

Lasting Impressions: Blacks Actors of the
1950's and 1960s
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An Interpretive History of
African-American Education

Part II: 1950 to the Present

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A. Overview

When going to the movies we often see names such as Halle Berry, Will Smith, Whoopi Goldberg, Samuel L. Jackson, and Morgan Freeman who make us laugh, cry, think, and forget about the worries of the world. However, we often forget about or have no understanding of those people who paved the way for the actors to be on the big screen and left lasting impressions in our culture. Icons like Sidney Poitier, Dorothy Dandridge, Hattie McDaniel, Bill Cosby, Alvin Childress, and Flip Wilson of the 1950's and 1960's through their portrayal in media brought their experiences through perseverance, strife, and overcoming racism real and allowed for the changes seen today to be made possible.

Throughout the early part of the century and during the Civil Rights Era, most black actors were depicted in stereotypical roles such as the butler, chauffeurs, entertainers, the "mammie" and the unemployed/ill-educated lazy person who does nothing but gamble and drink alcohol. "Mainstream society has long used the arts- including music, visual culture, theater, film and television-to offer unflattering images of blacks, images that would validate the poor treatment of blacks within American society" (Catanese, 2008). Despite these images those roles were a far cry from today's standards and complexities of black life and meaning. Dorothy Dandridge, Sidney Poitier, and Bill Cosby helped make a way for future generations of black actors to achieve more than the standard stereotypes to stand out as among the best in award winning Hollywood Royalty

who left us with the messages of the past and the hope for the future to overcome the oppressive images and rise to take the lead.

On November 9, 1922, Dorothy Dandridge was born in Cleveland Ohio to Cyril and Ruby Dandridge. Ruby began working with Dorothy and her sister Vivian to recite poetry, dance, play the piano and sing. As they grew up, “The Wonder Children” was formed, a mother and daughters group that traveled until the start of the Great Depression (biography.com). Dorothy expanded on her talents during her teen years by taking small movie roles including *A Day at the Races* and the *Drums of the Congo* while performing at the Cotton Club in New York City with her family (biography.com). During this time, she learned to confront issues of segregation and racism in the entertainment industry. Isabel Wilkerson explains the segregation seen in New York in his work *The Warmth of Other Suns*; “white leaders tried to segregate churches, restaurants, and theaters, the Lafayette Theater on Seventh Avenue permitting colored people to sit only in the balcony, no different from Mississippi” (Wilkerson, 2010). Brandi Catanese further supports this in her work *The politics of Representation in African American Theater and Drama* in looking at the development of the Harlem Renaissance. “The Harlem Renaissance was unique because of the opportunity that black artists had to work both within and outside existing theatrical structures. Not only did black artists make advances on Broadway and receive individualized support for their art from wealthy white patrons, but they also developed community based institutions to nurture emerging black talent” (Catanese, 2008). Due to World War II, the family tour that would have included

European venues was cancelled leading Dorothy to branch out in acting for films. Dorothy took the lead in *Lady from Louisiana* opposite John Wayne that proved she could stand with the best of Hollywood. The role that made her famous and an icon was the 1954 classic *Carmen Jones* in which she became the first African American woman to earn an Academy Award nomination for Best Actress only to lose to Grace Kelly in *The Country Girl* (Imdb, 2012). She continued to be recognized in media beyond the stage and film when she graced the cover of the prominent home magazine *Life*. During this time Dorothy refused to play racial stereotypical roles one of which was a slave in *The King and I* (imdb.com).

Ingrid Banks makes note of this in her work *Women in Film*, "...in earlier periods, black actresses are least likely to be cast in leading roles except for films with an all-black or predominantly black cast. In addition, although the stereotypes of black women in film have been remixed –to satisfy post-civil rights, integrationist, colored blind, movie-going audience-they continue to prevail" (Banks, 2008). She went on to star in *Porgy and Bess* opposite another African American icon of the era, Sidney Poitier. However, due to Dorothy's high standards and activism in how African American's are portrayed her star power began to fall. Banks explains, "Dandridge faced discrimination within the movie industry and despite the great fanfare and recognition after her triumph in 1954 she sadly discovered there was no place for her to go. Bigotry and bias still had their place in Hollywood...always she was to be cast as exotic, self-destructive women" (Banks, 2008).

From the cover it looked like Dorothy had the perfect life with fame and the chance to change in the Civil Rights movement through her films, but at home things were very different. Early in her career she had her first child Harolyn who was born with acute brain damage and gave her to the foster care system and continues to provide for her care (Oliver, 1999). In 1945, she married Harold Nicholas only to get divorced in 1951. In 1959 she married Jack Denison, who left her in 1962 due financial hardships. These tragedies resulted in Dorothy's escape through the use of drugs and excessive drinking (Oliver, 1999). From her addictive behavior her movie and singing career started to decline and she had to file bankruptcy (biography.com). The icon was dropped to second rate roles in movies or singing clubs. In 1963, she could no longer afford to pay for her daughter's medical care and was forced to put her in a state institute. Then on September 8, 1965 Dorothy was found dead in her apartment from an overdose of Tofranil, an antidepressant (Oliver 1999). By being a woman of high stature and refuting the black stereotypical roles of Hollywood her efforts helped break the racial barriers and laid a path for other black actors to follow especially Halle Berry. Through not only ground breaking roles, but her recognition by the Film Academy, many other black actors have gone on to be either nominated or received motion picture awards including Whoopi Goldberg being the second black actress to win an Oscar in over fifty years, the first being Hattie McDaniel. Halle Berry would follow in Dorothy's footsteps bringing home something she could not, the first Academy Award for best Actress in a Leading Role for a black woman in *Monster's Ball*, forty seven years after her nomination in *Carmen*

Jones. Halle Berry thanked Dorothy during the Oscar speech, “this moment is so much bigger than me, this moment is for Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne, Diahann Carroll...and it is for every nameless, faceless woman of color that now has a chance now that this door has been opened” (youtube.com). Interestingly, Halle Berry also portrayed Dorothy Dandridge in a Biographical movie made for HBO, *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge*.

A male equivalent to Dorothy Dandridge as a Hollywood icon and pivotal role model for African American actors in film was her co-star of *Porgy and Bess* is Sidney Poitier. Born in Miami, Florida on February 20, 1927 to poor tobacco farmers, Sidney then grew up in Nassau, Bahamas. At age eleven he discovered a love of acting, “recognizing the ability of cinema to expand one’s view of reality” (pbs.org). Sidney moved to New York City to pursue his passion for acting at age sixteen working first as dishwasher and then a janitor for the American Negro Theater in exchange for acting lessons. With the start of World War II, Sidney’s life changed as he was now eighteen and enlisted as a medical assistant (New York Times.com).. After the war, Sidney returned to the American Negro Theater and become the understudy for Harry Belafonte for the play *Days of our Youth*. This role opened the door for a number of stage roles and eventually to his dream of becoming a Hollywood actor.

His film debut was *No Way Out*; where Poitier portrays a doctor who accused by Luther, a white racist, for killing his brother John who comes into a hospital after being shot during a gas station robbery. Poitier’s role in this movie was controversial at the time due to the nature of racism in the film. Not only did this film begin his career, but it was fostered by controversy and banned in a number of areas including the Bahamas, “the

colonial government deemed it too explosive” (pbs.org). Sidney was not only an icon and symbol of American civil rights but as a result of the response from this first film and the protests that erupted the political party that would overturn the British rule in the Bahamas was formed (pbs.org). Sidney would continue to star in many more many films such as *The Defiant ones*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, and *Lilies of the Field* in which he became the first African American to win the Academy for Best Actor in 1963 (imdb.com). Then in 1967, Sidney went on to star in other movies that would break down the barriers of race such as *Guess Who’s coming to Dinner*. A movie about a white upper class woman named Joanna Drayton who wants to marry her black fiancé Dr. John Prentice in the 1960’s despite the underlining racism and disapproval from both sets of parents as well as the Catholic priest. Richard Lewis Jr explains, “American society is undergoing cultural changes in the 21st century. This social transformation began with the civil rights movement in the 1960s. With respect to marriage, popular media continually report the blurring of boundaries between racial and ethnic groups. As a result, there has been a tremendous increase in interracial dating and marriage over the past several decades” (Lewis, 2010). While Sidney strived to break down the walls of racism in film he like others of his time were faced with the stereotypical roles in Hollywood. “Hollywood also restricted the emergence of the youth and adult-oriented black protagonist because the U.S. film industry had not yet developed major black stars. During the 50s and early 60s, the black hero was limited to the contours of one actor — Sidney Poitier — who was forced to portray different roles, all of which rejected any interest in the opposite sex” (Reid, 1991). As the United States becomes more diverse, both racially and ethnically, equal access to a variety of social institutions and organizations becomes more

challenging. Poitier would later go on to start directing movies starring many of today's black icons such as Richard Pryor's *Stir Crazy* and Bill Cosby's *Ghost Dad*. In 2001, he was recognized for his pivotal work in Hollywood with a Lifetime Achievement Award given by the Academy of Motion Pictures. That same Oscar night, Denzel Washington won his Oscar for Best Actor. During his speech he joked that he had been chasing Sidney Poitier for years only to have them give it to him on the same night (Lang 2009).

Sidney Poitier continues to be an influence as an icon and activist today. Beginning in 1997, he became and continues to hold the office of the Bahamian Ambassador to Japan. In addition, Poitier received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2009 from President Barack Obama, America's first black President. Mark Silva of the Los Angeles Times supports this, "President Obama, attempting to spotlight those who have acted as agents of change, announced Thursday that he would bestow the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civilian honor, on a cast of living and deceased figures widely known in politics, the arts and sciences, sports and social movements. Actor Sidney Poitier and singer Chita Rivera were also named" (Silva 2009).

In a time of turbulent change and social injustice a number of movements began. With the Civil Rights of the 1960s, youth culture also rose out of popular media sources giving further proof to the impact that icons have on influencing change. Dorothy Dandridge and Sidney Poitier tried to move past those stereotypes and impact both youth culture and social change, however, for as far as they came they were still faced with the trials of the time. "The absence of a youth-oriented black star may have been the result of the U.S. film industry's current promotion of the white rebellious youth while ignoring the equally

rebellious black youths who refused second-class citizenship status as their racial heritage. While many actors and actresses like Marlon Brando, James Dean, Sal Mineo, Natalie Wood and Anne Francis appeared in such 50s pictures as THE WILD ONE (Columbia, 1953), BLACKBOARD JUNGLE (MGM, 1955) and REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE (Warner Brothers, 1955) and defined variations of the male and female type, African Americans were apparently limited to Sidney Poitier” (Reid, 1991). When in Birmingham thousands of blacks went into the streets facing police clubs, tear gas, and high powered water hoses and in the shadow of marches and speeches given by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X there were other icons that impacted change just as powerfully and in a way that has stayed with us. Acting and media icons give that avenue to reach the masses in a way that is not only memorable but has influenced generations.

B. Activities

1. In Class Activities

- a) Have the students write a short essay with the topic- In your words, how would you define the word activist? Have them define Characteristics and explain if Hollywood icons continue to have influential, social activist today? If so, who and why?
- b) Have the students write a journal for a week as if they were the Hollywood 1950's & 1960's Icon themselves. Afterwards, have a class discussion on what they experienced and felt.
- c) Conduct a mock interview as if they were Sidney Poitier, Dorothy Dandridge or another famous icon of the 1950 or 1960's. Student must have well prepared questions for the interview. The person that is going to be interviewed must know the person that they are impersonating. Research will be required for the both parties. Then after the interviews, asked the students if they notice a common theme or ideas that occurred during the interviews. Students must turn in a two page essay of their person.
- d) Have the students have a class discussion about what stereotypes and racism through two Hollywood icons actors. How they impacted and overcame the civil right movement. Taking this idea further back to include television, radio, and advertising in the 50's & 60's. Have the students bring in an appropriate item other than film and have them discuss it in a five minute presentation. Explore the impact and influence the item had on the black social life back then.

2. Out of Class Activities

- a) Have the students compare and analyze the movies of Dorothy Dandridge and Sidney Poitier to today's modern black icons. One of the movie must be from the 1950's and 1960's and other movie from today. Require students to discuss the character roles, social stereotypes, plot, themes, and how the icon actor would feel about the evolution of film today from the movie you picked.
- b) Create a crossword puzzle using black Hollywood icons of the 1950's to the present. Crossword must be minimum of 15 icons and must have a least three icons from each decade must be represented.

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