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*Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences
in 1930s Hollywood* by Miriam J. Petty (review)

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Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History, Volume 9, 2017, pp. 105-108
(Review)

Published by Penn State University Press



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Butler's own essay, "Homer's Deep," also reconfigures the traditional version of reception as (in Schein's words) "attentive read[ing] and creative reinterpret[ation]" (140) or close and informed attention to a single text by a single reader/author/receiver. Butler instead traces the love of Achilles and Patroclus as it appears and disappears through time in readings and engagements with Homer's text from Plato to John Addington Symonds and argues that these "renegade readers . . . are insisting on reading the tradition as a whole," in a kind of networked, collective, transhistorical reading that brings an enhanced "depth of field, an ability to bring into focus what no single text has shown us but which is seen all the same as residing in the tradition itself" (39).

In his introduction, Butler is careful not to overstate its claim for methodological innovation, writing only that "'Deep Classics' offers . . . at least a new way of contextualizing some of what we all seem to have been doing, all along" (3). This book is, however, a major contribution to the "radical" strand of classical reception studies. One of the most valuable things it has to offer is what Rita Felski might call an expansion of the discipline's "critical mood," which involves "not only a matter of method but of a certain sensibility" (*Limits of Critique*, 6). Different critical moods dispose us to find meaning, and take pleasure, in different kinds of writing, reading, and relationship to texts.

Ultimately, the difference between *Deep Classics* and the other two volumes reviewed here lies in their critical moods. The scholarship in *Deep Classics* is certainly no less rigorous than that in the other two volumes; its sense of responsibility both to the Classical past and to the present and future is no less acute. However, its *mood*—a kind of playful seriousness or serious playfulness—contrasts strongly with the serious-mindedness of Kraus & Stray's and Schein's books and helps to expand the possibilities for reading, writing, and thinking in the discipline of Classics.

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Miriam J. Petty. *Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016. 320 pages. \$65.00 (cloth). \$34.95 (paper and e-book).

Miriam J. Petty's impressive book examines the complex social positions and legacies of a constellation of African American stars during Hollywood's Golden Age. With fine writing and significant archival research, Petty explores how

African American actors pressed the boundaries of their limited stardom, in performances that challenged the stereotyped and marginalized roles assigned to them. The main body of the book is divided into four chapters devoted to the cases of Hattie McDaniel, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Louise Beavers and Fredi Washington, and Lincoln “Stepin Fetchit” Perry. Recognizing the ways these ambivalent performances risked reinforcing stereotypes, the book nevertheless explores the transformative potential of marginalized black actors as they influenced contemporary viewers and an ensuing generation. It traces the often controversial impact of these performers on the movie-going public, focusing especially on receptions by black audiences.

The book’s title, *Stealing the Show*, comes to represent different receptions and responses to these African American stars. On the one hand, performers might use marginal and stereotyped roles—such as Hattie McDaniel’s Mummy in *Gone With the Wind* (1939)—to outshine their costars, drawing attention to their characters and to their skill as actors. On the other hand, the very term “stealing the show,” used so frequently to describe these performances, reifies notions of white ownership and black theft. In a wonderful introductory gambit, Petty connects the idea of “stealing the show” to an often-repeated story from the nineteenth century about an enslaved African American caught stealing a pig from his master for sustenance. The enslaved man justifies the theft because the master has not technically lost anything but has merely enriched one form of property at the expense of another. As Petty notes, numerous writers, from Frederick Douglass to the historian Lawrence Levine, have retold this burlesque joke. When Toni Morrison draws on the anecdote in *Beloved* (1998), she uses an archaic but historically accurate term for the pig, calling it a “shoat” (4). This phrase, “stealing the shoat,” then becomes a “shadow figuration for the potentially affirming notion of stealing the show” (172). While black performers may sustain themselves and gain strength through the act, this subversion is haunted by the restrictions of a white marketplace. Petty’s study offers compelling readings of such African American performances in 1930s Hollywood.

The chapters themselves combine analyses of particular scenes, of the contextual dynamics of fandom and studio production, and of the discourse of performance and reception as evidenced in popular reviews and interviews. For instance, the first chapter considers McDaniel’s Academy Award-winning work in *Gone with the Wind*, arguing that the actor’s performance, especially in the so-called staircase scene, functions as a “dynamic, medium-specific mammy monument” (29). The language of monuments and landmarks suffuses the chapter, and not simply because McDaniel was the first African American to be recognized with an Oscar. Petty shows how, in the wake of the Civil War, white southern women in groups such as the United Daughters

of the Confederacy (UDC) sought to memorialize the Confederacy using the figure of the mammy, a cipher that helped them reimagine the slave plantation as a familial community. Indeed, the UDC led a twenty-year campaign to construct monuments of the mammy figure in every state and in the nation's capital. While these efforts were not successful, the campaign points to the significant power of Hattie McDaniel's role as Mammy and helps to account for its popularity among southern white viewers. The chapter goes on, however, to consider McDaniel's attempts to complicate this reception in public appearances and interviews, naming her influences as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Charity Still. Petty connects McDaniel's language in these instances to that of African American clubwomen in groups such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). The competing visions of the UDC and NACW thus intersect with competing receptions of McDaniel's landmark performance.

Petty's analysis of Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in Chapter 2 makes wonderful connections between his dance style as a form of play, his interactions with children both on-screen and through charitable activities, and the ways he was viewed by a black audience. While Robinson is best known for performing alongside Shirley Temple in several movies throughout the 1930s, the chapter decentralizes the child actress in order to focus on the Robinson's show-stopping performances. The chapter considers how films in which Robinson played small parts were promoted and advertised in segregated theaters to amplify the black performer's role. In a fascinating departure from an analysis of newspaper and magazine reviews of these films, the chapter uses memoirs to consider Robinson's influence on children of the 1930s, citing Maya Angelou and James Baldwin as well as scholars Mel Watkins and Ann DuCille. Most significantly, the chapter complicates the notion of black viewership as, by default, an "oppositional gaze" (74). It argues instead that children came to the movies with more flexible and transitory sensibilities, capable of what Petty calls racial transposition and racially transcendent play. For these viewers, Bill Robinson's performance stood apart from Shirley Temple's.

The discussion of Bill Robinson, known for his charitable work and respectability, contrasts sharply with the examination of Lincoln "Stepin Fetchit" Perry in the book's fourth chapter. Building on the work of film critic Arthur Knight, the chapter theorizes the "problematic stardom" of black actors, using Perry as a case study (172). Perry's "Stepin Fetchit" character is both famous and infamous for his garbled, senseless speech, which at times resisted the commands of white costars but also reinforced stereotypes of African Americans as unintelligible. The chapter shows how this character was developed in the transition from silent film to the "talkies." Indeed, Perry himself thoughtfully described how he invented Stepin Fetchit's speech patterns

to accommodate sound film technology. Once created and popularized, however, the character was imitated by actors such as Willie Best and Nick Stewart, and in a number of Walt Disney animated films, attaining a life of its own. The chapter shows that, while Perry sought fame and was substantially advertised by Fox publicity reports, his personal stardom, as an actor, was far more limited by race than the stardom of the character he created.

Other sections of the book further illuminate Petty's topic. The third chapter considers performances from Louise Beavers and Fredi Washington in a racial-passing subplot from *Imitation of Life* (1934). The duo's performance truly stole the show, garnering widespread critical acclaim over and above the performances of white actors in the film. Petty's chapter considers this subplot of racial passing, as Beavers and Washington played a dark-skinned mother and light-skinned daughter, allowing African American viewers to reflect on issues of beauty, colorism, and the "New Negro." The book's conclusion opens to later decades, discussing an NAACP initiative in the early years of the 1940s that asked Hollywood executives to give black actors nonstereotyped roles. Paul Robeson also receives some attention in the conclusion. Robeson is not included among the four chapters because he was the one black actor in the era to headline his own films and thus was the exception to the rule that guides Petty's study. Yet even Robeson was cast in a marginal, stereotyped role in the 1942 film *Tales of Manhattan*. As Petty points out, thirty years would pass before significant changes in the black "casting, scripting, and producing of roles" (225). Indeed, the limited stardom available to black actors in the 1930s has its legacy in Hollywood production and reception to this day.

For all of its strengths, *Stealing the Show* is not without a few miscues. Often, the text relies on tangential anecdotes to frame its chapters and subsections. Alongside its wide-ranging archive of receptions, these tangents can detract from the forcefulness of the writing. Similarly, by exploring a variety of interpretations of these deeply ambivalent performances, Petty's arguments can seem, at times, to be left open and undetermined. Yet this openness is also one of the book's great strengths, as it unsettles presentist interpretations of these performances in favor of discrete historical modes of reception. The study is especially powerful in shifting the frame and focus onto its marginalized performers and the way they were received by black audiences. The book makes a powerful case for further study of such counterhegemonic receptions. It offers compelling evidence for the ways early African American movie stars, limited by stereotype and marginalization in the Hollywood studio system, found a means for artistic expression—to be understood by moviegoers with eyes to see.

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