A Comparison Between *Gone with the Wind* and *Song of the South*: Reactions and Legacies

By Katherine Fapp

Following the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and until the end of World War II, the concept of the romantic South spread across the nation and manifested itself into many different forms of popular culture including literature and eventually, film. The films Gone with the Wind *(1939) and* Song of the South *(1946), both adaptions of earlier published materials, were examples of this theme in popular culture at the tail end of the period, but both currently have very different legacies. This article looks at the reactions stemming from the films, and why they, despite featuring similar ideas of the romantic South and stereotypes of African Americans, have such different legacies. The characters and portrayals of Mammy from* Gone with the Wind *and Uncle Remus from* Song of the South *played prominent roles in these legacies as well, generating most of the influential reactions from both white and black media. African American reactions to both films demonstrate the effect World War II had on African American attitudes regarding not only Jim Crow policies, but also the depiction of African Americans in popular culture.*

After Reconstruction ended in 1877, the idea of a fictionalized American South captivated a nation seeking to reconcile after 17 years of war and turmoil.[1] The heavily romanticized tragedy of the "Lost Cause" of the Confederacy captured the nation's imagination from the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, only slowing down with the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement after the end of World War II.[2] This nostalgia for the romantic South manifested into many different forms, including literature. Joel Chandler Harris, a journalist, compiled African American folktales into seven extremely popular publications; the character Uncle Remus, a former slave who lived on his former master's plantation, told the tales in his novels.[3] Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind*, published in 1936, centered on the antebellum South and the tragedy of its destruction in an epic story following the life of Scarlett O'Hara, who must rebuild her life after the Civil

1. Tyina Steptoe, "Imagined South" (lecture, University of Arizona, Feb. 24, 2016).
2. Ibid.
3. Daniel Stein, "From *Uncle Remus to Song of the South*: Adapting American Plantation Fictions," *The Southern Literary Journal* 47, no. 2 (2015): 23

War. Both of these texts eventually found themselves adapted for the silver screen, as well; *Gone with the Wind*, produced by Richard Selznick, premiered in 1939 to critical acclaim, and *Song of the South*, produced by Walt Disney, premiered in 1946. However, the two films hold two very different legacies — despite dealing with similar topics and portrayals of antiquated African American stereotypes. The overwhelmingly positive legacy of *Gone with the Wind* and negative legacy of *Song of the South* demonstrates the effect that the attitude shift of inspired African Americans returning from WWII had on the nation as a whole.

Gone with the Wind begins with a sweeping overture and opening credits with scenes of the romantic South — the grandiose, white-columned plantations of Tara and Twelve Oaks, flowering magnolia and dogwood trees — and slaves picking cotton in a field. These images scroll past as a rolling narration describes the South as a "dream remembered" and "a civilization gone with the wind."[4] The audience soon meets Scarlett O'Hara, and, less than a minute after, Mammy, fretting about Scarlett leaving the house without a shawl.[5] Mammy, portrayed by Hattie McDaniel, is a constant in *Gone with the Wind*, only appearing when Scarlett needs her and never by herself, acting as Scarlett's surrogate mother and arguably serving as Scarlett's only stable relationship in the entire movie.[6] Mammy is a stereotype of the black female domestic worker, and a hallmark of the imagined antebellum South. The mammy is solely concerned with her white family — she has no children of her own, no life outside of her work, and only seeks to dote on the white children she looks after. Like ideas of the romantic South, mammy was a very popular figure across the nation and the world.[7] In a movie based on a book detailing this imagined South, and created for a predominantly white target audience that fawned over this setting, it is no surprise that Scarlett's mammy was included. However demeaning the character, McDaniel's performance as Mammy became central to how both white and black media received the movie when it premiered in late 1939. Among many of the praises *Gone with the Wind* received, McDaniel's performance as Mammy was one of the highest.

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4. *Gone with the Wind*, directed by Victor Fleming (1939; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2004), DVD.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890 – 1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 98.

Papers in 1939 fawned over *Gone with the Wind*, with *The New York Times* dedicating most of their review to praising the movie's scenery, direction, and cast, lamenting only that it excluded some of the storylines from the novel. Interestingly, *The New York Times* review admitted that "Best of all … next to Miss Leigh, is Hattie McDaniel's Mammy."[8] *The New York Times*' glowing review of both *Gone with the Wind* and McDaniel's performance as Mammy echoed across the nation, with TIME magazine also praising her performance.[9,10] The African American community, however, was not as taken with the movie. Concerns over the movie started early, with many believing that *Gone with the Wind* would serve as a spiritual sequel to *The Birth of a Nation*, a film that portrayed the white terrorist group the Ku Klux Klan as the heroic saviors of a battle-torn South.[11] Prior to filming, producer Selznick consulted with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), agreeing to cut all scenes depicting the KKK and use of the word "nigger."[12] Despite this collaboration, however, the result was less than ideal, with black newspapers such as *The Chicago Defender* publishing several articles decrying the film for opening "a new wave of hatred against black people."[13]

The film avoided completely dismissive reviews from the African American press, though. A line of cautious dialogue started to appear in black papers that focused on McDaniel's performance as Mammy; as one reporter for the *Defender* warned his readers, her performance just about caused one to like the film.[14] Other papers across the nation also recognized McDaniel's groundbreaking performance; although she portrayed the infamous mammy, her performance in the role was the one of the first times Hollywood had recognized black excellence in acting.[15] McDaniel was the first African American to ever receive a nomination for and win an Academy Award, and upon accepting her statuette, said "I sincerely hope that I shall be a

8. Frank S. Nugent, "The Screen in Review; David Selznick's 'Gone with the Wind' Has Its Long Awaited Premier as Astor and Capitol, Recalling Civil War and Plantation Days of South – Seen as Treating Book With Great Fidelity," *New York Times*, Dec. 20, 1939.
9. James F. Tracy, "Revisiting a Polysemic Text: The African American Press's Reception of Gone with the Wind," *Mass Communication & Society 4*, no. 4 (2001): 423.
10. "Cinema: G with the W," *TIME Magazine*, Dec. 25, 1939.
11. Tracy, "Revisiting a Polysemic Text," 424.
12. Ibid., 424 – 425.
13. "Gone with the Wind," *Chicago Defender*, Jan. 13, 1940.
14. Al Monroe, "'Gone with the Wind' Has Too Many Insults," *Chicago Defender*, Jan 6, 1940.
15 . Tracy, "Revisiting a Polysemic Text," 429.

credit to my race and to the motion picture industry."[16] This honor only encouraged a more positive output from the black media, with many papers reneging on their initial reviews and criticisms of the film.[17] In spite of the demeaning role she played, Hattie McDaniel's performance became a matter of black pride in early 1940.[18] *Gone with the Wind*, despite all of the negative stereotypes it portrayed and initial negative reactions, has survived and maintained a relatively positive legacy because of the paradox its reception posed. McDaniel's role as Mammy was offensive, a stereotype created to only fulfill white fantasies about the antebellum South,[19] but the praises she won for her performance and the ground she broke pushed the black press to praise the film.[20] For all of its negative portrayals of African Americans, Mammy allowed Hattie McDaniel to receive the highest recognition an actress could in the predominantly white film industry of the late 1930s. McDaniel used Mammy to subvert white expectations from within a system controlled by white filmmakers. Disney's *Song of the South* and its Uncle Remus, on the other hand, did not reach this level of defiance.

Like *Gone with the Wind*, *Song of the South* was a film based off of a popular text — the seven Uncle Remus novels written by Joel Chandler Harris, a white journalist who compiled the slave folktales during Reconstruction. Told by Uncle Remus, the tales followed the misadventures of Brer Rabbit, a mischievous and cunning rabbit who often finds himself at odds with his adversaries, Brer Fox and Brer Bear.[21] Disney, partly inspired by the success of *Gone with the Wind*,[22] produced *Song of the South* as a more sanitized and child-friendly version of the stories, complete with Disney's signature animation. The film, which premiered in Atlanta in 1946, followed in the footsteps of its source material and *Gone with the Wind*, depicting a romanticized post-war South with many antebellum attributes. A big, fancy plantation house with white columns, lush and flowering landscapes, and friendly and smiling black farmers are seen singing as they walk to the fields in the opening credits,

16. Edward Mapp, *African Americans and the Oscar: Seven Decades of Struggle and Achievement* (Oxford, The Scarecrow Press, 2003), 10.
17. Tracy, "Revisiting a Polysemic Text," 430.
18. Ibid
19. Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation*, 112-113.
20. Tracy, "Revisiting a Polysemic Text," 430.
21. Stein, "*From Uncle Remus*," 23.
22. Ibid.

while an angelic choir sings praises of the South.[23] The audience soon meets Johnny, a young white boy staying at his grandmother's plantation to get away from city life and his quarreling parents. After Uncle Remus foils Johnny's plot to run away back to Atlanta, he and the boy develop a close relationship, with the former regaling Johnny with tales of Brer Rabbit and teaching him life lessons along the way.[24]

Song of the South's version of Uncle Remus, with James Baskett as the character, is quite different from the source material. Throughout the movie, Uncle Remus is portrayed in an amicable and docile manner; whether he offers a smile, a song, or wave, he is pleasant and happy at all times and only sad when Johnny's mother forbids him from seeing her son.[25] Uncle Remus takes up the mantle of Johnny's father, whose absence is a main plot point in the film. Similar to the relationship between Mammy and Scarlett, Uncle Remus supports Johnny when he needs it the most — simultaneously teaching him lessons and taking orders from him — but also takes a step back when Johnny's real father returns. This Uncle Remus, unlike the ones from the original Harris stories, became nothing more than Johnny's male Mammy, his only purpose in the film being to cater to Johnny and his needs. As Daniel Stein states, the original Uncle Remus tales, although published by the white Harris, originally transmitted tales of black resistance under the system of slavery.[26] The Uncle Remus presented in *Song of the South*, on the other hand, lacks this subversive element, which McDaniel curated when her performance in *Gone with the Wind* subverted the expectations of a white Hollywood. While Baskett did receive some praise for his performance as Uncle Remus,[27] it was not enough to save the ill-fated movie from the newly inspired African American community.

Unlike *Gone with the Wind*, *Song of the South* did not receive as high praises from most of the white media. In their review of the movie, *The New York Times* complained about the lack of animation in the film, mocked the plot of the live-action characters, and only really praised the animated escapades of Brer Rabbit. At the end of the review, they also acknowledged that the NAACP "expressed regret" that

23. *Song of the South*, directed by Harve Foster and Wilfred Jackson (1946; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Home Video, 1982), PAL VHS.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Stein, "From *Uncle Remus*," 25 – 26.
27. Mapp, *African Americans and the Oscar*, 12.

the film perpetuated the ideal master-slave relationship and, in an attempt to offend no one, glorified slavery.[28] As the statement from the NAACP would suggest, the African American community and press did not take kindly to *Song of the South*. Black Congressman Adam Clayton Powell asked city authorities to stop any showings of the movie,[29] and six African American theaters in Washington, D.C. refused to show the movie.[30] The Palace Theatre in New York City was picketed by protesters singing "Disney tells, Disney tells, Disney tells lies about the South," and waving signs that said "The *Song of the South* is slightly off-key because Disney says it's wrong to be free," and "We fought for Uncle Sam, not Uncle Tom."[31] The second phrase from the protest specifically demonstrated African Americans' newfound resistance against black disenfranchisement and existing racist stereotypes. Sentiments had clearly shifted in the seven-year period from 1939 when *Gone with the Wind* premiered, to 1946 when *Song of the South* debuted.

This shift is crucial to understanding why *Gone with the Wind* is a classic today and *Song of the South* is locked up in the Disney vault. While the former does stand as a better movie, *Song of the South* was partly a victim of the times. The year 1946 was vastly different from 1939; *Gone with the Wind*'s 1939 release date barely missed this crucial shift in African American attitudes, while *Song of the South* premiered when this shift emerged. Black veterans returning from WWII were inspired to change the state of their domestic lives, and while it may have explicitly been about civil rights, it seeped into the consumption of popular culture as well. The stripped Uncle Remus also takes some of the blame; in adapting Harris' stories for a children's movie, Disney dumbed the character down into a singsong man instead of one who slyly told tales of slave resistance. While the black press community eventually accepted *Gone with the Wind* because of McDaniel's performance and groundbreaking achievements, by 1946 the ground had been broken. James Baskett did receive an Academy Award for his role as Uncle Remus, and was the first black

28. Bosley Crowther, "The Screen: '*Song of the South*,' Disney Film Combining Cartoons and Life, Opens at Palace – Abbott and Costello at Lowe's Criterion," *New York Times*, Nov. 28, 1946.
29. "Adam Powell Asks New York Police to Bar '*Song Of The South*' and 'Rose'," *Chicago Defender*, Jan 4, 1947.
30. "Ban '*Song of South*'," *Chicago Defender*, Jan. 18, 1947.
31. "'*Song of South*' Picketed: Line at the Palace Protests Disney Portrayal of Negro," *New York Times*, Dec. 14, 1946.

male actor to do so, but it was only honorary.[32] Perhaps, if Disney had kept some of the wit and resilience of Harris' Uncle Remus, the movie might have received the type of praise *Gone with the Wind* eventually did. *Song of the South*, although displaying the South many came to know, premiered in a world where African Americans sought fair and equal treatment under both the law and popular culture.

Gone with the Wind and *Song of the South* contained many similarities; they were both set in a romanticized South with ideal race relations and subservient, loyal slaves, and a black/white relationship were both crucial to their plots and stories. However, *Gone with the Wind*, premiering before the U.S. entrance of WWII in 1939, and featuring the talents and groundbreaking performance of Hattie McDaniel as Mammy, has retained a legendary status and sustained less racial scorn in the seventy-seven years of its existence as compared to Disney's film. *Song of the South* premiered to a post-war America, one with changed attitudes regarding the depiction of race in the media. While it would not be until the 1960s when movies like *To Kill a Mockingbird* would start to depict southern blacks in a sympathetic light, the overwhelmingly negative black reaction to *Song of the South* was a first step towards realistic depictions of southern blacks in film. By comparing these two films and the reactions they received, it is easy to see how far-reaching the shift in black attitude post-WWII really was, even in the immediate aftermath of the war. This shift not only inspired the fight against the disenfranchisement of African Americans in the South, but also began to break down cultural barriers that existed nationwide, challenging how Americans viewed both the South and black Southerners.

Author's Biography

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32. Mapp, *African Americans and the Oscar*, 12.