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# THE MAMMY RELOADED: African American Men Portraying The Updated Caricature In Contemporary Films

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THE MAMMY RELOADED

African American Men Portraying The Updated Caricature In  
Contemporary Films

by

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Research Project

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
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THE MAMMY RELOADED:  
AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN PORTRAYING THE UPDATED CARICATURE IN  
CONTEMPORARY FILMS

By

Ukiya Henson

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## **Introduction**

A stereotypical caricature that has consistently appeared within entertainment is the mammy, which has generally been portrayed by plus-size African American females. The mammy evolved from slavery during the 1830's (Lafontant, 2009, p. 28). Throughout slavery many African American females were subjected to taking care of the children of their white owners who believed this type of work was entirely appropriate for African American females. Due to her "position" in Southern homes, the mammy emerged as a domestic stereotype in minstrelsy and media.

There have been numerous comedy films that feature cross dressing male actors in fat suits to portraying plus-size female characters. Interestingly, in recent years, African American males have portrayed characters that resemble the mammy. The goal of this paper is to explore the history of the mammy in film, radio, and television and more importantly, to examine African American actors and the ways in which they continue to play updated mammies in the films *Big Momma's House* (2000) starring Martin Lawrence, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005) starring Tyler Perry, and *Norbit* (2007) starring Eddie Murphy.

## **Method**

This study uses textual analysis which can be used to check on historical data to verify its authenticity (Walliman 2006, 203). It is also a way for researchers to collect data/information about how other humans make sense of the world (McKee 2003, 1). According to Keith McDonald, "Textual analysis involves the study of a given text in order to read the way in which it has been constructed for an audience. The process of textual analysis involves identifying the codes and conventions of a text and decoding or reading them. Textual analysis involves investigating how a text is working and why it is working in such a way (McDonald 2008, 2)."

Textual analysis has been examined by several researchers including film theorist David Bordwell. In *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, Bordwell maps different strategies for interpreting films. He explains that one can construct four types of meanings out of a film: referential, explicit, implicit, and symptomatic meanings. With these four types, Bordwell describes that film criticism essentially falls into either thematic explication or symptomatic interpretation. He explains that explicative interpretation of films has implicit meaning as its object. It is concerned with the overt facts about a certain story or theme that are directly presented within a film. However, systematic interpretation aims at uncovering subdued connotation. It attempts to clarify a cinematic occurrence as the expression in film viewers or in the film itself (Bordwell, 1989). With that in mind, Bordwell uses textual analysis to evaluate how critics interpret film. This specific research uses the Systematic Interpretation because it is aiming to show how African American men are portraying the updated mammy in contemporary films. Textual analysis will be used because this particular research studies how one can construct negative stereotypes about black women based on the updated mammy characters that are portrayed in the examined films. Since textual analysis involves identifying the codes and conventions of a text and decoding, this method is appropriate because I will be decoding how the characters in the specified films are portraying updated mammies.

### **Mammy in Minstrelsy**

Minstrelsy began with T. Daddy Rice, who while traveling through the southern United States in the 1820's, observed African slaves performing music and dance. After seeing the slaves, Rice created minstrelsy when he used burnt cork makeup to darken his skin so that he would appear black and mimicked their song and dance. In *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early*

*Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture*, William J. Mahar explains that blackface makeup was essential to minstrel shows:

The primary convention that identified the minstrel show as entertainment was burnt cork makeup. The combination of burned, pulverized champagne cork and water served as a racial marker announcing that a singer/actor or an ensemble offered what were selected aspects of African American culture to audiences interested in how racial differences and enslavement reinforced distinctions between black and white America. The makeup was also a disguise for white performers who chose parody as techniques to satirize majority values while still reinforcing widely held conservative beliefs (Mahar 1999, 1).

Blackface minstrel shows consisted of music and dance, in addition to comical skits in which performers portrayed buffoonish, lazy, superstitious, and cowardly black characters (Graham 2011, 7-8). Minstrelsy became a cultural phenomenon, which by the Civil War, was one of the most popular forms of entertainment (Womack 2012, 86).

Minstrel shows featured a host of stereotypical African American characters including the mammy, a comical domestic who is usually fat, dark-skinned, and dresses in oversized clothing that is too big for her full figure (Bogle 2001, 8-9). The character is mature and is known for being reliable (Parkhurst 1938, 356). In addition, mammy is asexual, fiercely independent, cantankerous and usually extremely headstrong and bossy (Bogle 2001, 8-9). She is usually a matriarchal figure who derives joy from serving the white family for which she works. This romanticized version of black femininity made the mammy the ideal faithful domestic servant (Graves 2000, 60). In minstrel shows, she spoke "Plantation Dialect" and came across as motherly and pleasant. Importantly, mammy was incapable of living without the help of the white family that she worked for. Thus, she always defended her white masters while neglecting her own family (Christian 1980, 11-12, Sanders, 2008, 6).

### **Mammy in Film**

Significantly, the mammy transitioned from minstrel shows into film, radio, and television (Lester 1996, 87-89). She first appeared in film as a comical character in *Coon Town Suffragettes* (1914), which tells the story of a group of mammies who organize a movement to keep their husbands at home (Bogle, 2001, 9). Soon after *Suffragettes*, mammy appeared in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which was one of the very first major motion pictures to cast a white actress in a role scripted for a black actress (Boyd 2008, 68).

*Nation*, was based upon Thomas Dixon's racially charged novels, *The Clansmen* and *The Leopard's Spots* (Wallace 2003, 86). The film tells the story of the Antebellum, the Civil War, and its aftermath, as seen through the eyes of two families who represent the divide between North and South. Specifically, the Stonemans are from Pennsylvania and the Camerons are from South Carolina. In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, Donald Bogle relates:

Before the war, the family lives in an idyllic "quaintly way that is to be no more." Dr. Cameron and his son are gentle, benevolent "fathers" to their children-like servants. The Slaves themselves could be no happier. In the fields they contentedly pick cotton. In the big house mammy joyously goes about her chores. All is in order; everyone knows his or her place. When war breaks out, the Stonemans side with the Union, while the Camerons stay loyal to the South. After the war, Ben Cameron, troubled that his beloved south is now being ruled by blacks and carpetbaggers, organizes several like-minded Southerners forming a secret group called the Ku Klux Klan. The film concludes when the Ku Klux Klan declares war on the new Northern-inspired government and restores order to the South (Bogle 2001, 10-12).

After its release, *Nation* it was highly criticized for its blatant racism and its stereotypical representations of African Americans (Bossy 2001, 81). Its portrayal of mammy serves as a prime example. Specifically, mammy is depicted as a faithful servant to her white masters even after the Civil War. She also internalizes the emotions of the white family for which she works, even as the family members ride out in Ku Klux Klan robes to prevent, among other things, the rape of a white woman by an ex-slave (Hanson 2008, 87).

In addition to *Nation*, mammy is also visible in John M. Stahl's *Imitation Of Life* (1934), which stars Louise Beavers as Aunt Delilah, a nurturing domestic servant to her employer Bea Pullman (Claudette Colbert) (McLaren 1997, 128). *Life* chronicles the friendship between Bea, a white widow, and Aunt Delilah, her black housekeeper. Bea yearns to operate her own business, a dream that she accomplishes thanks to Aunt Delilah's secret pancake recipe. A family friend advises the ladies to form a corporation to sell "Aunt Delilah" pancake mix, and within ten years the business becomes extremely successful. Meanwhile, Aunt Delilah must deal with her daughter, Peola (Freda Washington) a tragic mulatto who resents her African-American heritage so much that she is determined to pass for white. After being disowned by her daughter, Aunt Delilah dies of a broken heart. Fortunately, her death is not in vain, as Peola realizes the error of her ways and returns for her funeral where she apologizes while weeping uncontrollably on Aunt Delilah's casket.

In *Imitation*, Aunt Delilah is the classic representation of the mammy archetype. For example, she derives great happiness from seeing her white boss create a lucrative business from her secret pancakes recipe. Even though the business is based on her formula, Aunt Delilah has little or no desire to reap the benefits of the company's success. In one scene she informs Bea that she does not want to own her own home or car because if she does, she would no longer be able to take care of her and her daughter (Higgs 2002, 260). Aunt Delilah worked hard to keep the white family that she worked for stable, while her own family disintegrated.

Furthermore, Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* (1939), which was based on a novel by Margaret Mitchell features one of the most famous mammy characters. *Wind* tells the story of Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh), a Southern belle who pursues the man of her dreams, Ashley

Wilkes during and after the Civil War, while continually dealing with a charming and adventurous suitor named Rhett Butler (Clark Gable).

Hattie McDaniel, one of the most famous plus-size African American actresses to play mammy, became the first African American to win an Academy Award for her portrayal of the caricature in *Wind* (Otfinoski 2010, 154). McDaniel plays an outspoken mammy, particularly when it comes to her relationship with Scarlett O'Hara (Manning 1998, 158). In the first ten minutes of the film, she is shown yelling out of a window to Scarlett telling her to return to the house using plantation dialect:

Is de gempmum gone? Huccome you din' ast dem ter stay fer supper Miss Scarlett? Ah done tole Poke ter lay two extry plates fer dem. Whar's yo' manners? You ain got no mo' manners san a fe'el han, an after Miss Ellen an, me done labored wid you. An' *you* is widout yo' shawl! An' de night air fixin' ter set in! Ah done tole *you* an` tole *you* `bout gittin` fever frum settin` in *de night air* wid nuthin` on *yo`* shoulders. Come on in de house Miss Scarlett (McDaniel 1939).

In *Wind* Mammy is also feisty, but adoring and loyal specifically, in a scene where she is helping Scarlett get dressed for a barbeque. For example, she chastises Scarlett for not eating and even becomes angry with her when she refuses to eat. However, Mammy is still nurturing and caring by continuing to help her get dressed and help her to catch a man's eye at the barbeque.

### **Mammy in Radio**

The popularity of radio revolutionized American entertainment. Radio shows varied across formats including adventure, comedy, drama, horror, mystery, romance, and thrillers. Regardless of genre, many radio programs also relied heavily upon stereotypical black characters. One of the most popular was *The Aunt Jemima Radio Show* (1929 - 1953), which was sponsored by Quaker Oats (Arceneaux 2005, 64, Coleman 1998, 54). Much like in minstrelsy, the characters on the program were performed by white actors and actresses who used "black" dialect (Hilmes 1997, 80-81).

Moreover, *Beulah* (1945-1954), which was also adapted into a television show, was a popular radio program centered on a mammy figure. The title character actually began as a maid on the radio series, *The Fibber McGee and Molly Show* (1935-1959). Comparable to other radio shows that depicted black stereotypes, *Beulah* was voiced by white actors and actresses (Cullen 2007, 255). In the *Encyclopedia of Radio*, Christopher Sterling explains, “*Beulah* played a central part of the white middle-class family that employed her. She was good natured and respectful. . . Indeed she was often sarcastic, though rarely directly to her employers. She ran the household and solved problems-the core of the program stories (Sterling 2001, 256).”

### **Mammy in Television**

Television series like *Beulah* (1950-1953) and *Amos ‘N’ Andy* (1951-1953) introduced racist stereotypes to television, which the medium quickly embraced (Coleman 1998, 69). *Beulah* was the first situation comedy series that placed a black actress in the starring role (Acham 2004, 114). The title character, was a heavy-set, grinning, wide-eyed woman whose entire life revolved around the white family she served (Holtzman 2000, 248). Ethel Waters, Hattie McDaniel, and Louise Beavers, all plus-size actresses, played the comical *Beulah* throughout the course of the show (Coleman 1998, 64). Ethel Waters quit the show in 1951 because of the character’s perpetuation of negative stereotypes (Dalton, 2005, 24). Furthermore, Hattie McDaniel joined the cast of *Beulah*, but only filmed a few episodes before falling ill (Brooks, 2007, 129). Louise Beavers replaced McDaniel and played the role of *Beulah* until its cancellation in 1953. The program was still earning high ratings when cancelled the same year in which protests by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) led CBS to cancel *Amos ‘n’ Andy*. Interestingly, NBC denied any connection between the two events (Appiah, 2004, 79).

In later years more plus-size African American actresses portrayed mammies' on television shows. On the sitcom *That's My Mama* (1974–1975), Theresa Merritt embodies the mammy in her role as Eloise Curtis an overweight, over bearing, and bossy mother to her son Clifton Curtis (Clifton Davis). Bogle describes Merritt as, "large, fulsome, and browned skinned . . . she fits the physical image of the acceptable, nurturing, seemingly sexless black television mother (Bogle 2001, 208)." In addition to her appearance, Merritt also behaves like a mammy. Throughout the series, she demands that Clifton live his life the way that she feels is best, even giving tips on how to run the barbershop that he inherited from his father.

Another TV show that featured the mammy character was *Gimme A Break!* (1981-1987), which depicts plus-sized actress Nell Carter as Nellie 'Nell' Ruth Harper a housekeeper and nurturer of a White household (Jackson, 2006, p.40). In true mammy fashion, Harper has a dark complexion, is sassy, loyal and is all too pleased with her job as a live-in domestic, much like Aunt Deliah in the film *Imitation of Life*. Although she neither donned the head rag that characterizes the mammy nor spoke in plantation dialect, Harper epitomized the contemporary image of the mammy on television during the 1980s.

### **Modern Day Mammy**

While the mammy has undergone a transformation since the days of *The Birth of a Nation*, *The Aunt Jemima Radio Program*, *Beulah*, and *Gimme A Break*, she still exists in contemporary media, albeit in a very different fashion. Recently, African American male actors have continued to perpetuate the degrading stereotype, in the films *Big Momma's House* (2000), *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005), and *Norbit* (2007).

The trend of black males portraying overweight females in film seems to have become popular with Eddie Murphy and his summer blockbuster, *The Nutty Professor* (1996). In

*Professor*, Murphy plays Sherman Klump an intelligent, kind-hearted and overweight college professor and respected biochemist on the verge of a breakthrough in DNA restructuring. One day after teaching class, he meets and instantly falls in love with Carla Purty (Jada Pinkett), a chemistry graduate student who is a fan of his work. Sherman asks Carla out on a date, which she accepts, much to his surprise. The date begins well, but takes a turn for the worse when during his act a comedian at the club that the couple is attending begins to make jokes about Sherman's weight. As a result, Sherman enters into a state of depression until he finds the solution for his problem---- his genetic weight loss formula. He takes an excessive amount of the formula which transforms him into his slim, trim, and handsome alter ego, Buddy Love. Buddy is rude and brash and driven by his artificially-raised testosterone level, he gets into all sorts of trouble. He wants Carla for himself, although she prefers the mild-mannered Sherman. Buddy is also not happy that he turns back into Sherman when the formula wears off. He plots to overdose on the formula, which will permanently get rid of Sherman forever.

In *Professor*, Murphy also plays two comical plus-size black female characters, Mama Klump and Grandma Klump popularizing the trend of men portraying updated mammies. *Professor* was a financial success. It was released on June 28, 1996 and grossed \$128,814,019 at the box office (“Box Office Mojo-The Nutty Professor, 1996”, <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=nuttyprofessor.htm>, Accessed February 19, 2013).

*Professor* served as the catalyst for a rash of similarly problematic mainstream films that feature African American males replying upon the degrading mammy as a humorous plot device. One film that continued this trend is Raja Gosnell's *Big Momma's House* (2000), which stars Martin Lawrence. The film chronicles FBI agent Malcolm Turner (Martin Lawrence) and his partner John (Paul Giamatti) who is on the trail of Lester Vesco (Terrence Howard), a dangerous

bank robber who has recently escaped from prison. The agents are sent to Georgia to trap the robber where they suspect he will visit his ex-girlfriend Sherry (Nia Long) and her son. Malcolm and John set up a stakeout across the street from Big Momma's (Ella Mitchell) home, who Shelly will be visiting. Unbeknownst to her, Big Momma leaves for a vacation, which allows Malcolm to go undercover as the Southern granny.

As previously stated, mammy is described as nurturing but cantankerous, extremely headstrong, threatening and bossy. In *House*, Big Momma exemplifies the same characteristics within the first twenty minutes of the film when Martin Lawrence appears as an unrealistic image of the title character. It's doubtful that Sherry and other people in the community would be fooled by his appearance. However, Big Momma greets Sherry and Trent at the front door and welcomes them to her home. Trent is unhappy about staying at her house, expressing his desire to stay in a hotel instead. When Big Momma realizes that the young boy has a bad attitude, she immediately shows him that her attitude trumps his by scrunching up her face and stating in a threatening tone, "He's a quick little one isn't he. . . But he come to find Big Momma pretty quick herself," implying that the child's bad attitude will get him into trouble with her.

In an additional scene, Big Momma is bossy and threatening toward her male neighbor, Ben Rawley (Carl Wright), behaving like an updated mammy. Dressed in an oversized red floral dress, she becomes annoyed with Rawley's presence when he tries to kiss her on the lips during his visit. Big Momma practically throws him out of her house while shoving him and yelling, "Who the hell do you think you are trying to put your ashy lips on me?" The scene ends with her telling Mr. Rawley to get his behind off of her porch, while insulting the suit that he is wearing.

This scene marks a prominent connection between the way previous images of the mammy and the updated mammy that Lawrence portrays in *House* treat male figures. According

to Todd Boyd in *African Americans and Popular Culture*, the mammy is bossy and usually ridicules male figures. Moreover, this matriarchal figure emasculates men with her dominant and aggressive behavior (Anthropologica, 2004, 275, Boyd, 2008, 68). This type of behavior can be seen in films like *The Birth of a Nation*. In one particular scene, the Stonemans leave the north and arrive at the Cameron's southern house. As Senator Stoneman and his servants enter the home, the black butler follows with two suitcases in hand. When he sees the mammy, he tries to give her the bags. She steps back, puts her hands on her hips, and then points him in the direction of a room in the back of the home. When the butler continues to try and hand the suitcases to mammy, she makes a fist and threatens to hit him. The title card then reads: "Yo northern low down black trash, don't try no airs on me." As the butler heads towards the room mammy kicks him in the buttocks and pushes him down the hallway. In *House*, audiences are introduced to the modern mammy continuing the saga of mammy emasculating men in the scene involving the neighbor Ben Rawley.

Importantly, Big Momma demonstrates even more mammy characteristics when she is presented in the film as the town's midwife. In this scene she is awakened by Sherry and her neighbors who order her to come help deliver a young lady's baby. Wearing another floral oversized dress, she leaps out of bed to go and take care of the young lady. In an attempt to make others believe that she is a midwife, Big Momma begins offering incorrect advice about child birth. For example, she begins to scream loudly, explaining that screaming calms the spirit. Even with Big Momma seeming unknowledgeable of what to do as a midwife, everyone still believes that she can complete the task because she is in fact nurturing, trustworthy, and loyal.

This particular scene reflects the reoccurring image of plus-size African American females as domestic servants especially as midwives. The linkage of African American women

with childbirth may have negative consequences to the extent that midwifery was perceived as being a plantation craft and specifically reserved for black women (Fraser, 1998, 187). In “*Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery*,” Randall Miller states that mammy was a simple term of relative respect used for elderly black women who were midwives and nurses. Many African American mammies doubled as midwives often being the first to hold and make contact with the baby. Even though the work of a midwife had negative connotations, their work was praised by many in the south. Women suffering the complications of labor would assume everything was normal if the “old black mammy midwife” said it was (Baer, 1992, 65).

In addition to displaying mammy’s relationship with men, *House* also revisits her link with the church and religion. This is on prominent display in a church scene where Big Momma arrives and attempts to sit in the back to avoid being seen by her neighbors. When she is forced to sit up front with Sherry, she expresses her aggravation by mean mugging other church goers. After taking her seat, the Pastor (Cedric the Entertainer) begins to preach, immediately moving from the pulpit and toward Big Momma with a microphone to receive a “word from above.” Irritated by the reverend and his attempts to get her to talk to the congregation, she embarrasses him and herself by yelling, “Boy you better get that thang out my face! Move reverend, go on now!” Although Big Momma is initially irritated and cantankerous, she soon turns into a nurturer during her testimony, giving the other church members heartfelt advice and guidance about being honest. This scene ends with Big Momma dancing and flaunting her huge body while singing “Oh Happy Day” with the church choir.

Importantly, the mammy’s devout Christianity has been a staple of her film appearances. For example, in *Pinky* (1949), Granny Dicey Johnson (Ethel Waters) repeatedly expressed her love and faithfulness to her religion by praying and quoting the bible in several scenes. When her

granddaughter Patricia "Pinky" Johnson (Jeanne Crain) arrives back home for the first time, Johnson thanks God by praying "Thank you Lord for brining my child back to me, She'd be such a far piece and long journey, and this be the morning of her return." In another scene Johnson quotes the bible to Pinky stating, "Even the least leaven leavens the *whole lump*." *These actions show her faithfulness to Christianity. Thus, House* reiterates the prevalent and strong relationship between religion and the mammy in the aforementioned church scene.

The mammy is further emphasized in the trailer to *House*. It begins by positioning the film as an action movie involving two agents going undercover. However, it soon becomes apparent that the film is actually a comedy centering on agent Turner's undercover stint as the plus-sized, sassy, and nurturing matriarch, Big Momma. The trailer also features the tagline, "It aint over 'til the fat lady sings." This expression places even more emphasis on Big Momma's figure and weight. Thus, the underlying meaning is that *House's* humor derives from an African American male dressing as a plus-size African American mammy.

Despite its stereotypical content, *House* was a box-office success. Released on June 2, 2000, *House* accumulated \$117 million at the box office during its theatrical run (Box Office Mojo, "Big Momma's House.")

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=bigmommashouse.htm>, Accessed February 19, 2013). Although it performed well, *House* received mixed reviews at the time of its release. For example, Roger Ebert gave the film two out of five stars stating:

While it's true that comedy can redeem bad taste, it's can be appalling when bad taste thinks it is being redeemed by comedy, and is wrong. . . This is all essentially an attempt by Lawrence to follow Eddie Murphy's disguise as a fat guy in "The Nutty Professor." The whole enterprise has been ratcheted down several degrees in taste. . . A little of Big Momma is funny enough, but eventually we realize Martin Lawrence is going to spend virtually the entire movie in drag (he appears as Malcolm only long enough to stir up a sweet romance with Sherry). The problem is that Lawrence's gifts come packaged with his face and voice: Present him as Big Momma all the time, and you lose his star power.

The movie has some big laughs, yes, but never reaches takeoff velocity (Roger Ebert Reviews, "Big Momma's House.")

<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20000602/REVIEWS/6020301/1023>, Accessed February 19, 2013).

Film critic Jeffrey M. Anderson had a slightly different view of *House*:

The new Martin Lawrence comedy *Big Momma's House* is far from being the worst movie of the year. Most of its jokes fall flat and its attempt at storytelling is stale, but it has a few small chuckles and a funny lead performance. Lawrence reminds me of an old vaudevillian performer, someone like Nathan Lane or Robin Williams, who tries very hard to make us laugh. . . He just comes on full-steam, pummeling us with jokes until one of them hits. It's this approach that lets him get away with dressing up as Big Momma, the neighborhood matriarch in a Southern town. . . The funniest scenes involve Lawrence hiding in Big Momma's bathroom and Lawrence playing basketball disguised as Big Momma. Lawrence, hidden by the makeup, uses his eyes and mouth to great effect. He makes you believe that the townsfolk would all fall in love with his Big Momma, despite the obvious makeup. The rest of the movie's jokes include the usual sex jokes and locker-room humor (Combustible Celluloid, "Big Momma's House (2000)."

<http://www.combustiblecelluloid.com/bigmomma.shtml>, Accessed February 19, 2013).

Another updated mammy is displayed in Tyler Perry's *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005). The film tells the story of Helen McCarter (Kimberly Elise), a woman who seems to have it all-- a nice house, an excellent reputation, and a rich husband-named Charles (Steve Harris), who is one of Atlanta's most successful attorneys. Despite their wealth and prestige, things are not as they should be in the McCarter home, so on their 18<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, Charles informs Helen that he is divorcing her for another woman. He then throws her out of the house, leaving a distraught Helen to fend for herself. She turns to Madea (Tyler Perry), her sassy, opinionated, gun-toting, grandmother for help. With the assistance of her friends, family, her faith, and a new love interest, Helen finds the strength that she needs to get her life back on track.

When audiences are initially introduced to Madea, she exhibits many contemporary mammy characteristics. Helen first goes to Madea's house for help in the middle of the night.

When she knocks on the door, Madea answers it wearing a large white muumuu and an

oversized green over coat. She opens the door in a rage, loading her gun-, and preparing to shoot whoever is standing on her porch. Helen falls to the floor yelling, “Madea please don’t shoot, it’s your granddaughter Helen!” Clearly irritated, Madea yells back, “What the hell! Girl I always open the door this time of night shooting because it aint nothing but a crack head or the police knocking on your door this time of night. What you doing here this late?” Helen proceeds to tell her that she was in the neighborhood and just wanted to stop by. Madea immediately senses that she is lying so she begins to close the door in her face instructing her to come back in the morning. However, her nurturing mind takes over and she invites Helen into her home. The scene ends with Madea arguing with her brother Joe about people knocking on their door late at night. She yells “Shut up Joe, I got this.” He replies, “I’m getting tired of people coming by here late at night. I’m going to have to put my foot down.” Madea yells back to Joe, “Kunta Kente put his foot down, it got chopped off. Now shut the hell up and go back to sleep.” Hence, within the first 60 seconds of her screen time, Madea has already displayed cantankerous, irritable and nurturing characteristics.

In an additional scene Madea continues to act nurturing, but bossy. Specifically, she walks into a room where her brother Joe is staring at Helen who is sleeping on the couch. When Joe realizes that Madea has entered the room, he immediately gets up and asks Madea “Harpo, who dis woman.” Madea responds, “Joe go in that room and take your medicine, you know you crazy as hell when you don’t take it.” She is showing her concern for his health, while bossing him around at the same time. After he refuses to take his medicine, Madea pulls her gun from her purse and fires a shot into the air.

Mammy displaying nurturing but bossy behavior is nothing new. In the film *The Mad Miss Manton* (1938), Hattie McDaniel’s maid character Hilda, acts in the same way toward

Melsa Manton (Barbara Stanwyck), the woman for whom she works. Melsa is a young **socialite** **who is** always involved in mischievous antics, while Hilda is the maid that always fixes her problems. Although bossy, Hilda also cares for Melsa. Bogle describes Hilda as,

“A solid mass of cantankerous confidence and vitality, she hurls verbal barbs with the speed and accuracy of an ace pitcher... Throughout *The Mad Miss Manton*, she orders Stanwyck and her friends about, criticizing their beaux, dissecting their schoolgirl chatter, and reprimanding them for their bad manners, Hattie McDaniel stands as an iconoclastic arbiter taste. She also expresses a strong maternal concern for Stanwyck. Hattie demands approval of Stanwyck’s boyfriends, and she does not hesitate to listen in on phone conversations.”

In *Woman*, Madea continues to display mammy’s nurturing but bossy characteristics as displayed in previous films.

There were several different posters used to advertise *Woman* prior to its release. One in particular features a picture of Madea Simmons dressed in an oversized floral, blue and white muumuu on the left side of the poster. She has a black purse around her wrist, and in her hands she is pointing a gun towards the rights side of the poster. The words, “Diary of a Mad Black Woman,” are printed in large purple lettering. Below the purple lettering is the tagline, “Get Ready to Meet a Straight Shooter in Theaters February 25<sup>th</sup>.” This poster puts emphasis on the violence and boldness that Madea projects within the film.

Stereotypical representations of plus-size African American females in advertising are a reoccurring issue. In *An Image Popular in Films Raises Some Eyebrows in Ads*, Jeremy Peters discusses the presence of plus-size African American females in advertising. He explains, “To some, the freer use of overweight black women in comic situations suggests a welcome change that reflects a broader acceptability of blacks in the media. But others find the recurring use of the image a return to a disturbing past. Many say these images may serve to exacerbate misunderstanding between whites and blacks.” Peters goes on noting that the reoccurring role of

plus-size African American females in advertising usually constructs them as hostile and forceful. He states, “Large black actresses have had recurring roles in commercials over the years, and often are cast in roles where their aggressiveness is a defining trait. The heavy black spokeswoman for Pine Sol was one of the first to embrace the role. Her aggression was aimed at household dirt, however, not people. In a recent commercial for Captain Morgan rum, a large black woman berates her man for playing dominoes and making her late (Peters 2006).”

The image that Madea Simmons displays in the poster can very well be an image that determines how African American females are looked upon in reality. Marilyn Kern Foxworth, an African American female author and marketing expert contends, “Not only are we being given images of who we are supposed to be, but others are also formulating their images of us based on that... People have already determined who we are and how we’re going to react in certain situations (Peters, 2006).” After its release, Tyler Perry’s, *Woman* was a success.

Released on February 25, 2005, the film grossed \$50,633,099 at the box office during its theatrical run (Box Office Mojo, “Diary of a Mad Black Women.”

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=diaryofamadblackwoman.htm>, Accessed February 19, 2013). Despite performing well at the box office, Joe Leydon of *Variety* called the film “An ungainly hodgepodge of vaudeville-style comedy, turgid soap-operatic and joyful epiphanies of gospel-flavored uplift” (Fandango Movie Reviews, “Diary of a Mad Black Women 2005.”

[http://www.fandango.com/diaryofamadblackwoman\\_86795/criticreviews](http://www.fandango.com/diaryofamadblackwoman_86795/criticreviews), Accessed February 19, 2013). In another review, Michael O’Sullivan of *The Washington Post* commented on the film and Tyler Perry: “Played in over-the-top, droopy-bosomed drag by screenwriter Tyler Perry, who also acts as Madea’s geriatric, pot-smoking brother, Joe, and Helen’s saintly cousin, Brian, the role is actually quite funny, in the bare-knuckles manner of “In Living Color” or “Mad TV”

(Michael O'Sullivan on Movies, "Diary of a Bad 'Woman'." <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A50173-2005Feb24.html>, Accessed February 19, 2013).

Moreover, Robert Ebert gave the film one star explaining:

There's a good movie buried beneath the bad one. . . Grandma Madea, who is built along the lines of a linebacker, is a tall, lantern-jawed, smooth-skinned, balloon-breasted gargoyle with a bad wig, who likes to wave a loaded gun and shoot test rounds into the ceiling. This person is not remotely plausible; her dialogue is so offensively vulgar. . . we have had one emotionally implausible scene after another involving Charles and Helen, interrupted by periodic raids by the Grandma Madea action figure, who brings the movie to a halt every time she appears. She seems like an invasion from another movie. A very bad movie. I've been reviewing movies for a long time, and I can't think of one that more dramatically shoots itself in the foot (Roger Ebert Reviews, "Diary of a Mad Black Women."

<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20050224/REVIEWS/50214001>, Accessed February 19, 2013).

Last but not least, the updated mammy can be viewed in *Norbit* (2007). The film tells the story of a pleasant and respectable middle aged man named Norbit (Eddie Murphy), who is married to Rasputia (Eddie Murphy) a horrific, obese and atrocious woman. Constantly used, abused, and insulted by Rasputia and her three brothers, Norbit is miserable until he reunites with his childhood love, Kate Thomas (Thandie Newton). Instilled with a newfound sense of hope and love, he does everything in his power to be with her, which includes standing up to the Rasputia and her cruel brothers.

In true mammy fashion, Rasputia is threatening and cantankerous in a scene when she and Norbit are inside of their compact car that is obviously too small for her large body. She gets in on the driver's side of the vehicle and can barely fit without her body blowing the horn. When she realizes that she is too big for the car, she blames Norbit and accuses him of adjusting her seat closer to the steering wheel. Standing up for himself, Norbit tells her that he did not adjust her seat. Rasputia, being the bossy person that she is, insists that it is a scientific fact that he has

moved her seat. When Norbit refutes her claim, she reaches over and smacks him in the face, mumbling that it is indeed a scientific fact that he moved her seat.

The mammy is distinguished as being bossy and cantankerous which are two characteristics that correlate with the stereotype of African American women being angry and having attitudes. Rasputia's antics and behavior reiterate this stereotype. In *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, Melissa V. Harris-Perry defines the angry black woman and entails why this stereotype is detrimental: "The angry black woman is characterized as shrill, loud, argumentative, irrationally angry, and verbally abusive...the power of this stereotype shapes public perception. In *Women of Color and Feminism* Maythee Rojas further describes the angry black women stereotype within the media: "The stereotype of the angry black women is a staple in mainstream pop culture...Including a bitchy black antagonist has become almost de rigueur for most films and television series featuring at least one black actress... Consider, for example how common the sight of a neck rolling, trash talking black female supporting character is in contrast to the depiction of a complex, internally conflicted black female lead."

In addition to being angry, the mammy is also characterized as being a comical figure and her weight often makes her the punch line of many jokes. This definitely applies to Rasputia, who is the foil of many of the jokes in *Norbit*. In one particular scene, the title character is preparing to leave his home to go to the water park with Kate and several orphans. After finding out that Kate will be attending, Rasputia bullies her way into going with Norbit. When she arrives at Raging Waters she is shown stomping toward the entrance wearing a fuchsia bikini and a pink and white swimsuit cover up, which is only covering her arms. Her belly is so fat and hangs so low that it covers up her swimsuit bottoms entirely. Rasputia approaches the entrance to

the water park where an attendant stops her to ask if she is even wearing bottoms. After placing her hands on her hips, she replies, “Of course I’m wearing bottoms,” and lifts up her belly fat to reveal them. Completely shocked and disgusted, the attendant allows her to walk through the turnstile to enter the water park. Importantly, the gag continues as Rasputia attempts to force her large frame through the turnstile, which breaks in half from the force of her weight.

The previous scene continues a long line of mammy characters being used in films as comic relief. For example, minstrelsy was once one of the most popular entertainment forms within America. However, it was simply the general public’s way to try and render one of its most fearsome problems (Race Relations) into a funny one. During Minstrelsy even the beloved mammy became a target of humor (Warren, 2000, 68). From the popularity of minstrelsy, the image and the stereotype of the mammy became so admired that the exact same image can be seen on collectable knick knacks around the world (Goings, 1994, 64). Nonetheless, in many of these knick knacks, figurines and post card, mammy was frequently the butt of jokes and, could be seen bent over washing... with her breast literally caught in the wringer (Ferris Education, “Mammy: Her Life and Times from American Heritage.”

<http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/links/mammy/homepage.htm>, Accessed February 19, 2013).The water park scene involving Rasputia may be seen as amusing; however, the scene also demonstrates how the mammy is used for comic relief and how this tradition continues in contemporary films with updated mammies.

The trailer and posters for *Norbit* clearly demonstrate that the film is based on the overweight, domineering, bully Rasputia. One of the taglines for the film was “Meet a nice guy with a huge problem.” The posters for the film also emphasize Rasputia’s weight and controlling persona. The poster shows Rasputia lying on top of Norbit fully covering his legs and stomach.

Since her body is excessively larger than his, he looks frightened. The tagline for this picture asks “Have You Ever Made A Big Mistake.” The tagline for the poster hints that Rasputia is a big mistake to Norbit because of her size and her horrific attitude.

*Norbit* was released on February 9, 2007 and earned \$95.3 million during its theatrical run (Box Office Mojo, “Norbit.” <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=norbit.htm>, Accessed February 19, 2013). Even though *Norbit* thrived at the box office, Richard Roeper simply stated that the film was “offensively bad” in his review (Rotten Tomatoes, “[Critic Reviews for Norbit](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/norbit/).” <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/norbit/>, Accessed February 19, 2013).

Film critic A.O Scott of *The New York Times* reviewed the film and notes:

*Norbit*, a raucous, sloppy comedy directed by Brian Robbins, is primarily a showcase for the talents of its star, Eddie Murphy. . . Each character is a bit of a stereotype. His wife, Rasputia. . . is an ill-tempered giantess, a monstrous variation on Madea, the plus-size matriarch incarnated by Tyler Perry in “*Diary of a Mad Black Woman*” and its sequel. To play Rasputia, Mr. Murphy appears to have been encased in foam rubber and dressed in Dolce & Gabbana for Elephants. . . Mr. Robbins’s direction is adequate. He doesn’t mess up the story — it was a mess to begin with — but too many of the gags are lumbering and graceless, more fun to anticipate than to witness (Read the New York Times Review, “Norbit (2007)” <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/335654/Norbit/overview>, Accessed February 19, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

The goal of this paper was to explore the history of the mammy in film, radio, and television and more importantly, to examine African American actors and the ways in which they continue to play updated mammies in film. The image of the mammy in entertainment had become less visible since the times of actresses like Hattie McDaniel and Ethel Waters who both played mammy roles in numerous films and television shows between 1930’s-1960. However, mammy has resurfaced in full force in a different and contradictory form. Since 2000, there has been over thirteen motion pictures produced that exhibit the Black male as the mammy character,

eight of which the mammy is the title character. The films *Big Momma's House*, *Diary of a Mad Black Women* and *Norbit* all display African American men cross dressing to portray updated mammies. In addition to these films, there are other films that display African American males portraying the mammy like the sequels to *Big Momma's House*, *Big Momma's House 2* (2006), and *Big Mommas: Like Father, Like Son* (2011). Both films feature Martin Lawrence going undercover disguised as Big Momma to solve different crimes. Tyler Perry has produced a plethora of films including *Madea's Family Reunion* (2006) and *Madea Goes to Jail* (2009) that star the updated mammy character Madea.

The films *Big Momma's House*, *Diary of a Mad Black Women* and *Norbit* all feature male actors that have created successful projects that display the demeaning mammy. Martin Lawrence once starred in his own greatly-rated television series *Martin* (1992-1997) and has also been deemed one of the greatest standup comics of the day. Tyler Perry has produced several films that did not feature his popular character Madea, like *For Colored Girls* (2010) and *Good Deeds* (2012). Eddie Murphy, the second-highest grossing actor in the United States, has clearly given himself a name in show business by being one of the greatest comedians of all time starring in films like *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984) and *Coming To America* (1988). However, all of the actors have portrayed the stereotype of the mammy in one or more films. In the future, it would be exceptional to see positive images of plus-size African American females and to see these actors stop the demeaning portrayal of the mammy in film.

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