

**Beyond Simple Stereotypes:
Black Representation in Thanhouser Films, 1910-1918**

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Nineteen-fifteen was a landmark year in cinema history. D.W. Griffith premiered his enormously popular and equally controversial cinematic masterpiece, *The Birth of a Nation*, establishing the historic nadir for racist representations of African Americans in film. Showings triggered race riots, mobilized progressive social protest, and played midwife to a rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan. What is far-less-known is that – later the same year – the independent Thanhouser Company released a film that arguably contradicts Griffith’s and other racist representations of blacks in cinema’s preclassical period. At the same time, this one-reel comedy may be read as complicating hegemonic racial and gender hierarchies of early 20th century U.S. society. The film is *Glorianna’s Getaway*. It depicts a black maid who boldly impersonates her white mistress and attends a “fancy dress ball” in whiteface, wearing the mistress’ costume mask and escorted by the mistress’ unsuspecting fiancé. In doing so, is this African American female character directly defying the de facto social segregation of the time and at least implying a challenge to the taboo of interracial romance?

This presentation suggests that *Glorianna’s Getaway* supports an argument by Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, who maintains that black representations in early cinema should not be summarily dismissed as simple stereotypes. On the contrary, there is multilayered, “polyphonic” meaning to be mined in some portrayals of black people in that period.

Most scholarship concludes that black people are routinely stereotyped in films of the preclassical period, especially in moving pictures produced primarily by and for white people. According to Donald Bogle, such stereotypes emphasized black inferiority to amuse white audiences, with the emerging film industry freely appropriating racist representations that had circulated in the nation's larger culture for generations. (4-5) Daniel J. Leab observes that blacks were casually presented as less-than-human and frequently childlike in their dependence on whites. (2) According to Eileen Bowser, such images were perpetuated in hundreds of films and accepted by most audiences, despite resistance from black and white progressives, former abolitionists, and others. (10) Taking a somewhat different perspective, Mark A. Reid maintains that a shortcoming of much scholarship on moving pictures representing African Americans is an over-emphasis on films made by white people to the neglect of those created by blacks. In fact, Reid produces readings of early African American films by early black filmmakers that are far more nuanced than previously thought.

Citing Reid and others, Stewart argues in *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (2005) that some preclassical images of blacks – even in white-produced films – are too complex to be dismissed as simple racialized stereotypes. Uncovering such multilayered meaning can “complicate” images otherwise dismissed as mere stereotypes, revealing them, on closer examination, as representations that seem to challenge the racial and even gender hierarchies of a society profoundly conservative on such issues. (27-31) One film that Stewart cites as an example is *A Bucket of Cream Ale*, a 1904 American Mutoscope & Biograph production in which a black maid pours a bucket of ale on the head of her rude white male employer. (29) From such imagery then, it may be possible to discover and examine expressions of black agency in a society and a time that routinely suppressed such expressions.

Of more than 1,000 films produced by Thanhouser, 186 are currently known to have survived. Of these, a total of 38 are available on DVD. Each of these films was reviewed for this project. Given the dearth of surviving Thanhouser films, research for this paper relied primarily on information from the documents in the Thanhouser encyclopedia, compiled by Q. David Bowers. Published in compact disk format, the collection consists of more than 1,000 descriptions of films – in advertisements, articles, synopses, and reviews from trade press publications – and another 1,000 biographical entries on Thanhouser performers and other employees.

According to Bowers: “[Thanhouser] was ahead of its time in its presentation of minorities in a favorable light in an era in which Jews, Chinese, blacks, and others were often disparaged in film scenarios.” Nonetheless, racial and ethnic stereotypes – as defined by Bogle but arguably milder than many of the period – are in deed found in Thanhouser films. Analysis of available information suggests that stereotypes appear in 17 of the 18 Thanhouser films with identifiable black representation – reflecting all five categories described by Bogle. The first category is the all-too-familiar stereotype of the “tom” – which made its cinematic debut in the 1903 Edison film *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, adapted from Harriett Beecher Stowe’s popular novel. (3) A “socially acceptable,” non-threatening “good Negro,” the tom was utterly faithful to white folks and invariably eager to protect them, even to sacrificing his own life. The second of Bogle’s stereotypes, the “coon,” was essentially an “amusement object” and “black buffoon,” who provided “comic relief.” In its original incarnation, Bogle explains, the coon appeared as “a harmless little screwball creation whose eyes popped, whose hair stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were pleasant and diverting.” (Bogle 7) A third stereotypical character is the “tragic mulatto,” representing both the threat and product of miscegenation.

Usually the offspring of a white man and a nonwhite woman, the mulatto's fate typically proves tragic, due to the forbidden mixture of black and white blood. (9) The most threatening stereotype is the "brutal black buck," introduced to the silver screen, Bogle tells us, in *The Birth of a Nation*. This stereotype may be described as violent, angry, oversexed, and savage. (13-14) Unlike other stereotypes, the black buck appears in only one Thanhouser film identified by this study – a story set in the jungles of Africa. The last of Bogle's five stereotypes is the "mammy," often amusing like the coon, "distinguished, however, by her sex and fierce independence.... usually big, fat, and cantankerous." A variation is the "aunt jemima," a female counterpart to the tom and "sweet, jolly, and good-tempered." (9)

The most significant mammy character in the Thanhouser films analyzed for this project appears in the title role of *The Mistake of Mammy Lou*, a one-reel 1915 melodrama. The "old colored mammy" misconstrues her lovelorn mistress' actions and mistakenly fears the young woman is planning to commit suicide with a handgun. Mammy Lou finds and informs her mistress' estranged fiancé, who rushes ahead to the young woman's home. He arrives to find a "tramp" robbing the fiancé. As the would-be robber holds them at bay with the young woman's handgun, Mammy Lou arrives and immediately exclaims that she had earlier removed the bullets from the gun "so young Missy couldn't hurt herself." The young man subdues the robber and the police are called. (Synopsis, *Reel Life*, November 6, 1915) Mammy Lou saves the day for her white mistress – but only through her arguably childlike misunderstanding of adult white folks' business. Clearly – by today's standards – the mammy stereotype is in play here, although, again, in a milder version than in many films of that day.

An even stronger case in that regard can be made for *The Golf Caddie's Dog*, a 1912 comedy in which a black caddie reunites a pair of quarrelling lovers – a golfer he admires and

the golfer's fiancé. After witnessing the lovers' quarrel and the young woman's subsequent flirtation with another man, the caddie whitewashes his own dog to make the animal appear mad and releases him on the golf course. The would-be suitor deserts the young woman, her fiancé comes to her rescue, and the couple is reunited, per the caddie's plan. (Synopsis, *The Moving Picture News*, March 9, 1912). Portrayed, in fact, by a black actor, the caddie seems to exercise a great deal of initiative and cleverness. One might argue that he demonstrates considerable insight into human nature. He is apparently a child but notably not childish in his understanding of the business of adult white folks. This portrayal may be understood as complicating the stereotype of black people as childlike in their dependence on whites. The character, although perhaps reflecting a "tom" stereotype in his fidelity and service to white people, may be read as invested with polyphonic meaning.

However, the black role that most resists categorization as stereotypical and, in fact, suggests what Stewart describes as "polyphonic" meaning, is that of the title character in *Glorianna's Getaway*. As described earlier, Glorianna is a black maid who is envious of her mistress' "care-free life." Played by a white actress in blackface, the maid dons whiteface and a costume mask to accompany her absent mistress' unsuspecting fiancé to a "fancy dress ball." The mistress arrives later at the ball, suspecting her clueless fiancé of infidelity, and catches him whispering in the ear of the imposter. The revelation of Glorianna's ruse produces laughter and she leaves. Later, the mistress returns home and finds the maid's letter of resignation: "I quit my job before you fire me. But I sure did have one grand, good time." (*Reel Life*, August 21, 1915) More than any other film reviewed for this project, *Glorianna's Getaway* suggests black representation that defies reduction to stereotype, instead transgressing rigid racial hierarchies of

the time. The film depicts a degree of black agency in white society that is certainly unusual for films of the period.

In short, Glorianna transgresses beyond her “prescribed place.” The loss of her job is perhaps the minimal but necessary punishment for such social transgression – for which, notably, the black woman expresses no regret – only satisfaction with the enjoyment that her defiance bought. Facilitating her gambit, Glorianna is apparently a similar physical size as her “actress” mistress, suggesting that the maid is not the stereotypically full-figured mammy. Further, Glorianna behaves apparently in a sufficiently refined manner that does not attract undue attention from her escort or the white crowd, unlikely if she were a classic mammy portrayal.

Although *Glorianna’s Getaway* is a comedy – and perhaps safely so for the era – the film challenges, at least indirectly, the taboo of interracial romance. Although, the maid’s goal seems simply to enjoy herself at the ball, her escort is whispering in her ear when the mistress arrives. Thus, the film at least alludes to the threat of miscegenation, which historically has created problems for the racial purity of whites and for society’s visual policing of the color line. Further complicating the analysis, Glorianna herself is, in a sense, “passing” – assuming “whiteness,” much like untold numbers of nonwhites whose light skin color renders them indistinguishable from the general white population.

Glorianna is bold and self-directed, contravening racial boundaries and rejecting the mammy stereotype. The tragic mulatto may be the closest stereotype, with Glorianna’s resignation from her job serving figuratively as the self-sacrifice that eliminates the threat of miscegenation. But this audacious woman – perhaps “uppity Negro” in the parlance of her time – does not neatly fit any of the stereotypes described by Bogle. On the contrary, *Glorianna’s Getaway* problematizes conventional wisdom on black representation in preclassical film. In

short, this 1915 motion picture by the Thanhouser Company embodies the polyphonic meaning associated with black representation that Stewart argues is to be found in many preclassical films.

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Filmography

Thanhouser Films

The Actor's Children (1910)

Ambitious Awkward Andy (1916)

Back to Nature (1911)

Beating Back (1916)

Betrayed (1916)

Brothers Equal (1916)

Checking Charlie's Child (1915)

A Clever Collie's Comeback (1916)

The Cry of the Children (1912)

Ferdie Fink's Flirtations (1915)

Flames and Fortune (1911)

The Girl Strike Leader (1913)

Glorianna's Getaway (1915)

God's Witness (1915)

The Golf Caddie's Dog (1912)

Help! Help! (1915)

Hidden Valley (1916)

The Judge's Story (1911)

The Little Church Around the Corner (1913)

Miss Taqu of Tokio (1912)

The Mistake of Mammy Lou (1915)

The Satyr and the Lady (1911)

Uncle Tom's Cabin (1910)

Washington in Danger (1912)

The Woman in Politics (1916)

Other Films

Avenging a Crime; Or Burned at the Stake (Crescent, 1904)

The Birth of a Nation (Griffith, 1915)

A Bucket of Cream Ale (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1904)

The Chicken Thief (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1904)

Chicken Thieves (Edison, 1897)

A Nigger in the Woodpile (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1904)

Uncle Tom's Cabin (Edison, 1903)

The Watermelon Patch (Edison, 1905)

What Happened in the Tunnel (Edison, 1903)