America and England in burlesque shows that ridiculed blacks? Blacks and their culture fascinated whites in the nineteenth century; they still do, it seems. Why? In a way, the whole of this book is an answer. But the source of the long-lasting fascination lies in the early nineteenth century, which is where Heth’s story unfolds.

In 1835, Heth went on display in Manhattan, where she was advertised as THE GREATEST NATURAL & NATIONAL CURIOSITY IN THE WORLD. Born, it was said, in 1674, when slavery was in full force, Heth was held in captivity by the family of George Washington (1732–99), the first president of the US. The Emancipation Proclamation, which brought the end of slavery, was not until 1863. Thousands of customers were invited to spend their pennies to gawp at a 161-year-old woman, born in bondage. If they so wished, they could even prod her. Collecting the pennies, Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810–91) was starting what was to become a career of heroic proportions. Later, he would open his museum of freaks in New York City and, in 1871, launch an extravagant circus known as “The Greatest Show on Earth.”

Barnum may not have legally owned Heth, but he treated her as his property, exhibiting her publicly for up to fourteen hours at a stretch. In fact, the exploitation continued after her death in 1836: Barnum turned her autopsy

into a public event, 1,500 spectators paying for the right to witness the post-mortem examination of her body, which revealed that she was actually about 90 years younger than her advertised age.

In his book *The Showman and the Slave*, Benjamin Reiss remarks on the media's dehumanizing coverage of Heth: "Many early reports favored grotesque images of her body over accounts of her life story" (p. 39). She was displayed as a "human commodity," a product worthy of whites' curiosity and perhaps more. Barnum, though strictly an impresario, in staging the autopsy inadvertently offered a contribution to an emerging racial science aimed at discovering the source of the manifest physical and moral differences between blacks and whites.

Heth wasn't the first black woman to be placed like an object on public display. Saartjie Baartman (c.1789–1816) was taken from her Griqua tribal homeland in South Africa, enslaved, and then, in 1810, exhibited as a freak in London. Like Heth, she was displayed as an unusual physical specimen that observers were allowed to touch. Sold to a French animal trainer, she came to the attention of the prominent anatomist Georges Cuvier (1769–1832).

Baartman died penniless, aged 26. Cuvier was especially interested in her genitalia, the labium of which he considered a "special attribute of her race." After dissecting her body, Cuvier published his findings in 1817 as *Le Règne Animal Distribué d'Après son Organization*, which included his conclusions on the specimen he called *La Vénus Hottentote*. He compared the structure and functions of her body to those of the great apes. The comparison extended to the way he discharged her dismembered cadaver: preserved in formaldehyde-filled bell jars and either sold, loaned or donated to natural history museums. The 2010 film *Vénus Noire*, directed by Abdellatif Kechiche, tells Baartman's story.

Baartman spent her life in bondage of one kind or another, though Heth probably volunteered her services to Barnum. She may even have connived with him to develop a routine, or a little performance designed to amuse whites. Consider the arrangement. Barnum was a showman whose mission was to divert people's attention so pleasurably that they'd be persuaded to pay and so provide him with an income. Joice Heth was probably, as Barnum's publicity claimed, an ex-slave and she was certainly a black woman, her only prospect of a living being in domestic labor of some kind. So there were reciprocal interests.

Depending on your perspective, Barnum was either insightful or opportunistic in sensing whites' curiosity. But, perhaps this was not such a feat in the 1800s, when interest in black people appears to have been widespread. Quite apart from the scientific discourse on the concept of "race" and its ontological status, there were discussions on the natural disposition of black people: why did they always seem to be full of fun? In the mid-nineteenth century, the respected English geologist Charles Lyell observed the fondness of "Negroes" for music and dancing and concluded that this was not due to what he called "external influences," meaning it was part of their inherent qualities – it was natural, in other words.

Lyell is quoted by Joseph Boskin, whose historical study *Sambo: The rise and demise of an American jester* traces the origin of an enduring and adaptable characterization of black people – as carefree buffoons devoid of the intelligence or sensibility of whites. Blacks grinned a lot, danced a lot and loved singing. The reason for this could have been more expedient than Lyell imagined: looking unhappy or angry could earn a slave a beating; beaming could make life slightly less unpleasant. Also, as Ronald Takaki points out in his *A Different Mirror*, “they might have been playing the role of loyal and congenial slave in order to get favors, while keeping their inner selves hidden ... many slaves wore masks of docility and deference” (p. 115).

African American slaves probably wore the sambo mask for pragmatic reasons, but its functions for whites were many. The apparent happy-go-lucky demeanor of black people persuaded whites of the essential childlikeness of black people, perhaps reassuring them that they were morally justified in keeping a paternalistic control of their dependants. It may even have created the impression that blacks actually benefited from their dependence, and that their obedience was a reflection of devotion rather than coercion.

Whites were convinced that blacks were incapable of their own level of sophisticated thought and emotion, and the joyous manner with which blacks accepted their servitude would have supported this. It would also have assuaged any residual fears that whites would not be in control forever, a point that leads Jan Nederveen Pieterse to call the sambo figure a “cultural talisman” through which masters sought to “choreograph reality.” The phrase suggests composition, planning and the element of theater, all designed for the amusement of whites.

Boskin writes of the “incongruity of play and circumstance” that propelled whites toward a conception of blacks that explained the apparent contradiction between the inhuman conditions in which slaves lived and their pleasant, comical mien. “It was a conception that attempted to encompass all the facets of blacks’ playfulness: their cheerful and lighthearted manner, penchant for frivolity, rhythmical movements, unusual mannerisms, even their patter of language.” Blacks were “mirthful by nature” (p. 54). Even if the conception existed only in whites’ imaginations, its effects went far beyond. It became the basis for a form of entertainment.

The minstrel show, or the Ethiopian Opera, was the most popular entertainment in the early nineteenth century, ceding place to vaudeville after the end of the American Civil War (1861–65), before motion pictures took over in the twentieth century. The minstrel shows consisted of white singers and dancers in “blackface,” meaning their faces were covered in theatrical makeup, or burnt cork. They would sing, dance, play banjo and clown around, creating crude caricatures of inoffensive “plantation niggers,” or “coons,” the popular name

for southern blacks. Daddy Rice (1808–60) was the most famous of these minstrels.

White audiences loved them, probably because they affirmed what they wanted to know: that there was no need to feel guilty, or afraid. This appeasement was especially comforting against a background of slave rebellions, many of which were inspired by Christian beliefs – the Virginia insurrection of 1831 organized by Nat Turner being the most celebrated.

These uprisings suggested a different image of African Americans from those expressed in both the minstrel shows and popular literature of the day. “Responsive to kindness, loyal, affectionate, and co-operative,” is how the typical slave was depicted in many of the popular novels, according to George M. Frederickson. In his *The Black Image in the White Mind*, Frederickson reports on what he calls a “romantic racialist image” that circulated through literature and popular thought.

One of the stock characters of the shows was the bumptious, mock-important fellow forever embarrassing himself as he tottered toward a freedom that seemed in sight after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. It was, of course, farce: blacks, the audience was agreeably reminded, could not survive without the protective care of whites.

In his history of the minstrelsy, as the theatrical tradition was known, Robert Toll points out that African American beliefs, songs, dances and folklore were taken by the white minstrels. “The presence of these distinctively Afro-American themes supports the view that minstrels borrowed from black culture,” writes Toll (p. 50). He sees significance in this “because it was the first indication of the powerful influence Afro-American culture would have on the performing arts in America.” However, he is careful to point out: “It does not mean that early minstrels accurately portrayed Negro life or even the cultural elements that they used. They did neither” (p. 51). But they did have enormous effects on cultural change.

“Minstrel caricatures of slaves served not only to define African-Americans in the minds of the dominant culture,” writes Richard L. Hughes, but, “also contributed to the growing sense of ‘whiteness’ among an ethnically diverse population” (p. 29). This is a valuable point and I’ll return to it: the minstrels “helped define what was white and, consequently, what was American.”

The impresarios were white: men such as Charles Callender, George Christy, and Sam Hague, an English promoter who, in the 1860s, took the unprecedented step of featuring black performers on stage. White minstrels stretched and distorted aspects of what they considered black culture so that they presented portrayals white audiences found satisfying. Black performers deviated little from the established archetypes and routines. The promoter J.H. Haverly capitalized on Hague’s success with black performers and turned his troupe into one of the most successful touring theaters, using similar marketing techniques to those used by Barnum – what today we might call hype, back then, “humbug.”

Toll discerns an important difference in Haverly's theatrical approach: he presented his minstrels not as mere entertainers, but as authentic representatives of the black population, or perhaps the black species, "like animals in a zoo" (p. 206). The commercial success of Haverly's enterprise indicated the perverse amusements whites took in having images of blacks presented to them, even if in theatrical form. Black performers themselves profited from the minstrel shows. Those who were prepared to play up to the sambo type, like Billy Kersands, grew prosperous. Others, such as James Bland, enjoyed popularity in Europe as well as the US. Horace Weston (1825–90) "was the first African American banjoist to achieve a significant reputation," according to Robert B. Winans and Elias J. Kaufman (p. 10).

Flanked by white owners and producers in the wings, the minstrels laid on a costumed performance for the delectation of whites. "Coon songs" were popular compositions. A respectful acknowledgment of blacks' musical gifts, their untutored sense of rhythm and their instinctual ability to amuse others might have been offered as compliments. But they were conditional. Blacks were granted access to some, though not all, cultural areas – entertainment being the main one, sports the other. And they were expected to embellish, not compromise, stereotypes; "darkie," "nigger" and "coon" were popularized in their music.

There was a balancing act going on. Black performers "did not just attempt to hook audiences with hokum; they subverted and manipulated stereotypes as they struggled to present black identity." That's the interpretation of Karen Sotiropoulos (p. 105). In her *Staging Race*, Sotiropoulos argues that, while black performers were obliged to comply with white expectations, they were also agents of change, playing roles for the benefit of whites, at the same time distancing themselves from those very roles. In his critical review of Sotiropoulos's book, David Krasner adds, "black performers were media savvy; like the boxer Jack Johnson, they sought publicity to stay in the headlines" (p. 377). In other words: on stage, black people were clowning, dancing and singing in a way that confirmed whites' racist assumptions, but always trying to negotiate enough wriggle space to present glimpses of an alternative experience and identity for black people.

The effect on black audiences is something Jacqueline Stewart ponders in her article, "Negroes laughing at themselves?" "Spectatorship," argues Stewart, "is typically characterized as an activity fraught with social, psychological, and political contradictions for black viewers." In watching hideously disfigured portrayals of black life, African Americans "reconstructed their individual and collective identities." Stewart suggests "feelings of community and race pride" emerged in the common experience of observing and enjoying (p. 653).

There was some debate about whether there actually was or should be a distinct "Negro identity" that was either being represented or misrepresented on the stage. W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963), the eminent co-founder of the

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, claimed a cultural and racial identity based partially on aspects of the slave heritage. In contrast, as Barbara L. Webb points out: "Some prominent citizens such as Andrew F. Hilyer seemed to fear that the assertion of a distinct Negro cultural identity, especially one founded on slavery, could impede arguments for social and political equality" (p. 72).

This prompts a more general question: how can a theatrical performance convey any sense of cultural authenticity? However convincing, it's arguable that any kind of performance, whether dramatic, comedic, or any other style or genre, is helpless to express experience, except in a distorted or attenuated manner. Entertainment is often enlightening, occasionally edifying, but never veracious. So, if white audiences believed they were getting a clear view of the lives of African Americans, they were deluded. This didn't stop them.

Webb writes of how whites would "vicariously observe" black life, presumably meaning that, through theater, they experienced in their imaginations the feelings and actions of blacks. Nor was it just theater: exhibitions purporting to reveal black folk culture from the plantation past mixed education with spectacle. Depictions were consistent with white expectations, but it seems there was irony, periphrasis and non sequitur in blacks' performances for those who wanted to look closely.

The keenness of whites to learn more about black life, not through study but through entertainment, was a feature of this period that endured through the twentieth century and, arguably, to the present day. While they may once have been satisfied with other whites' interpretations, they later warmed to the authenticity supposedly conveyed by black artists and performers. This opened up opportunities for African Americans to explore their own capabilities as entertainers-of-whites. It also planted the seeds of a tradition deeply in American soil.

An elite of African American singers was so outstanding that its members were permitted to deviate from comic roles and even appear on programs otherwise limited to white artists. One such exceptional performer was Matilda Sissieretta Jones (1869–1933), sometimes known as the "Black Patti," in allusion to the late nineteenth century prima donna Adelina Patti. African American concert singers performed primarily for black audiences in churches or blacks-only auditoriums. "Jones initially pursued a different career goal," writes John Graziano. She became "one of the first African American women to associate professionally with white musicians and entertain predominantly white audiences" (p. 545). In short, "she chose to interact with white American culture." Her life illustrates the difficulty black artists had in the entertainment industry.

Touring Europe in the 1890s, she performed in front of all kinds of audiences, sometimes before royalty. In America, audiences were strictly segregated. Her

many accolades confirmed she was one of the premier operatic performers of her day. But in 1896, she took a new career path, forming her own company, which she called the Black Patti Troubadours. The name itself was surprising considering she'd previously regarded the "Black Patti" soubriquet as demeaning. The rise of the Ku Klux Klan in the period following the end of slavery symbolized the widespread suspicions about hostility toward blacks. It would climb to a high point of five million in the 1920s.

Even as a "major star," as Graziano describes her, Jones couldn't appear in many whites-only venues. Her repertoire was too highbrow for popular audiences, and she faced the prospect of returning to Europe before her manager, Rudolph Voelckel, and a business partner, John Nolan, offered her the chance to lead a new 40-strong, all-black troupe specializing in "popular" entertainment, mainly – though not exclusively – at black venues. The deal, worth \$20,000 per year, made her "the highest paid African American performer of her time," according to Graziano (p. 588).

Voelckel's motives were hardly selfless: Paula Marie Seniors documents how he "could use racism to control people of color" (p. 16). Her options limited, Sissieretta became the head of the touring "colored company" of performers, the titles of her shows evocative of white cultural tastes of the early twentieth century: *A Trip to Africa* toured 1909-10, *In the Jungles*, 1911-12, and *Lucky Sam from Alabam*, 1914-15. For the last nineteen years of her life, Sissieretta "remained a star and an important symbol," as Graziano puts it. She demonstrated "that black performers were not just limited to minstrelsy but could sing in opera and other genres of art music" (p. 589). She died in 1933.

Graziano believes Sissieretta represented the "New Negro," a term usually associated with the Harlem Renaissance, a literary and artistic movement in the 1920s, which produced the likes of Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes. In 1919, Oscar Micheaux became the first African American to make a film when he wrote, directed and produced *The Homesteader*. Six years later, Micheaux's *Body and Soul* featured "Paul Robeson, the world's greatest actor of the race," as the *New York Age*, a black publication, put it in 1925 (quoted in Pearl Bower and Louise Spence's 2000 essay on Micheaux). Robeson (1898-1976) was the pre-eminent black performer of his generation, though he became a deeply divisive figure. Like Sissieretta Jones, he found the pressures of being a serious and, in his case, politically involved artist too much to bear.

Educated at Rutgers and Columbia, Robeson distinguished himself as a football player, but opted for the theater, appearing in England and the US, in several Eugene O'Neill plays, but most notably in Shakespeare's *Othello*. A bass-baritone, he memorably sang "Ol' Man River" in the second film adaptation of Edna Ferber's paean to the traveling Mississippi theaters, *Show Boat*, directed by James Whale in 1936 (the first was in 1929). Robeson's "success brought him celebrity in both worlds, black and white," observes Barbara J. Beeching. But his affairs with white women, his acquaintance with intellectuals, royalty

and other distinguished personages, as well as his achievements in sports and his world travels “gave him a self-confidence that irritated whites, who resented ‘uppity Negroes’; and African Americans, who resented those who moved on to better circumstances, leaving their fellows behind” (p. 349).

Robeson spoke out against fascism abroad and racism at home. When he heard of the plight of Welsh miners who went on hunger marches in 1927, he aligned himself with their cause and began to visit Wales, where he performed concerts. Ever the controversialist, Robeson visited the Soviet Union in 1934 and thereafter identified with leftwing politics. The FBI and Britain’s secret service MI5 both had files on him, the implication being that he was an agent of a subversive organization and so a danger to America. He was not a member of any organization. The black baseball player Jackie Robinson (1919–72) publicly denounced Robeson, probably in the interests of his own reputation.

Robeson’s stance was at odds with the policy of piecemeal reform known as gradualism that characterized the period 1940–49: he had no time for slow, incremental change and insisted his human rights were inalienable. “A good piece of that American earth belongs to me,” he claimed. Robeson advocated Black Nationalism, meaning the self-sufficiency of and separate national status for black people.

When, in 1950, Joseph McCarthy (1909–57) started his infamous investigations into alleged communist infiltration in American public life, Robeson refused to sign an affidavit disclaiming membership in the Communist Party, prompting the US State Department to revoke his passport. The decision had uncomfortable resonances with a code of practice that stood before 1865 and prevented freed slaves from possessing passports. (W.E.B. Du Bois had his passport denied in 1952 following a speech in which he was critical of the Korean War, 1950–53.)

Robeson’s star fell abruptly: forced to pull out of international engagements, he was eschewed by American promoters. By the time his passport was reinstated in 1958, the civil rights movement was picking up pace and Robeson was a forlorn figure in poor health. He traveled and, for a while, settled in Europe, but returned to the US where he died in 1976. His experience seemed cautionary: conform or perish. When faced with a comparable dilemma, Sissieretta chose to conform. Robeson could have kept his political views to himself and his own affiliations private; his decision not to cost him his career, as well as his passport.

Robeson’s imperious, flamboyant and tempestuous reputation contrasts with that of his equally distinguished contemporary Duke Ellington (1899–1974), who was born a year after Robeson and died two years before him. Pianist, composer and bandleader, Ellington rose to fame after his *Mood Indigo* in 1930. As Robeson was the “greatest actor of the race,” so Ellington was the

leading “race man” in the field of music. When direct expression became perilous for black people, there was always indirect: “Ellington did not fight for civil rights in the manner of political activists, but he contributed much to that cause, most of it unrecognized,” writes Harvey G. Cohen (p. 1,004).

Cohen refers principally to Ellington’s suite *Black, Brown and Beige* (1943), which the artist intended as a musical portrayal of African American history. It was the first in a series of suites he composed, usually consisting of pieces linked by subject matter. Ellington began playing professionally in 1916, inspired by the syncopated music known as ragtime, which had emerged in the 1890s. Ellington realized that the new bluesy jazz sounds emerging from New Orleans called boogie-woogie represented a potent source of new ideas. His collaboration with the trumpeter James “Bubber” Miley produced the “jungle” sound, for which he was known in his early phase. “Many of Ellington’s titles from this period reflect the ‘jungle’ motif,” James Haskins reminds us in his *The Cotton Club*, a book about the Harlem club where Ellington’s band played its most famous residency between 1927 and 1931 (p. 53). The Harlem Renaissance was in full swing.

Cohen argues that in the 1940s, Ellington, by then renowned internationally, reappraised his contribution and “wondered if delivering the message about the need for equal rights exclusively through the medium of music was sufficient” (p. 1,020). Robeson was forbidden to travel abroad. The Klan’s membership had slid to around 30,000, though legal segregation was in force and would stay that way until 1964. At the time, “Ellington commanded center stage in a way that no black artist ever had,” Cohen tells us (pp. 1,021–22). But: “Did his insistence on staying within the musical realm only play into the old stereotypes that viewed music as one of the few areas blacks were skilled in?” Cohen imagines Ellington asked himself a similar question.

We can’t know whether he actually did, of course. But we know Ellington never expressed his views on what was, for all but his final ten years, a racially segregated society. At least, not explicitly: music is a subtler though infinitely more ambiguous medium than language. And, by using it exclusively, Ellington escaped the kind of privations of Robeson. Nor did he compromise his art, conform to arch stereotypes or play the excessively servile roles – the masks of docility, as Takaki calls them. Perhaps being a man made a difference; for comparison, let me outline the experiences of some prominent black female performers of roughly the same period.

In 1935, Ellington played in a short film, *Symphony in Black: A rhapsody of Negro life*, in which a number of African American artists appeared. One of them was the brilliant but tragic Billie Holiday (1915–59). Seldom less than good, sometimes brushing greatness, Holiday began recording in 1933, aged 18. Her success with bands – including those of Count Basie and Artie Shaw – was tempered by human failings and she had long periods of dependence on drugs and alcohol. Holiday was also affected by the particular problems she

faced as a black woman. She performed at clubs where she was not allowed to talk to the audience, stayed in hotels where she was told to use freight elevators rather than share with white guests. Acclaimed by critics and audiences, she reached a public few African Americans approached and, as such, ventured into a world where she was welcome as a singer, but not as a human being. Her manifest disorientation was no doubt a product of this. She was 45 when she died in 1959.

Earlier in the twentieth century, Ethel Waters (1896–1977) started out singing “coon” songs but found white audiences congenial. This was the first of what Donald Bogle, in his 2010 biography *Heat Wave*, reveals as series of racial breakthroughs. She was one of the first (if not the first) black women to sing on radio. She was the only major black actor in Irving Berlin’s *As Thousands Cheer*, a white Broadway show in the 1930s. She was among the first black women to star in a Broadway drama, *Mamba’s Daughters*. She was the first black woman to have her own network tv sitcom, *Beulah*, which went on the air in 1950, and to which I will return shortly. Stylistically, her scat singing foreshadowed Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald.

Waters’ dealings with promoters, agents and colleagues were often affected by her perception that she was underpaid. Maybe she was, but, in the depressed 1930s, she was the highest-paid artist on Broadway, earning \$2,500 per week. Her legal victory over MGM turned out to be Pyrrhic: she didn’t work for six years after.

Earlier, in 1925, when she was unavailable for a European tour, Waters’ understudy Josephine Baker (1906–75) stepped in. Baker, an exotic dancer, fascinated audiences at Paris’ Folies-Bergère, but found America altogether less hospitable. Her periodic returns to the USA were never easy; audiences were wary of a black female whose mission seemed to be to break every rule. Baker was one of several black entertainers, including the prodigiously dexterous Nicholas Brothers (Fayard, 1914–2006; Harold, 1921–2000), to find greater success in Europe than in the USA.

Three different women with three different experiences, though all united by a special kind of struggle that challenged African Americans either to bend or brawl. There are less obvious instances of struggle. Lena Horne (1917–2010), for example, was the first African American, man or woman, to secure a long-term contract with MGM, then the most powerful Hollywood studio, and by the mid-1940s was reputedly the highest-paid black actor. But she too paid a price; as she famously said: “I didn’t get much of a chance to act.” She usually appeared – looking vivacious – and sang, as she did in Andrew L. Stone’s 1943 film *Stormy Weather*, which featured an all-black cast.

Horne acquired a sound working knowledge of why her acting was often edited out of movies: she was expected to look good and sing well; that was the limit of her contribution. No one expected her to act particularly well. She was Hollywood’s version of an expensive ornament: pleasing to the eye, though

not integral to anything. In Vincente Minnelli's 1943 movie *Cabin in the Sky*, Horne played an overtly sexy handmaiden of the devil; in the original film she sang while taking a bubble bath but the scene was deleted before the film was released — not for racial reasons, as her stand-alone performances in other MGM musicals sometimes were, but because it was considered too risqué.

In fairness to MGM, the studio had broken with tradition when it signed Horne and afforded her the kind of treatment usually reserved for white sex symbols. Baker had been banished for her eroticism twenty years earlier. Studio chiefs presumably felt the world was now ready, their decision no doubt influenced by Horne's pale skin, straight hair and narrow nose (picture gallery at: <http://bit.ly/-LenaHorne>).

The NAACP took an interest in MGM's initiative and monitored Horne's career, presumably wary of the wider implications. Horne avoided clichéd roles, but was never offered the kind of parts available to white contemporaries, such as Betty Grable (1916–73), Rita Hayworth (1918–87) or Ava Gardner (1922–90). Fortunately for Horne, she kept her career as a recording artist alive. At 83, she sang on Simon Rattle's 2000 *Classic Ellington* album.

When Horne married Lennie Hayton, a white man – a prominent arranger, conductor and pianist who was for many years both her and MGM's musical director – the marriage, in 1947, took place in France and was kept secret for three years. Interracial marriage, as it was called, was forbidden in some US states until the *Loving v. Virginia* case of 1967, which resulted in a Supreme Court ruling that antimiscegenation laws were unconstitutional.

Although she wasn't expected to think for herself, Horne did exactly this and claimed that her friendships with Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois were responsible for a long period of inactivity after the end of her Hollywood tenure in 1950. She was blacklisted and unable to make films or tv shows for seven years. In the early 1960s, Horne became increasingly active, participating in numerous civil rights rallies and protests.

Horne's career invites comparisons with that of Dorothy Dandridge, four years her junior, also strikingly good-looking, also married to a white man, and also a singer – though not in Horne's class – who sought to transfer to the movies. Often cast as a nymphet, Dandridge is credited with having participated in the first “interracial screen kiss” when she embraced British actor Michael Rennie in Robert Rossen's 1957 film *Island in the Sun*. Frustrated at her failure to find serious acting roles, Dandridge turned to nightclub singing, though with no success. She was made to file for bankruptcy. In 1965, she overdosed on antidepressants and died, aged 41. (Biographer Donald Bogle talks about Dandridge at: <http://bit.ly/-DorothyDandridge>.)

Ethel Waters brought herself up from destitution, working for a time in domestic service. So when, in her fifties, she was offered a job in the title role of

the tv series *Beulah*, she presumably thought acting as a maid was preferable to being one. The television series was based on a successful radio show that had started in the 1930s, and which had originally featured a white actor as the eponymous housekeeper-cum-cook. In his book on Waters, Donald Bogle notes how the black press condemned her and contrasted her with Lena Horne, who “refused to lend her talents in roles that will reflect ‘badly’ upon her people.” Stung by this type of criticism, Waters quit the show, though it wasn’t the first time she had played a servant role: she had appeared in the 1934 musical *Bubbling Over* as a washerwoman.

Hattie McDaniel (1895–1952) took over. She’d been playing Beulah in the radio show after finding film roles scarce. McDaniel had endured protests in front of cinemas in 1939 when civil rights groups, including the NAACP, objected to her depiction of Scarlett O’Hara’s devoted slave, Mammy, in *Gone with the Wind*. The role was her specialty: she had virtually made a living out of it since the 1920s, when she toured on the vaudeville circuit, usually spoofing the plantation mammy caricature. Her biographer Jill Watts reckons, though typecast, McDaniel tried to subvert stereotypes of black docility and simple-mindedness; though this never persuaded her critics that her career was anything but a disservice to African Americans.

McDaniel fell ill – later diagnosed with breast cancer – after filming only six episodes of *Beulah*, which were not screened until much later. She died in 1952, three years before Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her bus seat to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama – an act that inspired the civil rights movement. Watts observes that even McDaniel’s legacy prompted controversy: in the 1960s and 1970s, when black power was at its peak, images of McDaniel’s grinning, rolling-eyed caricatures were held up as reminders of blacks’ mortification.

This was a ruthless assessment: viewed in context, McDaniel’s contribution is more varied. She was born and lived entirely amid Jim Crow segregation, so just having a presence in film or on tv was an achievement in its own right. While Hollywood was hardly insulated from the rest of America, it did afford black actors the chance to cross racial lines, even if temporarily and somewhat artificially.

In 1934, five years before the release of *Gone with the Wind*, Clarence Edouard Muse (1889–1979), himself an African American who had managed to make a living as Hollywood actor, self-published a pamphlet entitled *The Dilemma of the Negro Actor*. In it, he reasoned that the black actor has the choice of being responsible to black audiences in his or her screen portrayals, or being a successful black stereotype for “the white audience with a definite desire for buffoonery and song.” Was it better, Muse asked, for black actors to achieve success in mainstream roles as loyal maids and fawning darkies, or to risk not working at all by insisting on better parts and more equitable representation?

Muse had no compunction about accepting parts that he considered devaluing; he needed to earn a living in an industry that was driven by commercial dynamics. Only cultural change would open out roles for African Americans. Later, in 1972, with serious black film roles still at a premium, he gave an interview to *Ebony* writer B.J. Mason, in which he predicted: "Popular demand will cause producers to make good black films" (p. 54).

Film studios cast actors, whether black or white, by type. There were few black directors, no producers and, at many studios, facilities were segregated, reflecting social arrangements elsewhere in America. Those who challenged paid with their careers. Often even those who didn't challenge suffered, as we've seen in this chapter.

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from the material covered in this chapter. By maintaining a strictly limited array of roles, or types, that African Americans were allowed to play, entertainment has reflected wider social arrangements. Entertainment has also performed what might be called an ideological function, disseminating ideas, or more accurately, ideals that lie at the heart of the ethos of the nation. America was, and is, first and foremost a white society, and its artistic and cultural representations convey this just as reliably as its political and economic institutions.

Perhaps there is a more surreptitious process at work. After the first slaves arrived in Virginia in 1619, slavery became the single most important component of the American economy and thus the source of its prosperity. After nearly 250 years, the cultural patterns carved by slavery were deep and, in the eyes of many, ineradicable. Yet somehow, the nation had to make what must have seemed an accommodation of gargantuan proportions. Entertainment, as I've traced, offered a gratification: it showed black people in the way whites wanted to see them – as fools, minions, or primitives governed by sexual impulses rather than rational thoughts. Casting black actors or other kinds of entertainers in these roles was not an accident, but nor was it the result of the pernicious scheming of racist producers: audiences sought amusement rather than provocation or confrontation. Amusement often derives from comfort. The entertainment industry was responsive.

I started this chapter with a case that illustrated a historical interest in blacks, whether as people or as specimens, that has continued in its peculiar, serpentine way right to the present day. Whites have been fascinated by blacks and have paid to watch them perform in one way or another since at least the early nineteenth century, and probably in less organized fashions previously. I wrote before: entertainment is never *just* the provision of amusement or enjoyment; it's an opportunity to learn. In this instance, it offers us an understanding of the ways whites have managed and preserved their own sense of superiority in the midst of evidence that repeatedly challenged it.