



## CHAPTER ONE



# *Lena Horne*

## The Symbol Must Stand for Something



**I**t is a Friday night in 1973. My father cuts short his day of dry-cleaning pick-ups and deliveries. He walks through our door at exactly 7:30 P.M., brushes the dirt from his shoes, washes his hands, and saunters over to the recliner in the corner of the family room. He would eat later, not wanting to miss any portion of *Sanford and Son*, his favorite program. This one particular Friday night turns out to be a special surprise for him. Lena Horne is scheduled to make a guest appearance in “A Visit from Lena Horne.” When she comes into view on the television screen, my father smiles, folds his hands across his paunch, and declares with much vigor, “Lena Horne . . . my my my my my!” My mother bolts from the kitchen—soapy dishrag in hand—and joins in. “Who hon? Uh, huh. Miss Horne! That woman is something *else*. Oh, you should have seen her back in the day!” Hearing the excited voices, I stop my sewing to watch this Lena Horne. A half hour later, I do not see what all the fuss is about.

This scenario illustrates the proverbial generation gap; but, more important, that particular *Sanford and Son* episode as well as Horne’s performance as Glinda, the Good Witch in Sidney Lumet’s *The Wiz* (1978) introduces Lena Horne to a new generation of young African Americans, who endured the enforced national incentive to integrate public high schools in the 1970s. The Gap’s late 1990s’ “Get into the Gap” Christmas television ad campaign introduces her to a hip ultracool urban audience. Actress-singer Wendi Joy Franklin’s musical drama, *A Song For You . . . Lena*, and Leslie Uggams’s musical *Stormy Weather: Imagining Lena Horne* (closed March 4, 2007 at the Prince Theater in

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) (re)familiarizes the public with Horne's civil rights activism and entertainment career ("Lena Horne, Officially Retired" 58). During a retrospective of the late Ed Bradley, the *60 Minutes* and CBS news correspondent is asked to name and comment on his best profile. He declares, "[Lena Horne] was the first profile I did; and all of these years later I'd say it is the best profile I have ever done. . . . She had this song on [*The Lady and Her Music*] show *Bewitched, Both-ered, and Bewildered*. And she talked about being a rich ripe juicy plum again . . ." ("First and Best").

My parents' spirited responses, however, later pique my interest in Horne. What is behind the fuss and the "Uh, huh"? Who is the woman behind the "my my my my my," and what is the "something else" to Lena Horne? I learn Horne is one of the most glamorized, memorable, and venerated entertainment icons of the twentieth century. Her refusal to entertain a segregated U.S. Army makes her a heroine in the eyes of World War II black troops; musicians in the 1930s and 1940s, including band leaders Noble Sissle and Count Basie, and jazz and blues singer Billie Holiday, hold her in high esteem as she captivates audiences in the prestigious New York Café Society nightclub; and Paul Robeson encourages her to understand more fully the history of the Negro in the United States and thereby strengthens her self-confidence. Her agreement with Walter White, the NAACP representative, that the time had come for a new Negro womanhood to be shown on screen in World War II America transforms Horne from the successful singer in New York café society into "something else." When she became MGM's first Negro star to sign a long-term contract, a cascade of "my my mys" and "uh, huhs" flow from the mouths of theatergoers.

In the words of song stylist Nancy Wilson during an *Online News-Hour* interview with PBS, "Lena had it all. . . . She had the walk, the talk, the look. She was able to be everything that anybody white or black would have wanted to be" ("Lena Horne Turns 80"). Eartha Kitt recalls, "I adore her. She does not know this, but when I was trying to figure out what I could do to be recognized, loved and wanted in showbusiness, I saw her in *Stormy Weather* with Katherine Dunham. I saw her on the screen, a high-class sophisticated lady . . . She gave me the feeling that I would be OK, that there was a place for me in show business" ("Lena Horne, Officially Retired" 58).

Horne's image—her hourglass figure, light skin, European facial features, and straight-textured hair—counters the image of Hattie McDaniel, the rotund, blue-black maid, the premier Negro star of the 1930s. Moreover, as the first Negro actress afforded on-screen glamour,

she takes her place alongside the major white female stars, namely Ava Gardner, Lana Turner, Hedy Lamarr, and Veronica Lake.

She “had it all,” and, as Kitt tells us, Horne’s presence onscreen emboldens the spirit of Negro actresses. Walter White believes in her ability to become an uplifting symbol of the Negro race through the silver screen. Journalist Frank Nugent notes in 1945, Horne’s “loyalty to her race [. . .] made her almost a symbol to the new generation of Negroes, many of whom [. . .] referred to her publicly as a feminine Paul Robeson” (54). This “symbol of racial uplift” bolsters the “something else” of Lena Horne. The symbol is a societal emblem a particular individual agrees to assume in the interest of the community. The community invests its hopes and dreams in an emblem-individual, hoping for sociopolitical change. In times of crisis, a symbol or hero(ine) arises out of the Negro community to undertake a perilous yet momentous journey to lead the masses out of oppression and into a fight for social justice. We have seen these symbols in the leadership of other women in the political arena, such as Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, and Harriet McLeod Bethune. When Horne signs a long-term contract with MGM, she becomes the symbolic figure to lead Negro womanhood from behind the apron of the cinematic mammy and into new roles.

Horne’s autobiographies, *In Person* and *Lena*, reveal, however, that the contract with MGM activates several personal and professional concerns. First, the document launches Horne on a quest to deem herself worthy of the gift of being the first Negro woman to become a major contract player within the Hollywood studio system. Attendant to the question of “worthiness,” Horne experiences an interior discomfort as she wrestles with the displacement of her on-screen Negro predecessor, Hattie McDaniel. Second, and finally, as a Negro performer, Horne works to discover a new meaning for “the star” and “the symbol.” These components of popular culture have to signify more than mere spectacle for the enjoyment of the masses if she is to assume the role at MGM. Horne’s quest, I will demonstrate, is not a simple search for acceptance from her colleagues; it is also a pursuit of an understanding of the symbol as it is mapped onto the body of the Negro actress in times of national trauma.

### Historical Backdrop

Horne’s texts can be read as parables of a singer who journeys to find ways to manage the position of being the first Negro woman star. They

are also stories about a Negro woman who assumes the burden of representation for the Negro race during World War II. Horne's arrival on MGM's studio lot in 1942 paves the way for a new representation of Negro womanhood to supplant Hattie McDaniel's mammy figure. McDaniel's mammy role made her the first Negro in the history of film to win an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her performance in Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Her Academy Award win is for playing a character that resonates with the American collective memory of the fictitious genteel South—rife with elaborate plantation vistas and “happy darkies.” More tragic, after the release of D. W. Griffith's 1915 *Birth of a Nation*, the Negro community suffers from a cesspool of cinematic myths, stereotypes, and caricatures in general and the stereotype of the mammy figure, in particular, remains popular for approximately thirty years.

The mammy is one of the most enduring black stereotypes in film history. An idealized white notion of Negro women in slavery, the mammy figure functions as a tough but loving caretaker of her owners. Sociohistorian K. Sue Jewell points out that the perpetuation of this image, largely controlled by those with wealth and power in the print and visual media, “distorted images of African American women [. . . and made them] more pronounced and visible” to the American public (35). As film historian Donald Bogle observes, the mammy “is representative of the all-black woman, overweight, middle-aged, and so dark, so thoroughly black, that it is preposterous even to suggest that she be a sex object. Instead she was desexed” (*Toms, Coons* 14–15).

The popularity of the mammy figure as “all-black woman” is indicative of the Negro woman's place in American society at that time. Southern Negroes, skilled mainly in farming and agriculture, migrate to the industrial northern cities in the 1930s and 1940s. The employment they find generally is limited to domestic labor. As the mammy image in U.S. culture gains currency via literature and the media, racism feeds this limitation. The smiling, bandanna-clad Aunt Jemima on the pancake mix box stands firm on grocery store shelves.

The outbreak of World War II, however, prompts the NAACP to challenge Hollywood studios to present an alternative to the mammy tradition. The nation's engagement in a war across the seas to make the world safe for democracy calls into question its inequitable treatment of Negroes on the domestic front. Novelist Ralph Ellison writes in 1949 that because of World War II, “the United States' position as a leader in world affairs [was . . . ] shaken by its treatment of Negroes. Thus the thinking of white Americans [was . . . ] undergoing a process of change [. . . ]” (277). The studios (in)voluntarily fall in line with this process of

change. In the A&E documentary *Hollywood: An Empire of Their Own*, film historian and columnist Neal Gabler notes Hollywood has to scour for ways to manage the paradox of its portrayal of the Negro in film and the war effort. "A democratic state could not send minorities, immigrants and the poor to die for an America which excluded them," Gabler maintains.

The war leads to an unprecedented alliance between Washington, in particular the Office of War Information (OWI), and Hollywood. Aljean Harmetz, author-historian, affirms along with Gabler, an alliance between Washington and Hollywood facilitates the film studios' agenda to produce films with Negro actors fully integrated in plots and story lines. The industry uses the armed forces as the branch of government that could relay the message. Harmetz says, "[t]he American Army was not integrated except in Hollywood movies. And the Office of War Information was very eager to keep our enemies from making capital out of any sort of problems in America. So they didn't want movies that had any racial tensions of any sort" (*Hollywood: An Empire of Their Own*). The Hollywood moguls project racial harmony by producing films such as *Bataan* (dir. Tay Garnett, 1943), *Sahara* (dir. Zoltan Korda, 1943) *The Negro Soldier* (dir. Stuart Hiesler, 1944), and *Lifeboat* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1944), wherein the Negro man is an integral part of the storyline. Meanwhile, outside of Hollywood, Negro women move out of the domestic space and into the industrialized work environment as laborers. The Negro woman in the industrialized workplace unfortunately is not as successful on screen, although *Carmen Jones* (dir. Otto Preminger, 1954) does present the Negro woman at work in a parachute factory. This film also highlights the conflict between the working Negro woman and the emerging Negro ingénue that Horne eventually will come to represent.

Discomfort and anxiety, nevertheless, attend Horne's representation within the Hollywood community Horne decides to enter. Horne's signature on the MGM contract causes a conflict within the old guard community of west coast Negro actors, many of whom consider the east coast upstart a menace to their economic "stability." This west coast/east coast rivalry results in a protest meeting. The west coast Negro actor elite assemble at McDaniel's home to discuss the impending shift in attitudes toward the roles they have made popular. Chief among the concerns is that if Horne (or Walter White's "guinea pig") and NAACP spokesperson Walter White antagonize the status quo and displace the so-called menial roles, the financial status of the actors cast in those roles will be threatened. For example, McDaniel earns \$2,000 a week and Butterfly McQueen earns \$600 by the time White arrives in Hollywood to rally for Horne (Cripps 47). Lincoln Theodore Monroe

Andrew Perry or “Stepin Fetchit,” Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, and McDaniel live a high-style Hollywood life on the money garnered from their screen portrayals. Each of these actors works on contract, but not long-term contracts. The pre-Horne elite Negro actors’ contracts are for terms of no more than six months with options that could be dropped at the whim of the studio. Others are bit players working for a few dollars a day, a box lunch, and bus fare (Cripps 48).

More important, the old guard resent the NAACP’s snub of the already installed Fair Play Committee (FPC). Organized by the Negro Hollywood actors, the FPC campaigns for better parts for the Negro performers long before White arrives in Hollywood. White offends several veteran black actors, such as Clarence Muse (*Hearts in Dixie*, 1929), because of his failure to acknowledge the Screen Actors Guild. First on the FPC’s agenda is to “lessen the screen images of blacks as a ‘bunch of careless, illiterate porters, mammies, waiters, and sharecroppers’” (Jackson 102). White practically ignores the FPC and the Screen Actors Guild opting instead to consult directly with Hollywood producers. His gesture enrages Muse, who writes, “In laying his cards on the table here, Mr. White didn’t see fit to address the Screen Actors Guild. [ . . . ] We feel that if an organization like the NAACP is sincere in its fight, they should work it out with the moving force of Hollywood, the actors, through their Guild” (Muse 20). Muse perceives, furthermore, that the NAACP’s slight leaves no room for a discussion of their lives outside of the Hollywood regime. He realizes that the organization conflates the character and the player; it does not consider the actor as an individual, separate and apart from the roles played. Muse claims:

[T]here is nothing wrong with a man being a porter in a picture speaking dialect if the character is noble. If he has ambitions. If he is a part of the plot and wins in the end of the play. If he is glorified, if the role is comedy, let it be clean and true to life. Bob Hope or Bob Burns, in their comedy moments, do not carry the slogan of race discrimination or an uplift of humanity. [ . . . ] Hattie McDaniel won the Academy Award because of her great artistry in portraying a character as written. Not Hattie McDaniel, but the part in the book, “Gone with the Wind.” (Muse 20)

McDaniel maintains that if Mammy draws indignation from the NAACP and White, then the institution and its representative should find her a different role: “What do you want me to do? Play a glamour girl and sit on Clark Gable’s knee? When you ask me not to play the parts, what have you got to offer in return?” (Jackson 100).

The anger, however, pivots on Horne's daring. This "bourgeois eastern upstart" has the nerve to question the contract, rather than to depend on the studio to guarantee her rights as an actress. "[E]very actor should have written into his contract all kinds of 'special protections,'" insists Horne (*Lena* 135). In *Motion Picture* magazine in 1944, Sidney Skolsky makes known that part of these special protections for which Horne asks is "the understanding that she would sing in pictures or play legitimate roles and not have to do 'illiterate comedy' or portray a cook, roles customarily assigned to colored performers" (82). This woman has the nerve to insinuate that the parts for which Negro actors have been cast to establish careers and attain financial stability are not good enough for her. To make matters worse, not only does the studio agree to listen to her, but a studio mogul also incorporates these "special protections" into a written document. Just who do White and Horne think they are? These issues anger the Negro old guard. "They were afraid of what they called 'my attitude,'" Horne recalls, "by which they meant the terms I had insisted upon in my contract. They feared the studios might think it was the beginning of a large scale campaign on the part of Negro actors to raise their status, or that I might be thought the beginning of a revolt against roles as menials" (*Lena* 136, 137).

Horne stands in the midst of this conflict—literally—and within the context of protest Horne begins her journey to find meaning for the symbol. As a first strategy Horne projects her voice into the chaos to dispel her fellow actors' suspicion and to gain their acceptance. During the protest meeting, she is "forced to get up and try to explain that [. . . she] was not trying to start a revolt or steal work from anyone and that the NAACP was not using [. . . her] for any ulterior purpose" (*Lena* 137). Horne's voice is the clarion call to the Negro old guard to understand the cultural implications of her contract; it is also the proverbial cry in the wilderness of one seeking to be anointed by her people for the journey to come. Audre Lorde instructs us to listen, "[W]here the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them to the pertinence to our lives" (43). Only when this happens can the symbol fully assume the burden of representation.

The matriarch of cinematic Negro womanhood, McDaniel, answers Horne's call for support. Horne remembers:

[McDaniel] called me up and asked me to visit her. I went to her beautiful home and she explained how difficult it had been for Negroes in the movies, which helped give me some perspective

on the whole situation. She [. . .] sympathized with my position and [. . .] thought it was the right one if I chose it. [. . .] Miss McDaniel's act of grace helped tide me over a very awkward and difficult moment. [. . .] (*Lena* 137–138)

Like Robeson before her, McDaniel represents what Joseph Campbell terms the “protective figure who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces [s]he is about to pass” (69). The act of grace, or Campbell's amulet, in effect symbolizes a passing of the scepter. By passing the scepter, McDaniel builds a bridge on which Horne, the ingénue, can travel. McDaniel's sharing of the history of Negro images in film, within her hearth and home, with this newly appointed symbol of Negro womanhood, conjoins the tradition of the mammy with that of the contemporary ingénue.

What does the linkage of these two symbols mean? In the African context, McDaniel acts as the community elder who encourages the new and vibrant youth in its endeavors. According to Malidoma Patrice Somé, the “very old honor youth as the source of collective physical stability and strength as recent arrivals” (124). The overarching significance of the response and the meeting, however, is the homage paid to film ancestry. To continue in the African context, Somé regards the ancestor as one whose way is that of tradition. She explains:

[t]radition is they way of the ancestors, the manner in which those who lived before once walked and talked, the knowledge and practices that allowed them to live long enough to bestow life upon others. [T]his is crucial to life, because to forget the way life used to be lived is to become endangered. [. . . T]o look to the old ways is to avoid death. (124)

In addition, McDaniel's move to initiate the meeting signifies her recognition of the need for Negro sisterhood in times of crisis. In the transmission of history from one Negro actor to another, both Horne and McDaniel acknowledge the imperative of tradition in the whirlwind of radical change.

The McDaniel–Horne association complements that of the Lena–Cora dyad and the Robeson–Horne relationship (discussed later herein). By speaking up and out to Negroes within a film industry that has marginalized their presence and by accepting McDaniel's invitation, Horne locates herself within the community of actors, rather than standing apart from them as does Walter White. Her move is important because

in the NAACP's campaign these actors' character portrayals are judged an abomination to the Negro race.

Lena Horne's and Walter White's campaign to overturn mammy, however, is so complicated that it ostensibly forges a new color line in Hollywood, dividing the light-skinned entertainer and executive from the dark-skinned actors. Black film history illustrates that neither the entertainer nor the executive are alone in this creation. Horne joins other light-skinned Negro leading ladies of the silver screen and mulattoes cast in early race movies black and white independent filmmakers produce and direct. The "race movie" almost always features an exclusive Negro cast dramatizing stories targeted for the Negro audience. The filmmakers generally critique social issues such as the class and color caste system within the Negro community or model stories that mirror those by the Hollywood studios. Prolific independent black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux, black and white independent film companies such as the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, the Colored Players Film Corporation, and Million Dollar Productions, feature light-skinned actresses as leads in their motion pictures. Evelyn Preer, Micheaux's first leading lady, for example, stars as the educated philanthropist with a secret, Sylvia Landry, in the filmmaker's second silent film *Within Our Gates* (1920). In the silent feature *The Scar of Shame* (1927), Lucia Lynn Moses plays Louise Howard, a "tragic mullato" [sic] who commits suicide after her husband Alvin (Harry Henderson) refuses to come back to her after he discovers her low birth status. Lena Horne makes her movie and starring role debut in an all-black cast movie called *The Duke Is Tops* (dir. William Nolte) in 1938, produced by Toddy Pictures Company (founded by Ted Toddy) and Million Dollar Productions (founded by white producers Harry M. Popkin and Leo Popkin). Horne plays Ethel Andrews, a talented entertainer whom Duke Davis (Ralph Cooper, the "Dark Gable") vows to advance her career at any cost. This trajectory shows that Hollywood studios in the late 1920s and 1930s took cues from race, all-black cast movies or both when considering Negro women for lead actresses (Sampson *Blacks In Black and White*).

The major studios follow suit and choose the mulatto to star in films that address America's color consciousness as well as Negro culture and history. In 1929, MGM produces the first film with an all-black cast, *Hallelujah* (dir. King Vidor), and introduces America to a new light-skinned talent, Nina Mae McKinney. In 1934, Fredi Washington appears in Universal Pictures' movie about "passing" in the sentimental melodrama *Imitation of Life* (dir. John M. Stahl). Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge appear later in the 1940s and 1950s: Horne as seductress in

Vincent Minnelli's *Cabin in the Sky* and singer in Andrew L. Stone's *Stormy Weather* (1943); Dandridge as rebel seductress in Otto Preminger's *Carmen Jones* (1954).

The mulatto as ingénue or star popularized by all-black cast movies conceivably stimulates White's and Horne's Hollywood agenda. At first, the entertainer and the NAACP representative ignore the established Hollywood Negro actors. White especially negotiates only with the producers, studio heads, and the most popular white actors to rehabilitate the image of the Negro on the silver screen. Well-known (dark-skinned) Negro actors such as Hattie McDaniel, Clarence Muse, Mantan Moreland, and Butterfly McQueen receive the proverbial snub in the discussions. For example, White responds to the Sojourner Truth neighborhood and Woodward riots in 1942 and 1943 in Detroit, Michigan, by forming the Emergency Committee of the Entertainment Industry. Sponsored by CBS, the committee produces a program "through which well-known figures in the entertainment world could utilize their influence to create a countersentiment to mobism" (White 231). The roster includes luminaries such as Tallulah Bankhead, Duke Ellington, Lena Horne, Groucho Marx, Edward G. Robinson, and Orson Welles (White 232).

White also finds support from prominent Negroes in Los Angeles and the Negro press for his side-stepping of the old guard community of Negro actors. Interestingly, color consciousness and physical appearance factors energize the support. Walter White, blond and blue-eyed, is born into a deeply religious African-American family in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1893. White writes in his autobiography *A Man Called White*, that his parents are so light that they "guided themselves [. . .] along the course between the Scylla of white hostility and the Charybdis of some Negroes' resentment against us because we occupied a slightly more comfortable better-kept home and were less dark than they" (21). The recognition of his parents' strategies between the worlds of light and dark, imaginably informs his silence over a remark from a member of the Negro community. Kenneth Robert Janken, White's biographer, comments, "[White] accepted without comment the worst sort of pigment mongering by a prominent black Angeleno businessman, who told White not to meet with Muse, McDaniel, [Eddie "Rochester" Anderson,] and others" (271). Los Angeles businessman Norman O. Houston, secretary-treasurer of the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company, encourages White to dismiss the criticisms against him and Horne. In a special delivery letter dated September 16, 1943, Houston writes:

Naturally, a person physically large (or small), dark, limited in background and appearance can not [sic] appear in parts

designed for ingénues, gigolos or dashing heroes; therefore, it is possible that a *sort of jealousy or inferiority complex* is associated with the whole matter, especially when we take into consideration your friendliness with Lena Horne—certainly not of the type mentioned above. (1, emphasis mine)

Houston suggests further the character and “personal prejudices” of these actors will compromise a formal meeting with them; rather, “a semi-social gathering, where refreshments were served” will massage the emotions of the hypersensitive actors as they party on food and drink. Houston’s evaluation of dark-skinned African Americans—overweight or small—against that of Lena Horne’s “type” undeniably delineates the aggressive color and class consciousness practiced among several in the Negro community. In Houston’s estimation, moreover, dark physiognomy in the film industry “naturally” fails to transfer out of the mammy or tom or coon characterizations. The awareness of this disadvantage by the actor who meets the description, according to Houston, brings about a psychological disorder. Implicitly, the businessman welds the image stereotype to the actual actor rather than criticizes Hollywood’s investment in portraying Negro actors in stereotypical parts.

Similarly, an editorial, “Hollywood and Walter White,” in the *Chicago Defender*, a major Negro newspaper, claims the old guard Negro actors even fail to demonstrate the necessary competency to decide what is best for them because each “[has] been so used to playing menial parts that [she] can no longer conceive of getting respectable roles on the screen. The facts are that [they are] not capable of acting as judges of what is good and what is bad in Hollywood [. . .]” (14). Only White’s collaboration with white producers and talent agents can position McDaniel and others to be cast in other roles because neither McDaniel nor Beavers has the intellectual wherewithal to change casting decisions of film producers:

Perhaps Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers would no longer cavort in servants’ uniforms and Clarence Muse himself might not be called upon to put on a grass skirt and prance about as a jungle savage, ostensibly portraying an African. (14)

Horne’s and White’s résumé of similarities also add fuel to the fire. Both share upper-middle-class bourgeois backgrounds as well as similar physical characteristics of light complexions. Horne is born into an elite Negro family in the Bedford section of Brooklyn. She writes:

[. . .] most of my successes were to be the result of being exhibited, as I was that first day [of my birth], as oddity of color—a Negro woman, and a Negro entertainer who didn't fit the picture of personality and performing style the white majority used to expect. The world into which I was born, the one which exerted the strongest pull on my personality, was a small, tight world, [. . .] of the Negro middle class. [. . .] We were isolated from the mainstream of Negro life, seeing a relatively narrow group of people. (*Lena* 1–2)

Important to Horne's and White's Hollywood agenda are the bourgeois attitudes both she and White bring with them, and these attitudes encourage their isolation from the masses of the Negro population of actors in Hollywood. That Horne and White conflate the celluloid image with the actors themselves widens the gap even more between them and the old guard.

Interesting, however, is that although both Horne and White curry class and intraracial dissension while carrying out their Hollywood plans their paths eventually diverge. White continues lobbying Hollywood CEOs, but eventually learns “the immigrant Jewish cultural agenda was to use prevalent white stereotypes of African Americans in order to enter America's melting pot” (Jancken 273). In addition, Horne's autobiographies betray an admission that the arrangement she and White make to introduce a Negro womanhood means casting off the bourgeois isolation of which she is accustomed growing up in New York. She cannot sidestep the old guard of Negro actors to accomplish the task; understanding that the “symbol of racial uplift” involves the interaction of the bourgeois ingénue with the “working-class” Negro actors is imperative for her. Horne's texts lay bare an interrelationship with those who have come before her, and she develops a shrewd perception of the insidious assignation of labels (that is, “star,” “symbol,” “the first Negro to”) and its transitory nature. Thus, as she works with her new colleagues in film, Horne transforms into my parents' “something else”: an activist entertainer. As an activist entertainer, Horne places herself in the thick of things, and thereby claims a grassroots association with the people, not with the elite group of studio heads for whom she has agreed to labor.

Horne's migration to New York City after her screen test also is an important aspect of her journey. In New York, Horne meets Count Basie, the big swing bandleader. She confides her discomfort in Hollywood and her yearning to be with her people. She writes:

[. . .] I told [Count] Basie that I wasn't going back to Hollywood. I can't go back. I'm lonely; I can't see my own people. I don't want to be a movie star. [. . .] I was especially surprised at the seriousness of the advice he gave me when I said I didn't want to go back.

"You've got to go back," he said. "Nobody's ever had this chance before."

"But I don't want it," I sniffled. [. . .] Basie wasn't buying. "No you've got to go back," he said. "They've never had anyone like you. [. . .] They never have been given the chance to see a Negro woman as a woman. You've got to give them that chance." He made me believe it would somehow help all of us (*Lena* 142–143).

Exactly what kind of "Negro woman" does Count Basie mean they (white audiences) have not seen? Judging from the history of Negro women in film prior to Horne, Hollywood, especially MGM, is quite familiar with Horne's type through fair-skinned leading ladies Nina Mae McKinney, who plays Chick in King Vidor's production of *Hallelujah!* (1929) and Fredi Washington, who plays Peola in John M. Stahl's production *Imitation of Life* (1934). For example, Irving Thalberg, MGM's powerful producer, and director King Vidor considered McKinney "one of the greatest discoveries of the age," and Thalberg "predicted a glorious future" for her. Bogle maintains, "[t]he *New York Post's* Richard Watts, Jr. called her 'assuredly one of the most beautiful women of our time'" (*Toms, Coons* 33). McKinney so enchants the studio, MGM signs her to a five-year contract. According to Bogle, McKinney establishes the tradition of the treasured mulatto in Hollywood: light-skinned beautiful Negro women who are given a chance at leading roles because they meet the white ideal. The emerald-eyed Washington "emerges as one of Black America's most exciting dramatic actresses" and "[f]or a spell it looked as if Hollywood had a serious young black actress it would have to reckon with" (Bogle, *Brown Sugar* 79).

Like Horne, these actresses work in the theater and the nightclub circuits prior to work in film; and, like Horne's stint as a chorus dancer in Harlem's famed Cotton Club, McKinney dances in the chorus of a Harlem show, *Blackbirds of 1928*. McKinney's and Washington's film careers, however, hit dead ends, while Horne's only stalls. In the late 1950s, an assistant cameraman finds McKinney working as a maid in New York. Fredi Washington fairs better, but Hollywood stereotyping eventually lead her to abandon a career in film and embrace the role of a

civil rights activist and founder of the Negro Actors Guild of America in 1937, whose goal “was to eliminate stereotyping of roles [. . .] for blacks” (“Fred Washington”). With these similarities, what unique quality does Basie believe Horne can bring to Hollywood?

Horne appears in Hollywood with a very impressive résumé and entourage, including a solid upper-middle-class bourgeois Brooklyn, New York family. Lena Horne is born on June 30, 1917. She starts her career as a dancer in Harlem’s famous Cotton Club at age sixteen. Of that time, she observes, “[. . .] for the employees, [The Cotton Club] was an exploitative system on several levels. The club got great talent for very cheap, because there were so few places for great Negro performers. [W]e were underpaid and overworked in the most miserable conditions” (*Lena* 47, 48). Her interpretation of Harlem’s nightclub scene is perceptive, and her perceptions are honed at a young age by her wise but stoic grandmother, Cora Calhoun Horne. Calhoun Horne is a significant force in the singer’s belief that she can act as the Negro symbol for racial uplift.

Horne’s childhood exposures to racial injustice via participation in Negro institutions prepare her to endure and speak out against racism upon her entry in the entertainment industry. Her grandmother is an active member of the NAACP and the Urban League in the early 1900s. Horne accompanies her grandmother to many of the meetings, where she sits quietly memorizing the discussions. Horne writes:

[F]or of her many good works, it was, naturally, the NAACP, along with the Urban League, that ranked highest in [my grandmother’s] interest. [. . .] I have vivid memories of accompanying her to the meetings. [. . .] I was always the only child there, sitting quietly, listening because I knew I would be questioned later about what I had heard. [. . .] I was learning to “speak up like a little adult” in order to earn one brisk sign of approval from Grandmother. (*Lena* 10–11)

Observing these activities, repeating the deliberations therein, and “speaking up like a little adult” plant firm roots in Horne’s consciousness. I have shown how her grandmother’s training of Lena bears fruit in her dealings with the west coast league of Negro actors.

Horne’s association as a young entertainer with the internationally renowned singer Paul Robeson is also important in her choice to stand as a symbol for racial uplift. Anxious over her decision to pursue a career in entertainment rather than the formal education her grandmother favored, Robeson helps Horne understand that her resolve to

pursue a career in entertainment does not show disregard for her grandmother's teachings. Robeson assures her that even though Calhoun Horne takes a different approach to education, Horne's work complements the very principles on which the matriarch stood. In her 1950 autobiography, *In Person*, Horne recalls Robeson's affirmation during a backstage visit at New York's Café Society nightclub. Robeson reminds the young entertainer:

[Cora] was fighting for opportunity just as you are fighting for opportunity. If she could see you now, she'd be mighty proud of you. [. . .] She'd be proud of you because you both have the same drive for the same principles. [. . .] Aren't you always studying and rehearsing to improve yourself and do a better job? (*In Person* 186–187)

Robeson's words of encouragement facilitate Horne's reclamation of her self-respect, which is lost in the quagmire of racial injustice; Robeson affirms that he, too, "carried the same denial, the same rejection all our people suffer" (Horne, *In Person* 188).

The best information Robeson grants Horne, however, leads her to a deeper understanding of the plight of the Negro in the United States. In a 1947 interview with *Ebony* magazine, "Meet the Real Lena Horne," Horne confesses:

I hated my own people because I saw them pushed around and taking it. [. . .] But one night Paul Robeson came into Café Society [. . .] and that night changed my whole way of thinking. [. . .] I got some idea of the greatness of our people. I learned why they were being pushed around and how big people we Negroes can be if we learn how to see things clearly and fight. (10)

Robeson's mentorship in the backroom of New York's Café Society nightclub equips Horne with the vision and the ability to rightly judge appearances in an entertainment world.

Finally, the after-hour bull sessions held backstage at Café Society expose Horne to liberal whites who hold an abiding respect for Negroes in America: "[T]hey [. . .] knew what life was like for us [. . .] and how we react[ed] to what [. . . was] done to us. [. . .] These white people were doing something to help us overcome the unfair conditions of our lives" (Horne, *In Person* 194). There are conversations with and stories about Negro artists and musicians—such as the West Indian classical pianist

Hazel Scott, blues singer Billie Holiday, and actor Canada Lee—who protest discrimination in the United States. These sessions put Horne in close contact with whites and Negroes familiar with the Harlem Renaissance literati, including Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Richard Wright, W. E. B. Du Bois (to whom Horne refers as Dr. Du Bois), James Weldon Johnson, and Countee Cullen. The café society congregation of lawyers, newspapermen, writers, engineers, architects, doctors, and other professional people expands Horne’s grandmother’s wisdom and pedagogical approach as she hones her craft as an entertainer.

The congeries of occasions makes Horne “grateful for the deep respect [. . . she] was learning to have for [. . . her] own people” (Horne, *In Person* 193). While she has had to recite the tenets of the Urban League and the NAACP to her grandmother, the bull sessions afford her a front row seat to observe the system of beliefs in practice. Furthermore, in these discussions Horne most likely becomes familiar with Dr. Du Bois’s theory of racial uplift as outlined in his February 23, 1893, journal entry: “I am willing to sacrifice. . . . I therefore . . . work for the rise of the Negro people, taking for granted that their best development means the best development of the world” (Carby 9). For Horne, racial uplift means bringing up a new cinematic image for Negro women. The privilege of being the first Negro woman to be offered a long-term contract, glamour, and stardom at MGM is not enough for the bourgeois Lena Horne: she has an entire community of Negro women to liberate from the trammels of stereotypes on celluloid. Horne writes, “[m]y chief interest was in protecting my opportunity to sing” and to “set my own terms in the movies and also be successful [so that] others might be able to follow” (Horne, *Lena* 137). Here, Horne aligns herself with Du Bois’s theory of sacrifice. She refuses to buy into what film historian Richard Dyer calls “that hype and the hard sell [that] do characterize the media” because she senses its “manipulation, insincerity, inauthenticity” (*Heavenly Bodies* 16), and instability from the start.

The support of the NAACP and its representative Walter White; an established reputation in New York’s Café Society nightclub; the respect of her peers, both Negro and white, including Noble Sissle and Charlie Barnett; and, most important, the sociopolitical and racial issues of World War II America are other salient features of Horne’s life. As Horne’s onetime mentor and friend in New York, Basie knows Lena Horne is the most privileged, coddled, protected, and respected Negro female entertainer in the business at that particular time. Herein resides the difference between Horne and her predecessors and contemporaries. These elements, in particular the aspect of a protected Negro woman, constitute the “Negro woman as woman” Basie perceives.

As for McKinney, in his article “Black Garbo,” Stephen Bourne informs us that off screen, McKinney’s life is filled with strife and contention. He writes:

During the filming of *Sanders [of the River]*, her love affair with Paul Robeson came to an abrupt end when his wife, the ever-protective Eslanda, found them out. At the same time, Nina’s “star temperament” made her so unpopular in show business circles that she began to lose work. . . . Her replacement, Elizabeth Welch, later recalled: “Nina thought that being a star meant that you must be temperamental and nasty. Admittedly she was very young and immature, clearly unable to cope with fame, but she made herself unpopular, and ruined her career.” By this time, Nina had become addicted to drugs. [. . .] (112–13)

Bourne speculates further, “although very little is known about Nina’s affairs with women, she is rumored to have had a ‘liaison’ with the white Hollywood star Clara Bow.” Bourne continues:

Though not acknowledged at the time, many women like Nina found themselves drawn into relationships with women. Maude Russell, one of Nina’s contemporaries, explains: “Many of us had been abused by producers, directors, leading men. In those days men didn’t care about pleasing a girl. Girls needed tenderness, so we had girl friendships, and some of us became lovers, but we had to be discreet because lesbians weren’t accepted in show business.” (112–13)

Moreover, we find no indication that any field representative from the NAACP serves as agent for either McKinney or Washington, even though the organization has been fighting for changes in film images since 1915.

Basie understands the full implication of her contract and of the potential for her presence in the film industry. As a son of a domestic who witnesses his mother “take in washing [. . .] which meant that she did all of the washing and ironing of all the clothes and household linen for several well-to-do families around town,” Basie promises his mother that once he becomes successful and financially secure, she never would have to work as a domestic again (xi). The bandleader, therefore, regards Horne’s contract as an occasion to add another dimension to Negro womanhood, just as he anticipates the chance to lift his mother out of the role of the domestic. In other words, Negro womanhood has

another side. Herein is the “symbol” in Horne. Horne enters Hollywood as a would-be movie star and actress, a well-accomplished singer, and a political activist. These constituents make for a more holistic Negro woman rather than one frozen in an image of beauty, fair skin, and domestic servitude.

Basie’s directive has another element. Horne’s return to Hollywood means a distribution of the gift that is Horne. If Horne rests in the familiar comforts of New York, the gift is in danger of stagnating. Horne’s gifts—her “look,” her upper-middle-class pedigree, and the subsequent seven-year contract—are not only about Lena Horne. These gifts also will confront the nation’s long-held beliefs about the Negro woman as the nation stands at the threshold of change. Basie’s edict for Horne to go back is a request for her to understand the seriousness of the business at hand. In Basie’s mind, Horne must appraise the gift in the grand scheme of things, even if doing so means relinquishing the comforts of home.

Gift theory hinges on the concept that circulating the gift means ensuring a perpetual living space, rather than one that is motionless. Dinesh Khosla and Patricia Williams agree, “in the circularity of gift, the wealth of a community never loses its momentum. It passes from one hand to another; it does not gather in isolated pools” (621). This is not to say that Horne should act as sacrificial lamb to her own personal detriment. On the contrary, if the bearer of the gift passes it on, this means, according to Khosla and Williams, a personal sustenance as well. Distributing the gift “enchance[s] the self in relation to others, not alone. They continue, “[t]he spirit of the gift brings forth the self as part of a whole relationship: it brings forth the individual self, the group self, [and] the emotional self” (622, 623).

The assessment that Horne offers after hearing Basie’s charges makes evident the singer’s coming to terms with Khosla and Williams’s theory of the gift. By listening to Basie and analyzing his words, Horne finds meaning for the symbol. She explains:

[W]hatever his understanding of my possible symbolic value, [Basie] had also been able to see *me* within the symbol. [. . .] He was the first person who I thought had some objectivity about me, to imply that I was worthy of this favor. [. . .] [T]his was the kind of favor you prove yourself worthy of only after it is given. That is, the way you use it is the important thing, not the question whether you really deserved it in the first place. [. . .] I returned with the sense that I belonged somewhere. [. . .] (Horne, *Lena* 144–145)

Basie's belief in her abilities enables a self-appreciation and a better understanding of the meaning of the symbol, how it should work, and its relationship to her as a person. Through her history with Cora Calhoun Horne, Paul Robeson, café society, the west coast Negro community of actors, Hattie McDaniel, and Count Basie, Horne unearths an inner ability to make the symbol stand for something in the presence of movie mogul, Louis B. Mayer.

### From New York to Los Angeles; from Basie to Louis B. Mayer

On one level, however, Horne's arrival indeed problematizes the tradition of the mammy. On another level, Horne complicates the very contract that ushers in the possibility for a new representation of Negro womanhood. Horne biographers James Haskins and Kathleen Benson agree that during her initial appointment with MGM, Horne "was a bit overwhelmed by the reception[,] suspicious of the excitement she had generated[,] and] didn't want to get caught up in the excitement . . ." (67). Horne is familiar with the demeaning roles Negroes play in films: "[The Negro actors] were mainly extras and it was not difficult to strip down to a loincloth and run around Tarzan's jungle or put on a bandanna and play one of the slaves in *Gone with the Wind*" [Horne, *Lena* 138]. Her keen insights prepare her to hold a clear view of the studio system—unlike her predecessor McDaniel and her contemporaries Lana Turner, Marilyn Monroe, and Dorothy Dandridge. Horne's texts lay bare a shrewd perception of the insidious nature of the labels (that is, "star," "symbol," "the first Negro to") from the onset, rather than as a regret in hindsight. This shrewdness protects her from the baleful emotional, physical, and mental pitfalls her film-star colleagues—black and white, predecessors and contemporaries—experienced.

Hattie McDaniel, for example, identifies with the mammy figure for years. Her biographer, Carlton Jackson, notes McDaniel embraces the mammy so much that she even signed one correspondence "Mammy, Hattie McDaniel." McDaniel champions the role by going on national tour as Mammy after the popularity of the film *Gone with the Wind*. But in the end, with the changing times, McDaniel grows quite depressed. Jackson writes, "[Hattie] told friends that 'I don't belong on this earth. I always feel out of place—like a visitor.' During Hattie's 'time of troubles' in the late forties getting movie parts, she became so despondent that she attempted suicide" (144, 146). After nursing an entire nation through her character, "Mammy" dies of breast cancer in 1954.

Lana Turner, an MGM established star, laments that the sexy “flesh impact” image that director Mervyn LeRoy “fix[ed] in the viewers’ mind” clung to her for the rest of her career: “I was the sexual promise, the object of desire. [. . .] the movie star in diamonds, swathed in white mink” (Turner 9). Marilyn Monroe’s biographer, Donald Spoto, relates that even though Monroe managed to create an enormously popular sex symbol for the studio and the public, “she [had become] trapped by an image with whose manufacture she had wholeheartedly co-opted since her modeling. Close relationships had meant mostly sexual relationships” (187). As in her private life, her on-screen characters position her to be “taken advantage of or humiliated” (Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies* 46). In 1962, Monroe dies of an apparent drug overdose without having been released from her sex-symbol status. She was thirty-six.

Dorothy Dandridge, who is the first Negro actress to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actress (*Carmen Jones*), realizes that the acquisition of stardom does not guarantee equitable treatment from studio heads. Nor does it secure respectability from white men in the business—a thing she craves throughout her career. Dandridge writes of her angst, “I was too light to satisfy Negroes, not light enough to secure the screen work, the roles, the marriage status available to a white woman” (165).

Importantly, the dissatisfaction that white stars such as Turner and Monroe articulate and their conflicts with the studio systems bring to focus a desire to expand their careers and express themselves as something other than cinematic sexpots. Their autobiographies do not reveal any need in them to create different roles to uplift neither the white race, nor white womanhood. Moreover, none of them is an experiment in U.S. race relations. Turner and Monroe, especially, enjoy the full benefits of stardom despite their grievances against the studio. In fact, Monroe’s image made her the most popular American icon in the history of entertainment. McDaniel, Dandridge, and Horne struggle against society’s refusal to see them as American women, however, and a society that opts, instead, to relegate them to an on-screen role as household servant or sex goddess.

### The Paradox of Beauty

Horne has agreed to uplift the race: “Walter [White] felt, and I agreed with him, that since I had no history in the movies and therefore had not been typecast as anything so far, it would be essential for me to try to