

Critical Insights On Race Relations In Film **Assessing *Bringing Down The House***

Frederick Gooding, Jr.¹, Mark Beeman², Marta Soledad Serpas Guardado³
¹Texas Chistian University, ²Northern Arizona Univerisity, ³Flagstaff, Arizona

Abstract : *The American film Bringing Down the House was a huge commercial success. Starring the popular comedian Steve Martin and the popular hip hop artist and cover girl model Queen Latifah, Bringing Down the House seemed to bring a new approach to race relations to the screen in the twenty-first century. After decades of either banning or problematizing interracial relationships between African Americans and whites in cinema, Bringing Down the House openly ridiculed both the barriers and the tropes that had been mainstays of Hollywood films. However, a closer look at the film from the lens of critical social science theory reveals that the stereotypical portrayals entrenched in Hollywood filmmaking still exist in modern forms.*

Keywords: *race relations, film, Black feminist thought, controlling images, stereotypes.*

I. Introduction

Popular reaction to the film *Bringing Down the House* (2003) [1] seemed to indicate that Hollywood cinema could make a film that was both a top box office draw and could embrace an interracial romance between an African American woman and a white man. *Bringing Down the House* was the number one grossing film in the United States for eighteen days in March of 2003, and stayed in the top ten grossing films in theaters for forty-nine days after its release, eventually earning over \$164,000,000 worldwide.[2] American audiences seemed ready to accept a film that ridiculed racist whites who held on to anachronistic stereotypes of Black women, albeit in a comedic format.

Importantly, Queen Latifah's role as Charlene is written to mock the Mammy image which has existed in Hollywood film since the first feature length blockbuster. Indeed, her role in the film was acknowledged as the Black women who refused to give in and insisted the white protagonist deal with her on her own terms. The celebrated film critic Roger Ebert was puzzled, however, why the film departed from the romantic comedy formula whereby the contentious but likeable male and female leads find true romance in the end [3]. Missing in these observations was attention to the problematic and degrading imagery drawn from a history of institutional racism and reflected in the recurring degrading images of African Americans in American cinema. To appreciate this underlying context we employ critical theoretical insights on controlling images from the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins [4].

II. Critical Theory

The sociologist C. Wright Mills [5] understood that the inability to distinguish personal troubles from public issues leaves us at a disadvantage when trying to address social problems. Personal troubles, brought on by the behavior of the individual, can be resolved at the individual level. Here, education, counseling, or self-improvement accessible to the individual may remedy an undesirable situation. But public issues, problems shared by many and grounded in the way resources are distributed systematically in society, demand solutions involving institutional change. Mills realized that to understand public issues, it is essential to analyze the historical and institutional contexts affecting people's lives. Types of people, Mills understood, are those who in similar historical and institutional circumstances can share common privileges or problems. This type of approach to problem solving was labeled the sociological imagination.

Patricia Hill Collins, in her theoretical treatise entitled *Black Feminist Thought*, adroitly incorporates the essential components of the sociological imagination in examining the challenges facing contemporary

African American women. For Collins, the long-standing stereotypes serve as controlling images involving domination, the justification of sexual exploitation, and the denial of "fully human status as fully human subjects by treating us as the Objectified other" [4] (p. 79). These controlling images intersecting race and sexuality originated with the ideological justification for American slavery. In this context, the classic stereotypes of the Mammy and the Jezebel were born and have survived to the present day.

The Mammy character reflected an image of African American women consistent with dominant white southern ideology. According to Collins, the Mammy stereotype was "created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service" (80). Mammy "knows her place." Collins explains the Mammy is the ideal Black woman to serve white male authority in a capitalist structure. As a controlling image, the Mammy is reduced to a source for cheap labor for white employers, imagined as an asexual being, but is ironically highly prized and valued as a surrogate mother for white children. "Mammified" occupations reinforce the dominance of the white power structure, and African American women who internalize the Mammy model potentially become socialization agents who prepare their own children to expect subordinate positions in society.

Reproducing the controlling image through the Mammy role has other negative effects as well. Psychological problems may include feelings of self-alienation, self-hatred, and mental confusion for some African American women [6]. Even comedic representations of the Mammy character may make African American women feel maligned or may contribute to eating disorders [7,8]. The racism and sexism associated with the images create special barriers, which can be damaging to African American women's careers and leadership opportunities [9].

For Collins the Jezebel represents a racialized deviant of aggressive sexuality [4]. Again, coming out of the plantation slavery experience, the extraordinary sexual desire of the Jezebel serves to rationalize common types of victimization. The enslaved African American woman was subjected to rape by white males, but these offenses were justified in white society as fueled by the carnal initiative of seductive and sexualized aggressive women, rather than as the result of the depraved, violent and morally bereft actions of a manipulative, exploitative, and cruel slave owner. Using women as "breeders" for economic gain could also be explained as a natural outcome of the Jezebel's lust for sexual activity rather than economic exploitation. The control over the enslaved woman's body was also evident in her being used as a "wet nurse" for the slave master's children. The Jezebel's mythical insatiable sexual appetite invites a societal assessment of her as a "freak" sexually [4]. Thus, the Jezebel image reverses the responsibility of sexual exploitation historically and places African American women in "double jeopardy" for sexual harassment in the present-day context [10]. These images encourage victim blaming and may explain lower conviction rates for rapists when the victim is an African American woman [11,12].

Collins notes controlling images are dynamic and can be adapted to fit changing circumstances. For example, the Jezebel attributes are adapted to stigmatize modern women as "club hoochies," that is African American "women who wear sleazy clothes and dance in a 'slutty' fashion" [4] (p. 91). Controlling images affect adolescent African American girls as well. The identification with objectifying images of female African American entertainers increase adolescent girls' emphasis on beauty and self-appearance [13]. The acceptance of modern Jezebel stereotype has been found to be correlated with 'colorism' (the embracing of Western standards of beauty by African American girls); with colorism being significantly related to increased drug use among adolescent girls [14]. Colorism and acceptance of modern Jezebel stereotypes also are correlated to attitudes placing young African American girls at greater sexual risk [15]

Although our focus is primarily on the Mammy and the Jezebel in this analysis, it is also important to mention a third degrading portrayal, this time targeting African American men. The Black Beast character according to Davis, "racism has always drawn strength from its ability to encourage sexual coercion" [16] (p. 177). The paternalistic race relations which developed to reinforce the plantation slavery system not only condoned coercive sexual relations between the white male patriarch and enslaved women of color, but also condemned and castigated sexual relations between men of color and white women [17]. For Davis, "the black rapist" and "the bad black women" are "twin" co-existing and reinforcing myths that are used to maintain the control and exploitation of both African American men and women [16].

Cinematically these images were portrayed as "Black Beasts" beginning with recently freed African Americans after the civil war threatening innocent white women, and more recently and as "gang-banger"

portrayals. Hollywood openly celebrates the Black Beast portrayals as evidenced by the Academy Award winning performances for Best Actor in the twenty-first century, specifically for *Training Day* (2001) [18] and *The Last King of Scotland* (2006) [19]. These pervasive images also influence the non-fiction side of the media. Contemporary news reporting reinforces the myth of African American males as violent and as rape threats to white women [21-23].

This pervasive mythology set the context for the lynching of innocent African American men predominately in the Southern states during the Jim Crow era [4,24,25] and the tragic murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till [26] in 1955. More recently, the consequences of Black Beast mythology is highlighted by disproportionate rates of arrest, rates of convictions, and harshness of sentences for African Americans *vis-à-vis* whites [27-29], the disproportionate likelihood of unarmed African American males being shot by the police [30], and the massive demonstrations protesting these unjust killings [31,32].

III. Controlling Imagery In Film: Mammy And Jezebel

Controlling images of African American women not only can be traced to the cruelty of the plantation slavery era, they also can be traced to the first highly successful commercial feature length film in American cinema, *Birth of a Nation* (1915) [33]. These included the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Black Beast. The film portrayed recently freed post-Civil War African Americans as villains for believing in equality, while members of the terrorist organization, the Ku Klux Klan, were depicted as heroes who restored moral order to the South. President Woodrow Wilson, a trained historian, praised the film as "writing history with lightning" [34].

African Americans as voters, elected office holders, soldiers, and potentially as marriage partners of whites, were viewed with fear and disgust by the film's white southern protagonist. The threat is personified in the two "Black Beast" characters in the film, Gus and Sylls Lynch. Gus, a soldier, follows the young innocent female, Pet Sister, to the forest to ask her to marry him. She is horrified, runs to the edge of a cliff, and jumps to her death rather than "jump the broom."

Sylls Lynch, described as a "mulatto," is presented as a combination of ambition (his white heritage) and animalistic desire (his African heritage). His white egalitarian political mentor from the north, congressman Stoneman, is horrified to learn Lynch wants to marry his daughter Ellie. Stoneman and Ellie protest, but Lynch physically captures Ellie and attempts to force her into marriage. The climax of the film is the rescue of Ellie by the Klan. Griffith's film popularized the myth of Black male rapist, and the film's strong anti-miscegenation view would later be incorporated into the Hollywood code for filmmaking [35].

The African American (mulatto) woman Lydia, like Lynch, is sexually animalistic and hungry for power. As the sexually attractive Jezebel, she manipulates Stoneman, who loses his ability to use good responsible judgment under her influence. Both Lydia and Lynch are portrayed as the unfortunate products of miscegenation who threaten white supremacy.

Whereas Lydia as Jezebel is sexually attractive and threatening to white men, the Mammy character in *The Birth of a Nation* is loyal to "her" white family. She has no apparent biological family of her own, has no love interest, and is not presented as being sexually attractive to anyone. A large, heavy-set, dark (in blackface) woman, Mammy is subservient to whites, but she dominates African American men. She orders a reticent African American male servant to defend the white family and physically fights African American soldiers of the Union Army to keep whites from harm. Although she is a fighter, she also serves as comic relief in the film. In one scene she belly-flops on top of two African American soldiers, her arms and legs flapping, with her body weight sufficient to pin grown men to the ground.

Although Mammy is willing to fight for the white family, she cannot save them alone. The white hero, Ben Cameron (the Lil' Colonel) leads the newly formed Ku Klux Klan on horseback to rescue the white innocent Ellie from the Black Beast.

Hence, *The Birth of a Nation* signified the birth of demeaning popular racial stereotypes that became staples in the burgeoning Hollywood film industry. The powerful effect the film had on audiences should not be underestimated. Although film was protested by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for its demeaning images of African Americans, it was extremely popular, it gained high praise from President Wilson, and it was used as a successful propaganda tool for recruitment by the Ku Klux Klan [36]. With the main African American characters played by white actors in blackface, *The Birth of a Nation* was a technically advanced extension of the popular minstrel shows which had come before it.

The Mammy character became a common feature in Hollywood films, uncritically accepted by many northern moviegoers, and actively promoted by southern whites who both embraced Jim Crow segregation and rationalized their slave owning heritage. The first academy award won by an African American woman went to Hattie McDaniel for her performance as Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) [37]. Winning eight academy awards this highly celebrated film, like *Birth of a Nation*, focused on the hardships faced by southern whites during and after the civil war, with Mammy refusing to leave her former owner even after she was freed. McDaniel drew considerable criticism from the African American press for yet another demeaning depiction of African Americans as loyal servants. However, The United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), were delighted with the depictions in *Gone with the Wind*. For decades the UDC had been involved in a propaganda campaign through literature and monument construction to rewrite the brutal history of southern slavery as a paternalistic loving institution overseen by honorable white people [38]. As part of their campaign they attempted to convince the U.S. Government to erect a national monument honoring Mammy in Washington, D.C. Eventually they succeeded in erecting Mammy as part of their civil war monument placed in Arlington National Cemetery. *Gone with the Wind* author Margaret Mitchel accepted the UDC citation award the year of the film's release [39].

Although Hattie McDaniel had actively protested inequality in California and was married four times, Hollywood repeatedly limited her in asexual subservient domestic worker roles. Her fame did not win her the right to sit with white actors at the 1939 Academy Awards Ceremony, nor did it get her an invitation to the premier of *Gone with the Wind* in Atlanta [40,41].

Controlling imagery is stubbornly enduring, even corrupting highly awarded films dedicated to promoting racial equality. Take for example, the groundbreaking film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) [42], nominated for ten academy awards and winner for best screenplay. Filming began shortly after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and before the *Virginia v. Loving* case had struck down state bans on interracial marriage, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* tackled the issue of marriage between an African American male (John Prentice) and a white female (Joanna Drayton). Challenging the cinematic taboo established with the *Birth of a Nation* and reinforced for decades through the Motion Picture Code, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* set out to claim race is no barrier to a marriage based on love. This time the classic white supremacist is cast aside, while the parents of John and Joanna debate whether they and the world are ready to accept their children's decision. The biggest obstacle seems to be Joanna's white liberal father, Matt Drayton, who in the end realizes his objections have been misguided, and he gives his blessing. The film was remarkable in that a positive portrayal of African American male romantically linked to a white female is still a Hollywood rarity.

For all its good intentions as a modern look at race relations, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* cannot escape the stereotypical tradition of Mammy. The most hostile reaction to the marriage inside the Drayton household comes not from the white family, but their African American maid, Tilly. Tilly, in classic Mammy fashion, is fiercely protective of her white family. In particular, she is protective of Joanna whom Tilly has raised from a baby. Tilly's disapproval of an African American man marrying Joanna is highlighted in an emotional outburst when she berates John as a threatening intruder. Reminiscent of Mammy in *The Birth of a Nation*, Tilly distrusts African American men who think they are equal to whites. Although a Black woman living in the late 1960s, Tilly appears dismissive of Martin Luther King and distrustful of Black Power. Tilly's mammy-like status is reinforced in the climactic scene of the film where white paternalism dominates. Matt Drayton, informs his guests that Tilly, like a child, has been misbehaving, then instructs her to sit down. Here Matt's decision to approve of the interracial marriage appears to support racial equality, but at the same time his behavior reinforces conventional racial hierarchy of authority. The opinions of Tilly, although a "member of the family," and John's father, who both oppose the marriage, are rendered irrelevant.

The film *The Help* (2011) [43] is a serious attempt to humanize African American women domestic workers during the Jim Crow era. The film references actual historical events, such as referencing Margaret Mitchell's work as "glorifying" the Mammy, while Skeeter, the white heroine of *The Help*, says "nobody ever asks Mammy how she felt." Skeeter's goal is to write "from the point of view of the help." This fictitious depiction of a white southern hero during the civil rights era even briefly touches on the issue of how does the African American nanny feel about caring for white children when they are not home to care for their own children. Still, this film essentially is centered on a young, college educated, white southern woman breaking

away from the conventional lifestyle of marriage, motherhood, and overseeing domestic workers. While longing to view life from the perspective of the domestic workers, the film relegates them to the same traits as other Mammy films. The domestic workers love “their” white children and the children love them. The film’s main character as a domestic worker is Aibileen. Aibileen loves the white child she cares for more than the child’s own mother. Similar to *Imitation of Life*, the white child is neglected by her biological mother, and refers to Aibileen as “mother.” When Aibileen is fired by her employer, Aibileen begs the white mother to “give my sweet girl a chance.”

As with the Mammy stereotype, Hollywood used the Jezebel as a recurring character as well. Hollywood depictions of the Jezebel, as in *Birth of a Nation*, were commonly performed by white actors up through the mid-twentieth century. For example, the film *White Cargo* (1942) [44] featured the popular actor Hedy Lamarr in blackface. Set on a British plantation in the Congo in the early 1900s, Lamarr’s scantily clad character Tondelayo seduces and manipulates the somewhat naïve and innocent young British plantation manager temporarily stationed there. Tondelayo’s desire for material possessions ultimately results in her attempt to deceive and kill the young infatuated manager. Like *Birth of a Nation* the historical reality of white male dominance over people of color is reinvented in cinematic form as white victimhood.

The Jezebel was also at times cinematically depicted as light-skinned, mixed race characters. These “tragic mulatto” characters allowed whites to play the Jezebel role with no need for blackface, as the “tragedy” often involved them trying to “pass” as white. An example is *Imitation of Life* (1959) which centers around a white struggling actor named Lora Meredith, and an African American woman named Annie Johnson. Both have young daughters, Susie Meredith and Annie Johnson, who we see grow into adults during the film. The film opens with Annie needing a place to stay, so Lora, although without a decent income, offers to let Annie move in as the nanny and maid. Over time Susie feels neglected by her career-minded mother, and essentially Annie becomes her loving Mammy. Annie’s daughter, Sara Jane, continually tries to pass as white in desperate attempts to be romantically involved with white men. Sara Jane eventually rejects and breaks off all contact with her mother to maintain her deception with the white men she desires. In the end, Sarah Jane is left without her mother’s love, nor does she find happiness in romance. The men she dates either beat her or abandon her after discovering her racial identity. Her loving mother dies before Sarah Jane can reconnect and apologize for rejecting her. *Imitation of Life*, as with the other Jezebel films before it, reinforced Hollywood’s strong anti-miscegenation message.

Monster’s Ball (2001) [45] is the story of Hank, a presumably racist white prison guard, and Leticia, an African American woman who loses both her husband and her son in the opening moments of the film. Hank works death row, where Leticia’s husband is put to death. Shortly after, her young son dies in an accident. The Leticia character ushers the Jezebel image of the African American woman into the twenty-first century. Rather than taking time to mourn the passing of her husband and son, Leticia encounters a stranger (Hank), gets drunk, and appears to deal with her grief by exposing herself and begging Hank to have sex with her. Hank’s prior experience with sex seems to have been with white prostitutes, but after his erotic experience with Leticia, Hank is smitten. Despite still living with his domineering, racist father at the time, Hank decides to reject his father and live with Leticia. But despite their strong sexual attraction and growing affection, Hank and Leticia do not really know much about each other. The film ends with Leticia discovering Hank is her husband’s executioner, and both now seem lost and uncertain what will be next.

While the critic Roger Ebert argued the focus of this story should be about need, not “sex appeal,” he concedes the camera “lingers” on the “half clothed” Leticia for too long [3]. Even this is a generous interpretation of the way Leticia is presented. The camera’s focus on not only the “half clothed” but the fully unclothed body of Leticia during her sexual encounter is not subtle. This interpretation also ignores the economic and racial dynamics that historically are tied into “need.” Notably, the African American actor Angela Bassett said she did not consider taking the role of Leticia because it was “such a stereotype about black women and sexuality” [46].

IV. Bringing Down the House: A Second Look

Since the *Birth of a Nation* introduced and popularized African American stereotypes and demeaning images, they have appeared in numerous films up to the present. We have illustrated them with selected

examples. Importantly, Collins has noted these degrading images of African American women can take on new forms [4]. Like racism itself that adapts to its historical and institutional contexts, imagery of the Jezebel and the Mammy can be updated and modernized. It is in this context we take a second look at *Bringing Down the House*. As we mentioned in the introduction, the Pulitzer prize winning film critic Roger Ebert seemed puzzled that this romantic comedy film diverted from the conventional formula. The main male lead and female lead, after experiencing romantic tension and attraction do not become a couple at the film's conclusion. The film and culture critic Esther Iverem viewed *Bringing Down the House* as a breakthrough film, as Charlene exhibits hip hop style and lives life on her own terms. Iverem described the film as a "Black woman's anti-mammy manifesto" [47].

Both these observations are understandable from a first viewing of the film, especially from the perspective of conventional film criticism. We would like to consider another perspective. We believe that *Bringing Down the House* does follow a more conventional formula, but not the formula prescribed by romantic comedy. Conventional romantic comedies generally did not challenge racial discrimination. Likewise, Iverem's review is following a conventional reading; that is, comedy can be used to ridicule the status quo [47]. But in this case, our main character is rooted in racial imagery that the ridicule does not erase.

Bringing Down the House was written, directed, and produced primarily by white Americans, although Queen Latifah served as an executive producer and one of the production companies involved was Latifah's New Jersey Entertainment. That being said, there is nothing untoward about whites making a movie featuring Black characters, however many of the mainstream shared narratives contain historically damaging norms that subjugate Black existence to a secondary status in juxtaposition to white imagery [48].

In *Bringing Down the House*, while the protagonist Charlene (as played by Queen Latifah) shares main character duties with Steve Martin's Peter Sanderson character, she nonetheless inhabits a world created and dominated by whites both onscreen in fantasy and off screen in reality. Clearly, the intent of the moviemakers was to use humor as a tool whereby racism could be shamed or burlesqued in satirical fashion. What concerns us presently is the fact that racism is normalized as simply part of Charlene's unquestioned, everyday world. White characters also engage the topic of race on some level as well; in fact, racism is the very thread that stitches the entire movie together.

Bringing Down the House centers on an African American woman (Charlene) who escapes from prison to clear her name of an unjust conviction. She enlists the help of a white tax lawyer (Peter) by forcing her way into his life by misleading him through an internet chat room. Along the way, we find Peter is trying to reconnect with his estranged wife and become a better father to his two children. Peter's success at his job and his social life depends upon pleasing a host of white racist characters.

We shall explore how Queen Latifah's character engages the Jezebel and the Mammy stereotypes and whether these narratives are simply being rehashed or being transformed.

4. 1. Charlene as Jezebel

"Grab These"

In Charlene's first encounter with Peter she displays classic Jezebel characteristics – overt sexuality and devious manipulation of an unsuspecting white male. Setting up an on-line date, Charlene leads Peter to believe she is a blonde white female lawyer. Charlene deviously sent an image with a white female in the foreground, whereas Charlene only appears in the background.

Arriving at Peter's house dressed in tight blue jean shorts and a denim sleeveless shirt tied at the waist, Charlene exclaims, "Look at all these pretty candles, all romantic and shit...Somebody was plannin' on gettin' some booty tonight!" Beyond her overt sensuality, Charlene's character both physically and dialectically exaggerates stereotypical racial cultural differences between Peter and herself. Peter wears a pressed shirt and dress slacks, lives in an expensive home in an upscale white neighborhood, and speaks college book (American) English. Charlene explains Peter's confusion:

"That's yo' fault you thinkin' that bro.... You musta notta tooka good look at that picha." And later, "Bump that...Shoot, Rosco cracked that do'; I kicked it off the easy and bams...for real though." Peter is incredulous, "What did you just say?"

While an exasperated Peter tries to force Charlene out of his home, he is no match for Charlene's manipulative style highlighted by her overt sexual and racial references. As he locks her outside the house,

Charlene yells loud enough for his neighbors to hear: "It's your baby Peter, and don't you deny it. His DNA test told on you. You lied Peter; you know little Kareem is yours. Why? Why'd you do me like that Peter? You told me I was your beautiful African Queen.... Little Kareem...just wants a relationship, with his white daddy. A little chocolate-vanilla swirl...that magic night at the crack house."

To avoid public embarrassment, Peter hustles Charlene back into the house. Peter's racist neighbor, Mrs. Kline, yells to him, "I thought I heard Negro." Peter yells back, "No negro spoken here!"

Charlene manipulates her way back into Peter's home for the night. Charlene emphasizes race identity and sexuality saying: "Don't be gettin' any ideas about sneaking up here and hittin' this ass, 'cause you blew your chance with this fine sista!". The next morning, Peter locks Charlene out of the house and discards her personal effects in the curbside trashcan, but she resourcefully shows up at the country club when Peter is meeting an important (and highly prejudiced) client, Mrs. Arness. Passing herself off as belonging with Peter's party, Charlene enters the dining room in one of only two of the film's slow motion scenes (the other being a shooting). She wears a jean mini-skirt and heels, and walks to the beat of "Black" music accented by jungle animal noises. The slow motion shot examines Charlene stopping to rub her thighs, extend her tongue and lick fully around her lips, as her face is lighted up by what appear to be camera flashes as if she were an object of desire.

Peter's white lawyer colleague, Howie, is instantly smitten by Charlene's physical appearance and sexualized walk. He exclaims "Shazam...Swing it you Cocoa Goddess." Howie's labeling of Charlene as "Cocoa Goddess" expresses his desire for Charlene as a racialized sexual object. We will return to Howie later.

Charlene's continues to use sexuality and blackness as manipulative threats to Peter's career. Charlene leverages her way back into Peter's home by masquerading as Peter's nanny in front Mrs Arness. This threat is particularly effective as Peter is forced to hide Charlene's true identity from upper class Whites who could damage his career. Charlene's social blackmail forces Peter to allow her into his home and to provide her pro bono attorney services.

Charlene's Jezebel persona is highlighted as her interest in Peter's personal life deepens. On their one date, Charlene convinces Peter to dance. Wearing a revealing black dress, Charlene tells Peter that he cannot dance with his brain, and admonishes "you've gotta feel it, now come on, show me how you made them kids." She holds Peter from behind and pulls him close telling him to work his hips. As they continue gyrating, Peter's estranged wife, Kate, dining at the same club, sees the seductive dancing. Kate cries to her sister, "He never danced with me like that" and "You know what they say...once you have Black you never go back." The later suggesting natural Blackness provides a superior and irresistible sexual experience.

However, Charlene's sexual stimulation of Peter is ultimately focused on making him a more sexually aggressive partner to please his estranged wife. When they return home from their date, Peter confides he still longs for Kate. Charlene tells him "bitches don't care" about a man's commitment to his job (i.e. the Protestant work ethic). Charlene taps into her Jezebel roots informing Peter that women do not want a sensitive love making "Nancy boy," women want a beast. She tells Peter to practice being sexual by using her – that is, her body – as the object of his desire. Peter resists, but Charlene points to her breasts and commands "Grab these!" She tells Peter a beast needs "cojones grandes" (large testicles) which she supplies in the form of two balls Peter stuffs down the front of his pants. She instructs him to "Get to humpin'" and informs him he is not just "the King of the Jungle, you own that Jungle." Charlene climbs on top of Peter as she calls on him to be a Beast. She enthusiastically humps him, and pulls out the balls from his pants exclaiming, "you found your balls."

This scene emphasizes Charlene's natural "jungle" Black sexuality. However, the encounter is not romantic; the Black female body is merely on display as a sex object. Peter's calls Charlene "Kate" (the true object of Peter's affection) during this scene. Still, Charlene is excited by the encounter and does not mind being a sexual stand-in. The racist neighbor, Mrs. Kline, returning Peter's son home interrupts the sexual encounter. The transgression of interracial sexual intimacy is highlighted by Mrs. Kline's cry of "Mandingo" as she witnesses Peter and Charlene's humping on the sofa. Mrs. Kline reports the infraction to her brother, Peter's boss.

Peter, forced to face an all-white judge and jury (his boss and his partners), lies claiming he and Charlene were not humping, they merely lost their footing and fell together. This denial, although false, is palatable to the audience since there was no legitimate romantic connection. Hence, the slave plantation race

relations secret where "illegitimate" sexual encounters with Black women were denied by white men to protect the legitimacy of white marriage is replayed.

Historically, so-called "mixed race" children were explained as the outcome of highly sexualized and manipulative Black Jezebels taking advantage of married white male victims. In *Bringing Down the House*, the audience as jury, judges the comedic sex sequence being manipulated by the highly sexual and enticing Charlene. Like *Birth of a Nation* where Black sexuality is linked to the Beast character, *Bringing Down the House* brings Black sexuality full circle. Black women through the example of Charlene are portrayed as craving Beast-like sexuality. While Charlene's sexuality is no match for white-on-white romantic love (by movie's end, Peter ultimately returns to his true love Kate), it is nonetheless hard to resist for white men with "freaky" sexual desires.

4.1.1. Cocoa Goddess and her Freak Boy

Peter's white law partner Howie is made to order for the Jezebel. While there are moments where he appears to show genuine caring for Charlene, he is generally presented as enamored by Charlene's overt sexual appeal. Hence Howie characterizes Charlene as "sexy" and as a "Cocoa Goddess."

On their first date Howie tells Charlene, "I'd like to dip you in cheese wiz and spread you over a Ritz Cracker, if I'm not being too subtle." Charlene responds, "Boy, you are some kind of freaky." He responds, "You have no idea, you have me straight trippin' Boo." Charlene is flattered, and later adds, "Hey Freak Boy, I am going to make myself a little more luscious for you, OK?" Hence, the stage has been set for their relationship. Howie is enamored of Charlene's Black (Cocoa) sexuality, and Charlene is attracted to Howie because of his sexual freaky nature whereby he becomes her "Freak Boy."

In one scene, Howie believes Charlene has been shot and killed. When she regains consciousness he admonishes: "Precious, don't ever scare me like that again, or I'm going to have to give you a nasty spankin', if I'm not being to subtle." At this point Charlene turns to Peter and affectionately says, "He's such a damn freak." Hence, even in the most dramatic moment of the film, Freak Boy expresses his concern for Charlene as a sex object. Unlike her relationship with Peter, however, Howie's overt sexualization of Charlene allows her to move from being sexual domineering to being flattered and willingly pursued.

In the classic romantic comedy, the two protagonists find love. In *Bringing Down the House* the insertion of Howie as Charlene's sexual interest allows the protagonist Peter to remain on his side of the color line and re-connect with his ex-wife. Charlene, however, does not find true romance, but has found her Freak Boy. In the movie's last scene, Howie's transformation into black sexuality is symbolically complete as Charlene places Howie's hair in cornrows and calls him "Rastaman." He asks Charlene, "Who's your Daddy now?" Charlene, delighted, sitting on Howie's lap says: "you are some kind of freaky" then pulls down a window shade blocking their freaky behavior from the audience. This ends the movie.

The contrasts at the end of the film are clear. Peter reconnects with his ex-wife with a passionate embrace and kiss. He tells her he loves her. Charlene and Howie never say the word "love," and for all their sexual banter exchanged during the movie, the audience *never sees them kiss*. The pulled shade accomplishes two outcomes. First, the audience will not see a passionate interracial kiss indicating love between Howie and Charlene. Second, the audience has been invited to imagine freaky sex behind the shade between the Black woman and the cornrow haired Freak boy--possibly deemed too uncouth to show. Notably, sex with no kissing has been the Hollywood standard not for love, but a longstanding formula for the female prostitute and the john.

4.1.2. African American Women as the Jezebel Type

At one point, Peter confronts the film's antagonist, Widow, at a club named the "Down Low." The Down Low is presented as off limits to whites. Peter has purchased clothes from two young African Americans on the street for his undercover dress. His language, walk, and dress are a comedic attempt to look and sound hip, urban, and Black. The clash between his stereotypical white awkwardness and his over-exaggerated hipness provides the comedic contrast. At the club Peter speaks in his version of black vernacular dialect saying things such as he is "from the hood and misunderstood."

An African American woman in tight jeans and a halter-top approaches Peter and asks, "Can you swerve, Snowman?" When he refuses to dance, two large African American males command him to "dance with the woman." The young woman literally leads Peter to the dance floor by the chains around his neck,

symbolically showing he is captive to her desires. The camera focuses on her body as she repeatedly bumps up against Peter, not unlike the earlier "humping" motion Charlene used with Peter. A second African American woman, much larger than Charlene, cuts in to continue the sex-simulating dance. Peter is eventually sandwiched in between both women who rhythmically thrust their bodies into him. Peter, tantalized by their advances, emits groaning sounds.

The relevance here is that outside Charlene, these are the only two African American women that have any significant interaction with the main characters. They have nothing important to say, but they both have forced themselves on the white male who has entered the club. Following the pattern of the classic Jezebel myth, Peter does not seek or initiate the contact with either, but he is ultimately taken in by their sexual advances. Hence, in this film the Jezebel is not only portrayed as a character through Charlene, but as a racial type.

4. 2. Morphing into Mammy

There are several key scenes that bring to bear Charlene's function as a modern-day mammy figure where she is depicted protecting her new "white family." While classic stereotypical roles have portrayed African American women either as the nurturing Mammy or the manipulative hyper-sexualized Jezebel, Charlene embodies both. We will see that Charlene's natural Jezebel self is always at the core of her persona, but when thrust into social situations where the white family is in jeopardy, her Mammy skills come to the fore.

4.2.1. At the Country Club and at the Dinner Table: Playing Mammy

At the country club, Charlene is fish out of water. Her urban or ghettoized behavior contrasts sharply from the pristine, measured actions of the "civilized and refined" white patrons. Peter is there for a lunch meeting where he is vying to impress a billionaire white female potential client, Mrs. Arness. Mrs. Arness is old, rich and racist. Charlene's arrives uninvited, and her unexpected presence must be explained. Charlene's hat, large earrings, jean outfit, and Black identity ultimately provoke Mrs. Arness into asking Peter who is his "associate."

Our quick-thinking protagonist devises a rationale that would make sense to Mrs. Arness – Peter surreptitiously asks Charlene to pretend to be the children's nanny. Now, the modern initial take by Charlene is one of sarcasm and defiance. But Charlene cleverly leverages Peter's discomfort by having him agree to be her lawyer and to let her live in his home. An independent Black woman in his life is cause for alarm. Yet, that same Black woman, domesticated and under financial and social control is now charming and valuable if she can be leveraged for Peter's personal financial gain.

Charlene, in an attempt to expose the lunacy and ludicrousness of Mrs. Arness's racist thinking, "plays along" with this old Mammy role thrust upon her. Her over-the-top act "Yessuh...I'm gonna go down to the pool with the chillun" appears to satisfy Mrs. Arness, who appears oblivious to Charlene's sarcasm. This is important, for Hollywood in this case is not outright condemning otherwise unacceptable, racist and historically subjugated roles that Black women play just to stay relevant in modern film. Because Mrs. Arness is old and a relic of a bygone racist era, the modern audience is in on the joke and has ability to enjoy the racial humor without feeling the guilt of appearing to be racist themselves.

This ruse is re-enacted at Peter's home again when he invites Mrs. Arness over for dinner. In contrast to the panic to explain Charlene's presence at the County Club, Charlene is now "at home" in her rightful place – in the kitchen. She formally takes her place by donning a pink and white maid outfit and even alerts the family that "dinner is served" while smiling and holding a tray of cornbread (culturally associated with southern Black culture). She literally serves the family seated at the dining room table joined by Mrs. Arness and her dog, William Shakespeare. The white dog complete with a Shakespearian theatrical collar symbolizes the depravity of racism that allows family pets to join white humans at the table while African Americans are excluded. The audience in on the joke, that Charlene is merely playing Mammy to fool Mrs. Arness. The southern heiress reaffirms her offensive racism by singing an old slave song, and when Mrs. Arness is looking away, Charlene both threatens her with a kitchen knife and adulterates her food with a strong laxative. Both attempts are thwarted; the knife by Peter intentionally, and the laxative is ingested by Peter unintentionally. Hence, Charlene is impotent to thwart the overriding force of white supremacy that defines the role of subjugated Black women.

4.2.2. With the Children: Being Mammy

Charlene's transition from playing Mammy to being Mammy is evident through her interaction with Peter's children. Although Peter clearly is uncomfortable with Charlene in the house, the children trust her. Eight-year old Georgie is mostly a plot device, however he is relevant in introducing the audience to Charlene's Mammy instincts. Georgie cannot read. Although the family and the schools have failed, Charlene reasons that Georgie will read if he is exposed to interesting material. Charlene teaches Georgie to read from an erotic "Giant Juggz" magazine she found in Peter's room. The audience hears the eight-year old sound out "I put my mouth on her nip..." as his both shocked (for content) and pleased (Georgie is reading) father enters the room. Here Charlene's character as a modern Jezebel/Mammy hybrid is unveiled. The young white male Georgie is both nurtured and stimulated by the Black female in the household, as the film unwittingly draws upon plantation imagery of the wet nurse and the Jezebel.

Charlene also saves the daughter, Sarah. Sarah, like Pet Sister in *Birth of a Nation*, is portrayed as young, white, virginal female innocence. Note, both Sarah and Pet Sister have to be old enough to be objects of the lustful desire of older dangerous men, but are young enough to still be presented as childlike. For Sarah this is accomplished through her adolescent naiveté. She is willing to sneak out to date an older, more worldly male, but is not old enough to have her own driver's license. Like Pet Sister who attempts to run and hide from Gus in a forest, Sarah is taken to a party must literally crouch down to hide from her shady date. When a traumatized and frightened Sara calls Charlene for help, Charlene immediately ignores all else and races to the party in Peters' silver Mercedes.

Peter had been deceived into thinking Sarah was going to the parent's home of a young, clean cut, polite, white teenaged boy. Instead, she snuck off with a slightly older black haired, dark eyed, and black leather jacket clad man. These cues to the audience, much like early Disney portrayals of darker characters as unsavory, presumably would have been evidence for Peter to veto the date. Unlike in *The Birth of a Nation*, the modern Mammy Charlene is not limited to fighting only Black characters. After learning that Sarah's "boyfriend" got "rough" trying to force Sarah to have sex, Charlene locates the offending boyfriend, Mike, and dangles him upside down from the second story balcony. The emasculated Mike wearing only his boxer drawers and socks pleads to Charlene "Please don't kill me!" As Mike helplessly hangs over of a yard full of teenaged partiers, Charlene announces publicly to Sarah "He has something to say to you." Mike proceeds to apologize and repeat "No means no." Thus, chaste white innocence has been protected, and her honor has been publicly restored.

This modern Mammy brings another twist as well. Traditionally, the "hanging" was only done by whites, usually with African American as victims. In *Bringing Down the House*, instead of hanging Black males to serve notice that white women were to be honored, revered and protected, a Black woman "hangs" a white male up high and *in public* (as most lynchings were public spectacles) in order to honor, revere and protect the innocent white female.

Charlene proceeds to defend Sarah *inside* the house by exhorting Peter to be sympathetic and not get angry even though his household rules were violated. This thread is concluded with the white male patriarch Peter, coming in as the lead attorney to conduct the final cross-examination after the junior attorney did all of the deposition and interrogatory work beforehand. He has a heart-to-heart conversation with his daughter whereby no consequences are mentioned or levied, nor is any judgment passed on her untruthful actions, underage drinking or risky sexual encounter. Thus, the white family is bonding and growing closer together thanks to "the help" that Charlene has become. While, Charlene provides the protective physical "heavy-lifting" of Mike over the balcony, she knows her place and deferentially passes the emotional "heavy-lifting" over to Peter.

4.2.3. Saving Peter: The Loyal Mammy

Charlene saves Peter in two ways in the film. First, she saves his marriage, and second, she literally saves him from death. We have already seen how Charlene as Jezebel gets Peter on the couch for their simulated sexual encounter. Her Jezebel instincts, though, were subordinate to her Mammy nurturing. Earlier Peter and Charlene had gone out to dinner. *Bringing Down the House* hinted at romantic tension between the

two, but that is cut short by Peter's sorrow over his separation from his whiter and slimmer estranged wife. Although the sexual nature of the couch scene has both characters stimulated, Charlene's main mission was helping Peter win his true love back. This nurturing is evident in the conclusion of the film, when Peter's reconciled wife Kate walks in on Peter and Charlene hugging. Charlene then relinquishes *possession* as she turns to Kate and says "Take care of him for me." Thus, the sanctity of the family remains intact, with Charlene sacrificing her own chance at love so that the white couple could re-unite.

For the film's climax, Charlene physically fights the Black Beast character to keep the traditional white family safe (much like Mammy in *The Birth of a Nation*). Peter has gone to the Down Low club to collect evidence against Widow, who Peter realizes had framed Charlene. The racially threatening environment is highlighted by the Black Beast Widow calling Peter "Eminem" and a dumb "cracker".

Widow is an imposing, muscular, bald, Black man with bodyguards larger than himself. Charlene confronts both the bodyguards and Widow at the Down Low to rescue Peter, who Widow holds at gunpoint. Charlene asks that Peter be freed, and the issue settled between Widow and her. A fight ensues. As Widow scrambles for his dropped gun, Charlene gives him a massive upper cut, then continues to beat him. As in *The Birth of a Nation*, grown Black men in *Bringing Down the House* are no match for the protective Mammy. Fully emasculated and outfought by Charlene, Widow retrieves his gun and shoots Charlene in the chest. Unbeknownst to Widow or Peter, Charlene has called the FBI, who storm the club and save the day. Again, reminiscent of the KKK riding in on horseback to save Elsie from the Black Beast in *Birth of a Nation*, Charlene describes her call to the FBI as "calling in the cavalry." Charlene, the protector, called the FBI despite knowing they had "evidence" to put her back in prison. Charlene has displayed the ultimately loyalty, both willing to sacrifice her *life* and her *freedom* for her white family.

Ultimately, Charlene's nurturing of the emotional and libidinal needs of the Sanderson family places Peter's house and his world back in order. Peter's white paternalistic authority as the breadwinner/lawyer is needed to resolve Charlene's unfair conviction. Unbeknownst to Charlene, Peter has used his ingenuity and intellect to outwit the more powerful and more physically intimidating Widow into a taped confession, so that the "good guy" enforcers of the social order (the FBI) can free the innocent Charlene and incarcerate the evil Widow. Here, the film portrays race relations as returning to a legally enforced level playing field, which is institutionally sound, but had been temporarily disrupted by the Black Beast.

V. Conclusion: The Adaptability of Controlling Images

We began this paper by introducing two controlling images of African American women, the Jezebel and the Mammy. We noted that both images are derived from plantation stereotypes about enslaved African American women, but these controlling images can evolve and adapt to changing economic and social conditions. In *The Birth of a Nation*, the Jezebel Lydia does not find true love, and does not win the heart of the white protagonist. Instead, she has a lustful relationship with a secondary white male character. At best, she holds the status of Stoneman's mistress who tries to manipulate him to gain status and respect from whites. Through manipulation, dishonesty, or desperation, we see the same pattern of film Jezebels yearning for white love, respect, or favors throughout film history. Over time the Jezebel takes on new characteristics matching changing times, but the core traits remain. Charlene's does not get the respect of white protagonist in terms of true romance, marriage, and family. Her one romantic evening with Peter does not result in a love connection, instead she becomes the sexual interest of a secondary white male character, "Freak Boy."

Concerning the modern Jezebel, Collins writes: "Because jezebel or the hoochie is constructed as a woman whose sexual appetites are a best inappropriate and, at worst, insatiable, it becomes a short step to imagining her as a "freak." And if she is a freak, her sexual partners become similarly stigmatized" [4] (p. 91). Hence, Howie as a "Freak Boy" is made to order as a partner for the modern Jezebel Charlene. Interestingly, the conventional Jezebel character does not make an acceptable protagonist as it historically was devised as a threat. Charlene's modern Jezebel becomes more acceptable as she is progressively mammified throughout the course of *Bringing Down the House*. The film attempts to ridicule the old embarrassing Mammy stereotype rather than reinforce it, but on the whole the attempt fails. While Charlene feigns a caricature Mammy image for comedic effect, Charlene ultimately takes on the very traits that embody the Mammy. She becomes the figure who protects and nurtures both the white children and the white father to their happy ending. While it

may have been the intent of the filmmakers to avoid the classic asexual Mammy caricature of the past, the unfortunate outcome of *Bringing Down the House* is that Charlene does not become a multidimensional character worthy of meaningful love or meaningful family relationships, but takes on the persona of a modern Jezebel/Mammy hybrid. Charlene's nurtures and supports both the white father and son while *at the same time* providing them with sexual stimulation. While this modern hybrid serves the comedic goal of having the audience laugh as the problems of the white family are being resolved, it also unfortunately reinforces enduring controlling images of African American women.

The realization that Charlene is a continuation of a long pattern of depicting African American women as Jezebel or Mammy characters in film allows us to address the observations made by the film critics at the beginning of this section. Ebert's [3] question on why the film does not follow the class romantic comedy formula with Charlene and Peter falling in love now makes sense. The more dominant pattern the film followed was in line with the Hollywood history of race relations. Neither the African American Jezebel nor Mammy find true love with the romantic leading man. Likewise, Iverem's [47] observation that the film serves an "anti-mammy manifesto" based on Charlene's hip hop style and "in your face" persona misses the core Mammy traits embedded in Charlene's modern image. As Collins observes, controlling images change with the social conditions [4]. Charlene's modern Jezebel/Mammy hybrid has made these stereotypes more acceptable to a contemporary audience.

After a century, the images that the NAACP protested within *The Birth of a Nation* keep re-emerging in contemporary films, albeit modernized and now in hybrid form. African American actors now, as then, must decide if they play roles based on dominant racial imagery. Hattie McDaniel, an anti-segregation activist and first African American to win an academy award, was only allowed to play servant and Mammy roles [49]. While appealing to white audiences, her roles were criticized by civil rights organizations [50,51]. She famously said "Why should I complain about making \$7,000 a week playing a maid? If I didn't, I'd be making \$7 a week being one" [52] (p. 52). Will Smith recently talked about how racial concerns still affecting casting in his films [53,54]. Angela Bassett refused to consider the female lead role for *Monster's Ball* because she thought the role was demeaning to Black women. Halle Berry accepted the role and the academy award that followed, which placed her career on a highly successful and lucrative trajectory [55]. Wickham writes:

The sex scene, notice I didn't say love scene, between Berry's character and prison guard, portrayed by actor Billy Bob Thornton, unfolds like something that was written by Simon Legree, the slave owner in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Just hours after they meet, the black woman lustfully seduces the startled white man... The movie is a leering, fanciful look at interracial sex from a white perspective. Its highlight is the union between a grunting, groaning, lust-filled beautiful black woman and an unsuspecting white guy on whom she throws herself [56]

The pressure to succeed takes its toll. The African American director Lee Daniels who has been accused of promoting demeaning images of African Americans in film and on television says he will accept being a "sell out" so that his films get made [57]. Mo'nique who won an academy award for Daniel's directed *Precious* but later criticized the history of Hollywood racism, struggles to good roles [50]. The innovative African American director Melvin van Peebles has stated no person of color "has the power to green light a film" in Hollywood [58] (p. 98). We note the recent attention to the nearly all white Academy and the lack of any awards for African Americans for major Academy awards in 2015, and the negative reaction to actors who engaged in protests for racial justice [59,60].

In a sense, we realize that it is unfair that actors of color must negotiate their careers in the context of the continued popularity of stereotypical roles along with the risks involved in speaking out against racial injustice. Unfortunately, as long as Hollywood finds the traditional approach to be an economically successful model, the controlling images are likely to continue. Yet heightened awareness can effect change, and along with massive Black Lives Matters protests, more entertainers are speaking out. Viola Davis recently said she regretted her role in *The Help* [61]. Queen Latifah recently supported HBO Max's decision to remove *Gone with the Wind* from its steaming service; and others agreed that it should only be shown along with a historical analysis of its racist implications [62]. With this increased scrutiny, we are hopeful that filmmakers and studios will take another look at the racial imagery depicted in their films.

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