Black Faces, White Voices: The Politics of Dubbing in Carmen Jones

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The Velvet Light Trap, Number 51, Spring 2003, pp. 29-42 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press
DOI: 10.1353/vlt.2003.0010

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Otto Preminger’s film Carmen Jones is often considered a landmark—all positively and negatively—in the history of black representations in the cinema. Released by Twentieth Century–Fox in 1954, Carmen Jones established Dorothy Dandridge as a major star and earned her an Oscar nomination for best actress, the first ever for an African–American woman in a leading role.1 At the same time, however, Carmen Jones is also situated as a point of intersection between two separate film and musical traditions.

The first tradition relates to the history of the opera upon which Carmen Jones is based. As Susan McClary points out, Carmen’s entry into the canon of Western operas gave rise to several revisionist interpretations, each of them foregrounding a particular issue of concern to the society and culture that produced it (123–29). A production in Moscow in 1925, for example, made over Carmen as a Jewish Communist girl fighting for the rights of the workers in a cigarette factory. Nazi productions in the thirties, however, focused more on the threat of gypsy crime and miscegenation. As a text that exists in relation to both the original Prosper Mérimée story and to various productions of Carmen, Carmen Jones can be read as a reconfiguration of race, class, and gender issues that are already present in its previous guises. Indeed, lyricist Oscar Hammerstein evinced some awareness of this tradition when he defended his reworking of the opera as an all-black musical by pointing to the Moorish influence on Spanish culture.

The second, of course, is the all-black musical production. As a film, Carmen Jones is a throwback to the all-black films made in Hollywood during the thirties and forties such as The Green Pastures (1936), Cabin in the Sky (1943), and Stormy Weather (1943). Like those films, Carmen Jones adheres to a logic of segregation, one that situates black representations within idealized, often rural landscapes that systematically deny the presence of race relations or of any larger social context. As Robert Stam and Louise Spence point out, such films literally cannot bear the presence of white faces, since the appearance of a single white character would puncture their depiction of fantasy. Appearing near the start of the civil rights movement, Carmen Jones garnered some criticism based on its inheritance of the all-black musical’s segregationist tropes. During preproduction, Preminger and Twentieth Century–Fox sent the script to NAACP president Walter White in an effort to forestall any criticism from the black community. Although White could find no specific scene or character that was objectionable, he claimed that he could not support the production because the film’s basic premise deviated from his organization’s integrationist agenda (Bogle, Dorothy Dandridge 267–68).

Yet while Stam and Spence’s assertion aptly characterizes Carmen Jones’s image track, it is unable to address certain peculiarities of Carmen Jones’s sound track, namely, the dubbing of Dorothy Dandridge’s, Joe Adams’s, and Harry Belafonte’s singing voices by professional and, in some cases, white opera singers. Of course, in itself, the dubbing of an actor’s singing voice is not unusual in Hollywood films. For example, it was rumored for years that Andy Williams had provided the singing voice for Lauren Bacall’s character, Slim, in To Have and Have Not (1945) (Bogdanovich 332). Likewise, Marni Nixon made a name for herself as the off-screen singing voice
of several Hollywood stars, most notably, Natalie Wood in *West Side Story* (1963) and Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady* (1964).\(^2\) Moreover, the dubbing of actors’ singing voices would scarcely raise an eyebrow in India, where this practice had become the norm by the 1940s, and playback singers like Lata Mangeshkar emerged as major stars in both the film and music industries.

The ostensible reason for dubbing an actor’s singing voice is, quite simply, that the actor does not possess the requisite musical skills for such a performance. Ironically, the evidentiary support for this explanation has come from films that do not observe the convention, such as Robert Altman’s *Popeye* (1980) and Woody Allen’s *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996). In those films, the off-key warbling of performers like Shelley Duvall, Edward Norton, and Julia Roberts is supposed to add an amateurish charm to the films, which more generally break with the conventions of the classic Hollywood musical. Whether or not it achieves this aim is debatable, but at the very least, the use of the actors’ real singing voices reinforces a prima facie case for the studio era’s practice of dubbing in musicals.

In the case of *Carmen Jones*, however, the nonmusical performer hypothesis fails to provide an adequate explanation for that film’s use of dubbing. It might explain the dubbing of Joe Adams’s singing voice, since Adams was largely known as a popular disc jockey. It does not, however, explain why other voices were used for the film’s
two stars, Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte, both of whom were known to be accomplished musical performers. Indeed, Otto Preminger was well aware of Dandridge's musical background in casting her as Carmen and even helped Dandridge with her cabaret act when the production was completed. Belafonte, on the other hand, was a moderately successful calypso artist whose record sales soared after his star turn in Carmen Jones. Since both Dandridge and Belafonte were known as popular musicians, the decision to dub their voices for Carmen Jones raises an obvious question: were Dandridge and Belafonte considered “too black” to sing opera?

In this essay I will attempt to answer that question as well as to explore its implications for theories of racial representation in the cinema. In examining this question, I will first work through some of the reasons given for dubbing Belafonte’s and Dandridge’s voices in Carmen Jones, and then I will examine evidence from the film to see whether it supports or undermines these putative explanations. After examining this evidence, I will then try to extrapolate some conclusions from this case study by situating the filmmakers’ reasons for dubbing in relation to much broader theories of race as they pertain to both opera and cinema.

By severing the “natural” link between black bodies and black voices, the dubbed voices in Carmen Jones appear to question the very categories of race that were circulating in American culture in the 1950s by juxtaposing two quite different systems of race relations that are correlated with the technological separation of sound and image. On the screen, Carmen Jones presents an image of segregation along the lines sketched out by Stam and Spence. On the sound track, however, Carmen Jones mixes the voices of black and white performers in a manner that some of its performers perceived as a peculiar kind of racial integration. Before examining the implications of Carmen Jones’s treatment of racial categories, however, let me briefly turn to the film’s production history in order to explore the purported reasons for dubbing Dandridge’s and Belafonte’s singing voices.

**Dubbing Dandridge and Belafonte: Establishing Cultural Hierarchies in Carmen Jones**

Billy Rose’s production of Carmen Jones debuted in Philadelphia on 19 October 1943. Even prior to the production, however, Rose planted publicity items about the play that sought to establish a particular context for Carmen Jones’s reception. At the very outset, Rose attempted to shape that context by walking a fine line between showing fidelity to the original Bizet opera and highlighting the differences entailed in Oscar Hammerstein’s conception of it as an all-black musical. This tension, which would mark much of the background history of Otto Preminger’s production of the 1954 film, was already evident in a 1942 New York Herald Tribune notice announcing Rose’s project: “CARMEN JONES will be presented with an all-Negro cast, but it will not be a swing version of the opera. The locale will be transferred from Spain to South Carolina, and the lyrics will be in Negro dialect.” Of crucial importance here is Rose’s assertion that Carmen Jones will not be a “swing version,” since it indicates Rose’s desire to preserve the operatic character of Bizet’s music while drastically altering the opera’s setting and libretto.

After Carmen Jones’s Philadelphia premiere, however, initial press reports about the production mostly highlighted the differences entailed in Rose’s restaging of Bizet’s original. While these reports acknowledged the use of Bizet’s music, they also noted the show’s new libretto, Robert Russell Bennett’s new orchestral arrangements, and the cast of more than one hundred African-American performers. When the production moved to Broadway in December 1943, the reviews of Carmen Jones began to rein in the perceptions of the play’s deviations from its source. Lewis Nichols of the New York Times, for example, described the musical as “beautifully done in every way, with gay colors, gay ballets, and singers who sing as though they meant it.” But rather than simply enumerate the differences between Rose’s production and its source, as the initial press reports did, Nichols emphasizes the continuities between the two. In a second article for the Times written for its Sunday edition, Nichols emphasizes that Hammerstein has not written “a parody in any sense” and demonstrates the ways in which the characters, musical numbers, and narrative structures parallel one another in Bizet’s opera and Rose’s all-black musical. Don José becomes simply Joe, while Escamilo the Toreador becomes Husky Miller the prizefighter.

Perhaps because it purposely avoided the appearance of parody, Rose’s production of Carmen Jones had a long and successful run. In 1945, nearly two years after the
show’s debut, *Carmen Jones* earned Rose almost $120,000 in profits based on a fourteen-week run that collected more than $330,000 in total revenue. In 1946 a thirteen-week run earned more than $170,000 on $301,560 in total revenue. Yet despite the show’s financial success, Rose faced criticism from Bizet’s estate over the issue of *Carmen Jones’s* African-American performers. Rose’s business letters during this period make frequent reference to these complaints, which suggest that even though he avoided both swing music and parody as potential pitfalls, Rose ran afoul of the Bizet estate’s more rigid conception of the opera. More specifically, the complaints imply a stricter definition of musical style that specifies the operatic character of Bizet’s music as something that can only be achieved by classically trained vocalists. While many of Rose’s performers were trained opera singers, not all of them were, and it is presumably the “untrained” African-American vocalists that created such displeasure among the custodians of Bizet’s legacy. It also established something of a paradox within Rose’s conception of *Carmen Jones*. Bizet’s estate had no problem with African-American performers or with Hammerstein’s approximation of a Negro folk dialect as long as the performers did not sound like African-American singers but adhered to the more “universal” standards of classical vocal performance. Rose’s problems with Bizet’s estate would hamper the international reception of *Carmen Jones* for many years to come. Even after Preminger’s film was completed, Bizet’s estate successfully prevented the film from being seen in France until its Paris premiere in 1981.

Rose’s conception of a racialized *Carmen* affected the show’s reception in other ways. Perhaps because of the pressures from Bizet’s estate, Rose quelled a proposal by the Manhattan Opera and Drama Guild to stage *Carmen Jones* as part of a tour of “Negro communities.” Still, despite shunning African-American audiences, Rose clung to his conception of *Carmen Jones* as a specifically all-black musical. For example, in 1949 Rose refused permission to the Los Angeles Civic Light Opera Association when its general director, Edwin Lester, proposed a unique plan that involved “alternating the casts so that white people would play one night, negroes the next.” Three years later, in a letter to Irvin Marks, Rose complained that though he had been approached by various studios for a film version of *Carmen Jones*, the negotiations always broke down “because the Hollywood boys balked at the idea of making the movie with an all-Negro cast. In other words, after Oscar performed the unique job of turning an opera into an entertainment, they wanted to turn it back into an opera . . . and this never made sense to us.”

After initially attempting to get Elia Kazan to direct a film version of *Carmen Jones*, Rose finally settled on Otto Preminger. In an undated letter to Preminger, Rose outlined his terms for the film version, which included demands that the film be made in color, that it would use Bizet’s music and an all-Negro cast, and that it would adhere to Hammerstein’s story line and characterizations from the Broadway production. In exchange for the rights to a film version of *Carmen Jones*, Rose would receive $300,000 against 10 percent of the producer’s share of all gross receipts.

Once Preminger had been installed as producer and director, there remained the sticky point of who to cast in the lead roles. Preminger selected Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte for the roles of Carmen and Joe, respectively, but, according to the pressbook that Twenty-First Century–Fox prepared for the film, Dandridge and Belafonte were cast for their looks rather than their musical skills. In an item entitled “Singers to Spare in ‘Carmen’ Film,” the studio claimed that *Carmen Jones* called for “young, romantic leads with operatic voices. The two don’t often go hand in hand.” Crediting Preminger for the decision to dub, the pressbook says that substitution of operatic voices for the voices of Dandridge and Belafonte “works beautifully,” largely because the previous singing experience of the two enabled them to do a more natural and believable job in lip-syncing the songs.

As was the case with the Broadway musical, Preminger’s film version of *Carmen Jones* sought to negotiate two apparently contradictory demands between the film’s visual and aural regimes. On the one hand, *Carmen Jones* conformed to the economic and cultural demands for real film stars whose glamour would provide the film with much of its box office appeal. As two stunningly beautiful performers who had previously been paired in MGM’s *Bright Road* (1953), Dandridge and Belafonte supplied all the erotic energy needed for *Carmen Jones’s* ill-fated romance. As Hedda Hopper declared, “I got so excited I burned a big hole in the front of my dress. Yep, the film is that hot” (Rippy, “Commodity, Tragedy, Desire” 189). Yet Preminger’s interest
in sexual heat did not extend to the film’s sound track, which eschewed “hot” music in favor of a performance style based on operatic conventions. This may have been done in response to pressure from the Bizet estate, but it became an important aspect of the film’s promotion and publicity. Unlike other dubbed performances in Hollywood musicals, which were typically uncredited, the voices of Marilyn Horne, Le Vern Hutcherson, and Marvin Hayes were featured in the film’s opening credits and were mentioned in nearly all of the film’s reviews. By openly citing the use of classically trained voices in the film, Preminger and Twentieth Century–Fox employed a rhetoric similar to that of Billy Rose in publicizing his show. The frequent reference to the film’s use of operatic voices served to reassure audiences that Carmen Jones remained closely tied to the Bizet opera, a gesture comparable to Rose’s public claims that his production was not a “swing version.”

Still, Preminger’s and Fox’s insistence on operatic voices in Carmen Jones ultimately falters as an explanation for the use of dubbing, since it cannot explain why some voices were dubbed but others were not. It explains, for example, why Olga James, a Juilliard-trained opera singer, not only appears on-screen in the role of Cindy Lou but also sings the part herself. It does not, however, explain why Pearl Bailey was allowed to sing the role of Frankie. By publicizing Bailey’s appearance in Carmen Jones and her own “inimitable brand of singing,” Preminger and Fox beg an obvious question: why deny Dandridge the right to sing the part of Carmen on the grounds that her voice could not handle its demands but then accommodate Pearl Bailey by lowering her number nearly an octave to fit the range of her husky alto?

Likewise, Bailey’s “undubbed” performance in Carmen Jones also poses problems for another commonly cited reason for dubbing, namely, that the vocal ranges of Dandridge’s and Belafonte’s voices did not match that required by the parts. This hypothesis surfaces in some later accounts of the film such as the Toronto Film Society’s program notes for a 1987 screening: “[A]lthough Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte were both professional singers, Bizet’s music would have been a bit too difficult for them.” As an explanation, this theory has some merit, since it displaces the question of Dandridge’s and Belafonte’s training. Even if Preminger had used a popular musical style in the film, he still may have dubbed the voices of the two leads with singers whose voices matched the range of the parts. Here again, however, the vocal range hypothesis cannot account for Pearl Bailey’s performance in the film. In adapting the “Gypsy Song” from Carmen, the key for “Beat out Dat Rhythm on a Drum” was lowered from E major to F# major to fit Bailey’s vocal range. This again begs an important question about the differential treatment of Dandridge and Bailey: why deny Dandridge the right to sing the part of Carmen on the grounds that her voice could not handle its demands but then accommodate Pearl Bailey by lowering her number nearly an octave to fit the range of her husky alto?

In sum, the prevailing explanations for the dubbing of Dandridge’s and Belafonte’s voices leave much to be desired. They unproblematically explain the specifics for the roles of Carmen and Joe, but they do not explain why other parts and other performers were treated differently. If Bizet’s estate objected to the use of popular performers in operatic roles, then surely they must have objected to Bailey’s incarnation of Frankie and her performance of a number that is sung by Carmen herself in the original. In order to understand the reasons for the decision to dub in Carmen Jones, we must look elsewhere to the broader cultural associations of blackness and whiteness, popular music and opera. Since every argument about the reason to dub circles back to Pearl Bailey’s performance in Carmen Jones, I submit that the real, if unstated, reasons for dubbing can be found through an analysis of her number and its specific textual functions.

Making Sense of the “Rhythm”: Blackness and Exoticism in Carmen Jones

Pearl Bailey’s number, “Beat out Dat Rhythm on a Drum,” begins with a medium shot of Carmen in Billy Pastor’s café. When Carmen hears a drum solo begin off-screen, she turns to walk through a crowd of dancers. As Carmen nears the bar, the crowd chants, “Go, Max,” an action that is followed by a brief shot of Carmen, who enters from off-screen and sits down in the extreme right part of the CinemaScope frame. Having established Carmen’s spatial position, the film now reveals the source of the drumming with a slightly low angle shot of jazz great Max Roach performing a driving, highly syncopated drum solo with a pair of tympani mallets. After a cut back to the previous camera position, Roach completes his virtuosic display off-screen.
and begins to plunk out the simple eighth-note rhythms that introduce “Beat out Dat Rhythm.” From a purely musical perspective, the shift from Roach’s drum solo to the straightforward rhythms of the tune could not be more jarring. The frenzied, polyrhythmic, and “swinging” rhythmic pulse of Roach’s drum solo provides a marked contrast to the accented downbeats and very straight, precise eighth-note patterns of “Beat out Dat Rhythm.” Through this brief juxtaposition of opera and bebop, Preminger gives us a taste of the “swing opera” Carmen Jones might have been rather than the relatively faithful adaptation of Bizet’s opera that it actually was.

Returning to the shot of Carmen by the bar, we see Frankie just a few feet to her left. Like Carmen, Frankie is costumed in a party dress. However, where Carmen’s dress is a relatively demure pink, a color that varies the associations of redness with flames, flowers, and passion established earlier in the film, Frankie’s dress has a khaki-colored skirt, a purple bodice, and thin straps that expose the character’s bare shoulders. In addition to the dress, Frankie wears large earrings, a pearl necklace, and bracelets on her left arm. The latter add a touch of exotic “negritude” to her costume in their similarity to the bracelets worn by the “jungle natives” that Frankie will soon sing about.

As the camera tracks in slightly to reframe Frankie as the focal point of the scene, she takes a drink, shakes her head, and begins to sing about the primitive force of the drummer’s rhythms. Hammerstein’s lyrics here indicate that Frankie enjoys the “sweetness in the music” but that such “sweetness” appeals to her emotions rather than
her physical being. Instead, it is the “thump, thump, thumping of the bass, the bump, bump, bumping of the music” that stir Frankie’s desire to dance. Indeed, as the song’s chorus indicates, rhythm is the only element needed to instill this desire. As long as the musicians “beat out dat rhythm on a drum,” Frankie “don’t need no tune at all.”

The next shot of the sequence begins with a match on action of Frankie turning toward the camera, which then tracks in as she walks to the right and hops upon the bar. With Frankie now seated, the camera pulls back to reveal members of the crowd continuing their dance number. As a kind of visual demonstration of the power of rhythm, we see only parts of the dancers in the foreground, their shimmying and shaking limbs and torsos extending into the frame. The end of this shot is once again marked by Frankie’s turn away from the camera, a gesture that not only anticipates the cut but also marks the end of the chorus and the start of the next verse.

Shot six of the sequence begins as a reverse angle medium shot of Frankie in the foreground and the dancers swaying in the background. Here again, Hammerstein’s lyrics for the song link the primitive African rhythms of “twenty million tom-toms” with the dancer’s bodily state as something felt “way down deep inside my bones.” As Frankie starts to sing the song’s chorus for a second time, she jumps off the bar and walks up to the bandstand. The camera follows Frankie as she is repositioned on the left part of the frame in front of Max Roach’s drums.

Shot seven is also a reverse angle shot that places Frankie in the middle ground with the back of Max’s head visible in the foreground and the dancers visible in the background. During the song’s third verse, Frankie picks up a drumstick and briefly plays along with Max on his hi-hat and tom-tom. In this penultimate section of the song, Pearl Bailey is allowed a brief moment to showcase her unique vocal talents during a caesura before the final chorus. As she reaches the phrase “stormy weather” Bailey adds a vocal growl, a musical gesture that not only references a particular jazz and blues singing style associated with performers like Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, and Ethel Waters but also intertextually references the song, “Stormy Weather,” singer Lena Horne, and the 1943 all-black musical of the same name. The sequence then comes to a close as Frankie is pulled off the bandstand and carried to the middle of the dance floor. After the number’s big finish, Frankie completes the song’s final chorus and nearly collapses on the bar from ecstatic exhaustion.

As this description of the sequence indicates, Pearl Bailey’s performance of “Beat out Dat Rhythm” brings together several signifiers of “blackness” as it was understood within postwar American culture. The tune’s self-consciously “primitive” rhythm, the lyrics’ references to African jungles, the wild dancing, the linkage between musical and bodily expressiveness, and the inclusion of obvious, if brief, elements of African-American musical performance styles all serve to link African-American culture with the culture of its origins, which, according to the song, may be found in the deepest regions of the so-called dark continent. By conforming to the most obvious stereotypes about African-American culture as earthier, more sensual, more libertine, more natural, “Beat out Dat Rhythm” functions to establish the exoticism and Otherness of African-American culture that lies at the heart of Hammerstein’s project.

In this respect, however, Carmen Jones is little different from its source. As Susan McClary points out in her excellent analysis of Carmen, both the opera and Prosper Mérimée’s source story evince a similar interest in the exoticism and otherness of both gypsy culture and the French underclass. By situating Bizet in relation to the Orientalism of Hugo, Flaubert, and Baudelaire, McClary describes Carmen herself as a figure who brings together several strands of exoticism that are articulated along the lines of gender, ethnicity, and class. Noting that Carmen appeals to Don José because she offers him freedom from the strictures of bourgeois life, McClary argues that the opera’s emphasis on slumming, crime, and prostitution casts Carmen as the dark seductress, a racialized and sexualized Other who leads Don José down the path of self-destruction (29–43).

As McClary also notes, however, this interest in Otherness not merely is confined to the opera’s characterizations but informs Bizet’s use of different musical idioms. Much as Carmen Jones brings together the musical discourses of opera and Broadway, classical music and pop, Bizet’s opera is situated within a similar nexus of contemporaneous styles and idioms. According to McClary, “Carmen revolved dramatically around the encounters among these discourses: between high art and the ‘degraded’ entertainment music of the cabaret, between the sentimentality of opéra-comique and the
‘Realism’ of contemporary literature, between ‘Oriental’ and European, between French lucidity and Wagnerian excess” (58).

Thus, in understanding the textual function of “Beat out Dat Rhythm,” which parallels the function of Bizet’s “Gypsy Song” in its treatment of racial and gender issues, we can better understand why it is Pearl Bailey’s voice on the sound track rather than that of a classically trained opera singer. Bailey sings her own part because she, more than any other character, must bear the burden of Carmen Jones’s construction of racial identity. In one sense, Bailey must sing with her own voice, since it is both she and Max Roach who come to embody an indigenous tradition of African-American musical performance. It is only through the use of Bailey’s actual voice that Carmen Jones can make any claim toward an “authentic” portrayal of black American culture.

This, however, is not the case with Dorothy Dandridge’s Carmen and Harry Belafonte’s Joe. As the opera’s archetypal “tragic couple,” their cultural status within the canon of Western music could not be compromised by the use of popular or, more specifically, African-American musical styles. By this point in the opera’s history, its original sense of alterity and eclecticism had disappeared as Carmen, in McClary’s words, “won a permanent place in the standard opera repertory” (120). Through its canonization, Carmen had come to symbolize the virtues and aesthetics of Anglo-European culture rather than the Orientalism and decadence of gypsies and cabarets. Given Carmen’s cultural pedigree and the pressures placed on the production by Bizet’s estate, the decision to dub Dandridge’s and Belafonte’s voices with those of classically trained opera singers must have seemed like a
“no-brainer.” More importantly, by juxtaposing the voice of Pearl Bailey with those of trained opera singers, Carmen Jones establishes a cultural hierarchy of musical styles in which the studied, cultivated performances of classical singers supervene upon the “natural” and “spontaneous” style of jazz and pop singing.

Still, the perception of Carmen Jones as an all-black musical appears to have influenced the performances of even the opera singers. According to McClary, Marilyn Horne employed a thin, reedy sound for Carmen Jones rather than the more full-bodied tone she used in later years for her Carmen. Moreover, in certain passages in the seguidilla, Horne sings the part in a deliberately sloppy fashion, smearing tones rather than articulating the tune’s vocal ornamentations. In McClary’s view, Horne employs this style to preserve some measure of “authenticity” to the performance. This was accomplished by matching Horne’s style to a performer that producers believed was incapable of singing the part and, second, by matching the style to a character who by virtue of her race and class background would lack the aesthetic sensibility to negotiate the ornamentation of an aria (132).

If McClary’s assessment of Horne’s performance is correct, then it would seem that Carmen Jones utilizes a rather strange double articulation in its efforts to create a diegetic world in which rural, southern blacks sing opera. On the one hand, Carmen Jones employs film sound technology—more specifically, the playback technique commonly associated with filmed musical performances—in order to produce the illusion that classically trained, operatic voices issue from the mouths of Dorothy Dandridge, Harry Belafonte, and Diahann Carroll. On the other hand, the same marks of musical training (breathing technique, diaphragm control, vocal attack, and articulation) are used to create the impression of “untrained” musical performance on the grounds that the African-American performers and characters could not be expected to sound like real opera singers. In other words, the singers heard on the Carmen Jones sound track attempted to “blacken” their performance through the use of techniques associated with the pop idiom.

If this description of vocal styles found in Carmen Jones seems strange, it also suggests that one cannot locate the decision to dub Dandridge and Belafonte in Hollywood production practices but rather in relation to recent work that attempts to theorize particular constructions of race and ethnicity (Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes; Cripps, Slow Fade to Black and Making Movies Black; Diawara; Guerrero; Hall; Hill; Marchetti; Mercer; Reid; Smith; Wallace, Invisibility Blues and Black Popular Culture). Indeed, Carmen Jones seems to be an emblematic case study for this type of critical enterprise, since it demonstrates the need to theorize cultural identity in a way that does not essentialize “blackness” in terms of particular aesthetic forms or cultural practices. Revealing the ideological biases of its social and historical context, Carmen Jones establishes a hierarchy of musical aesthetics that is correlated with broader notions of race and, through the use of film technology, employs dubbing to create a kind of phantasmic body that registers visually as black but sounds “white” in terms of the material qualities of its “voice.” Through its manipulation of film sound technology, Carmen Jones creates something altogether unique in the history of Hollywood film: an all-black musical that “mimes” the voice of white, European culture. In the next and final section of this essay, I will briefly examine the cultural implications of this dislocation of African-American voices and African-American musical styles.

**Folk Cultures, Politics, and Minstrelsy: The Cultural Implications of Dubbing in Carmen Jones**

Although space limitations preclude a thorough exploration of the cultural implications of Carmen Jones’s treatment of racial issues, let me briefly address three issues that connect the film with a larger program of research on racial representation: the historical contexts provided by earlier all-black musicals, the tradition of “blackface,” and the emergence of the civil rights movement. I will begin by discussing Carmen Jones’s place within Hollywood’s production of all-black musicals and the way it articulates a tension between primitivism and sophistication that is more generally characteristic of this film cycle. In essence, the split between visual and aural registers in Carmen Jones reveals how Bizet’s famous music masks the sound track’s construction of “whiteness” by placing it under the rubric of musical “sophistication.”

Writing about Vincente Minnelli’s Cabin in the Sky, a film that is roughly contemporaneous with the Broadway production of Carmen Jones, James Naremore
outlines several influences on the production of *Cabin* that are also pertinent to our understanding of Preminger's film. The first of these is a "vestigial tradition of "folkloric" narratives having to do with poor blacks in rural Southern communities" (Naremore 171). In his discussion of these folkloric elements, Naremore is careful to emphasize that they have nothing to do with the indigenous cultures they depict and, further, that these folkloric discourses have a multiplicity of meanings and uses. The images of contented, rural mammies and pappies may have fed the imaginations of white racists, but a different understanding of the folkloric was also instrumental to the liberal discourses of the Popular Front and the Works Progress Administration. Describing the "folksy" tone of much artistic production during the Depression, Naremore points to its traces in public murals, Leadbelly recordings, leftist folk songs, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and plays like *The Mule Bone* and *The Green Pastures* (172). In *Carmen Jones* the influence of this folkloric tradition is evident during the first half of the film, especially during Carmen's visit to her family home, where the remnants of magic and voodoo are figured both as part of her matrilineal heritage and as an omen of her tragic demise.

The emphasis on the folkloric, however, is balanced by another important influence on *Cabin in the Sky*, namely, the emergence in the 1930s of a "chic, upscale 'Africanism,' redolent of café society, Broadway theater, and the European avant-garde" (Naremore 177). For Naremore, Minnelli's incorporation of Africanist motifs into *Cabin in the Sky* produced an end product in which blackness simultaneously signified both "wildness and sophistication" (179). On the one hand, *Cabin in the Sky's* folkloric elements defined blackness in terms of a simple, rural primitivism; on the other, its Africanist motifs associated blackness with the uptown élan of jazz, high fashion, and cosmopolitan entertainment. In this way, *Cabin in the Sky* and other all-black musicals made in Hollywood could have it both ways by blending the denatured fantasy of the film's folkloric elements with the bourgeois values of "the Freed Unit's relatively elite, Broadway ethos" (Naremore 182).

While *Carmen Jones*’s treatment of blackness augurs a similar split between wildness and sophistication, it does so along a slightly different ideological axis. Like *Cabin in the Sky*, the influence of folkloric elements can be felt in the film's setting, characterizations, and visual style, but unlike *Cabin, Carmen Jones*’s aura of sophistication derives both from the Africanist sensibilities evident in certain "show-stopping numbers" and from its complicated relationship to the original Bizet opera. The use of Bizet's music establishes a cultural hierarchy slightly different from the one found in *Cabin*, one in which jazz is clearly located on the side of primitivism and opera on the side of sophistication. As the pressure from the Bizet estate indicates, opera was more or less assumed to be the culturally and aesthetically superior form, one in need of protection from the predations of vernacular and popular styles of music. Moreover, as I noted in my discussion of "Beat out Dat Rhythm," the differential treatment of Pearl Bailey's and Dorothy Dandridge's voices suggests that Billy Rose and Otto Preminger were attempting a somewhat peculiar cultural balancing act, one intended to exploit the local "color" and exoticism of rural African-American culture (voodoo, jazz, roadhouses, sexuality) while simultaneously preserving the aesthetic dominance of opera. In this respect, *Carmen Jones* shared Hollywood's desire to have it both ways. It could revel in the entertainment values associated with black popular performers like Dandridge, Bailey, and Belafonte while enjoying the cultural pedigree offered both by Bizet and by classically trained opera singers.

This sense of a cultural hierarchy is further reinforced by two complementary hierarchies within the film. The first of these is evident in the film's treatment of the division of speech and song. While a crude approximation of vernacular language is evident within the film's dialogue and song lyrics, this example of folk culture is juxtaposed with the melodies, harmonies, and orchestration of Western classical music. It is within this split between speech and song that the latter becomes a repository of the values of high culture and "whiteness," while the former retains the broader associations with spontaneity, naturalness, and folk expression. Although these cultural hierarchies may be understood discursively, there is an additional hierarchy established among the film's African-American performers. As James Baldwin noted in the 1950s in a notorious attack on the film, *Carmen Jones*’s depiction of feminine eroticism and male malevolence is roughly correlated with the skin tones of its actors. According to Baldwin, the taffy-colored or café au lait complexions of Dandridge and Belafonte are explicitly contrasted with the darker pigmentation
of Pearl Bailey and Brock Peters. As such, the hierarchy of star and supporting player, operatic voice and popular singing styles is further correlated with the light and dark skin tones of Dandridge and Bailey, respectively. In this way, their characters, Carmen and Frankie, not only signify whiteness and blackness through their performance styles but embody it in their physical appearance. 4

In addition to revealing the ideological nature of 1950s musical aesthetics, Carmen Jones also bears an interesting relation to the practice of minstrelsy. In recent years minstrelsy has become a topic of increasing significance among critical theorists (Bean, Hatch, and McNamara; Cockrell; Lott; Mahar; Rogin; Watkins). For Clyde Taylor, the minstrel show is a particularly revealing form of American vernacular culture because of what it tells us about our nation’s symbolic order. Operating as a projective mechanism, minstrelsy provided a cultural mask for whites through which they could explore and indulge hidden desires within the venue of public performance. At the same time, however, the minstrel show also established the boundaries between blacks and whites by functioning as a negative inversion of the dominant white culture. For others, particularly in film studies, the minstrel show is important for its origination of character types that have dominated black popular culture in succeeding decades. Spanning a wide range of representations, the history of minstrelsy has informed the public persona of several distinguished African-American performers such as Hattie McDaniel, Amos and Andy, Louis Jordan, and even Public Enemy’s Flavor Flav. For still others, minstrelsy’s significance derives from the ways in which it destabilizes “race” as a biological entity and reveals its constructedness as a cultural category. Blackface, like other kinds of passing, crosses boundaries in ways that reveal notions of “blackness” and “whiteness” to be the product of ideological processes and cultural contexts.

While Carmen Jones is notably less reliant on minstrel types than previous all-black musicals, the technological separation of filmed image and sound offers something similar to minstrelsy in the way it treats race as a cultural category. Whereas the minstrel show involved performers who cloaked themselves in signifiers of “blackness” such as dialect, costume, and burnt cork, the dubbing of singing voices in Carmen Jones achieves a similar effect by severing the link between voice and body. The technological separation of image and sound here enables a white performer to speak through the black body that is seen on-screen. Moreover, through the italicized mimicry of black dialect heard in the songs’ lyrics and Marilyn Horne’s peculiar smearing of the vocal lines in some of Carmen’s arias, the dubbing in Carmen Jones creates the curious spectacle of a black actress voiced by a white singer trying to sound black. By creating a hybridized figure in Carmen, Carmen Jones undermines the very premise that governed Billy Rose’s and Oscar Hammerstein’s development of it as an “all-black” musical. More importantly, by calling attention to its use of dubbing in reviews, publicity materials, and even the film’s credits themselves, Carmen Jones veritably flouts its definition of race as a cultural rather than biological category.

Finally, situated within the historical context of the emerging civil rights movement, Carmen Jones also bears an important, albeit conflicted, relationship to the broader structures of American politics of the 1950s. On its face, as an all-black musical, Carmen Jones would seem to be politically regressive, harking back to Hollywood’s earlier idealized images of rural black life and its denial of racial prejudice, economic exploitation, and apartheid. This fantasy becomes even more tenuous when the film’s action moves to Chicago, reflecting the broader patterns of African-American migration to northern urban centers during the postwar period. Yet even in the Chicago sequences Carmen Jones clings to its all-black premise, preserving the illusion of a segregated world in which blacks enjoy a separate but equal existence as members of American society.

This description of the film, however, applies only to its visual track and fails to recognize the far more complicated racial politics that were evident in the creation of the sound track. This notion that the sound track offered an alternate political paradigm is suggested by Marilyn Horne’s recollection of her participation in the film. At the time, Horne was a nineteen-year-old, aspiring opera singer struggling to begin a career as a performer within the Los Angeles area. When the news of the film adaptation of Carmen Jones began to circulate in Hollywood, Horne and her friends assumed that they need not even audition for parts, knowing that the film would adhere to Oscar Hammerstein’s conception of it as an all-black musical. Soon, however, word began to spread in the Los Angeles music community that Fox
was looking for people to simply sing the parts and that these recordings would be used to dub the voices of the on-screen performers. Once again, Horne and her friends assumed that Fox desired African-American singers but were pleasantly surprised to find out that there “was no color barrier—Whites could apply” (72). Horne then went to the audition, hoping to land a part in the chorus, and in classic “rags to riches” fashion was offered the lead role of Carmen instead.5

While Horne’s anecdote suggests the kinds of double standard that typically operated to enable white participation in black cultural production, her observation that there was no “color barrier” nonetheless resonates with the emerging politics of the period. Although Carmen Jones depicts a space of racial segregation on its image track, its sound track reflects the prospects of desegregation as an issue associated with the civil rights movements of the fifties and sixties. Blacks and whites could not intermingle in the diegetic world of Carmen Jones, but their voices could in nondiegetic and extradiegetic spaces on the sound track. Released within a few months of the Supreme Court’s landmark decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, Carmen Jones simultaneously looks forward and backward in its inscription of the racial politics of the 1950s. While a contemporary perspective suggests that this mixing of voices was closer to a simple commingling of races than it was a genuine form of integration, it is important to remember that some of Carmen Jones’s performers viewed the sound track as a space without color barriers, one in which members of different races interact in harmony, both literal and figurative. While that viewpoint may seem naive and Utopian, it nonetheless speaks to certain political aspirations that existed at the time of the film’s release.

Conclusion

In an ironic parallel with the production of Carmen Jones, the casting of Halle Berry in the title role of Introducing Dorothy Dandridge (1999) raised a question about the latter film’s production that was similar to the questions surrounding the earlier film, namely, how to handle the numerous scenes in which Berry’s character is shown singing. Initially, Berry intended to sing those numbers in the film herself after receiving vocal coaching from Wendi Williams, an African-American singer from the R&B group For Real. But as the production neared its start date, Berry got cold feet and ceded the vocal duties for Introducing Dorothy Dandridge to Williams (Freydkin). This took care of the problem for most of the singing scenes but did not address a crucial scene showing Dandridge’s first day on the set of Carmen Jones. In this sequence Berry would have to play Dandridge while Dandridge was “playing” Carmen. More importantly, since Dandridge “sings” her habanera number (“Dat’s Love”) in this scene, someone would have to provide the voice of Dandridge/Carmen. Yet while Williams was undoubtedly the logical candidate, she, like Dandridge herself, was not a classically trained singer and did not have the kind of operatic voice that was used in the production of Carmen Jones. For this scene of Dandridge/Berry performing “Dat’s Love,” the filmmakers returned to the source by using the film’s original sound track and Marilyn Horne’s original recording of the tune. Through this series of historical and technological convolutions, Horne could be heard once again supplying the off-screen voice for a talented African-American actress, the white voice hidden within the visible black body.

Not surprisingly, given the differences between the historical and cultural contexts of Carmen Jones and Introducing Dorothy Dandridge, the latter film handles the information about its use of dubbing in an entirely different way. Whereas the use of dubbing in Carmen Jones was understood solely through the film’s reception contexts, Introducing Dorothy Dandridge adds a slightly reflexive spin to its technological manipulations. Just as Dandridge/Berry is about to begin “Dat’s Love,” director Martha Coolidge cuts to a shot of the space adjacent to the set and a medium close-up of a sound technician placing the needle on a vinyl recording of Marilyn Horne’s rendition of the song. Thus, in Introducing Dorothy Dandridge, the star of Carmen Jones is clearly shown to be lip-synching her performance rather than actually singing. The contemporary film thus acknowledges its technological sleight of hand in this scene while paradoxically concealing it in others. The self-reflexive touch here contrasts the falsity and illusion of Hollywood with the genuine star power and presence suggested by Dandridge’s “singing” during her nightclub performances of “Hep Hop” and “I Got Rhythm.” The film
seems to say, “Oh, what fools these Hollywood directors be. See, she was a talented singer all along.” In doing so, the film establishes a strange double standard by acknowledging the technology used to construct Dandridge’s star persona as Carmen Jones but concealing the use of the very same technology to make it appear that Halle Berry is, in fact, a talented jazz vocalist.

Yet, these further ironies aside, what makes Carmen Jones such a singular example in the history of Hollywood’s use of dubbing is the degree to which the film foregrounds its assumptions about race, film, and popular culture. While Oscar Hammerstein and Billy Rose were praised for their ingenious transformation of Bizet’s Carmen into an all-black stage musical, the history of the production shows that there were some clear limits about how far Carmen Jones’s creators could push in the direction of popular culture. As such, the contemporary experience of watching Carmen Jones gives one an acute impression of cultural schizophrenia. The film seems stuffy where it should be loose, measured where it should be swinging, note-perfect where it should be improvisatory and free. Beyond that, the film adaptation of Carmen Jones employed singers and sound technology in a manner that blurred racial boundaries and complicated the film’s articulation of racial identity. By calling attention to the separation of image and sound, Carmen Jones unwittingly presented two seemingly contradictory models of American race relations in the 1950s: one a “separate but equal” fantasy that only Hollywood could concoct, the other a desegregated, extradietic space that mixed the voices of black and white performers but also situated those voices within established cultural hierarchies.

In tracing the cultural history of Carmen, a recent MTV production brings the history of the opera and the Prosper Mérimée story full circle. Taking the Moorish influence of Carmen to its limits, the MTV production starred Destiny’s Child diva Beyoncé Knowles in a reinvention of Carmen as contemporary, urban “hip-hopera.” This most recent chapter suggests that the emphasis on gender and ethnicity in the original has never completely disappeared, it simply gets rearticulated. And seeing that the custodians of high culture no longer guard Carmen’s status so zealously, one can only wonder what a “swing” or even a calypso Carmen might have been like.

NOTES

1. Within the past several years, there has been an upsurge of interest in Dorothy Dandridge’s career, both within academic film studies and in popular culture. In 1999 HBO produced a critically acclaimed film about Dandridge’s life starring Halle Berry, and Dandridge is the subject of three recently published and reissued biographies. For more on the cultural import of Dandridge’s stardom, see the recent biography by Bogle and the critical essays by Lightning and Rippy.

2. For more on the textual and industrial implications of Hollywood’s use of dubbing, see Anderson; Seifert.

3. I should note here that I first encountered this explanation in relation to Porgy and Bess (1959) rather than Carmen Jones. Porgy and Bess was also directed by Otto Preminger, and, as was the case with the earlier film, Dandridge’s singing voice was also dubbed. According to Marsha Seifert, producer Samuel Goldwyn reportedly insisted on using black singers for all the off-screen voices but relented when music director André Previn claimed that no black singers could be found to match Dandridge’s on-screen incarnation of Bess. Instead, Previn used Bach specialist Adele Addison for the voice of Bess, once again matching a white singer’s voice to Dandridge’s black body.

4. It is worth noting here that on MGM’s Bright Road, makeup supervisor William Tuttle created a special pancake base to make Dandridge’s skin look darker because the first dailies on the shoot showed that the actress’s skin tone photographed too light (Bogle, Dorothy Dandridge 227). This story is briefly referenced in the Halle Berry biopic Introducing Dorothy Dandridge (1999).

5. Ironically, Horne’s story parallels that of Dorothy Dandridge, who was first offered the role of Cindy Lou before Preminger cast her as Carmen. Dandridge convinced Preminger to change his mind by “playing” the role of Carmen during a second audition. Dressed in sexy clothing and adopting a sultry manner, Dandridge more or less “seduced” Preminger into giving her the part, much as Carmen herself seduces Joe in the film. According to her biographers, Dandridge set out to show that no one else could “be” Carmen in quite the way that she could.

Moreover, Horne was acutely aware of the racial issues that surrounded her casting as Carmen’s singing voice. At the time of her audition, Horne was romantically involved with Henry Lewis, an African-American conductor whom she would later marry. In her autobiography, Horne recalls being told that an interracial marriage would destroy her career and describes the ways in which family members subtly pressured her not to marry Lewis. After marrying Horne in 1960, Lewis achieved notoriety as the first African-American conductor to lead a major orchestra in a regular concert (Horne 131). Given her personal history, it is not surprising that Horne would be sensitive to the issue of color barriers, both on Carmen Jones’s sound track and in the world of opera more generally.

WORKS CITED

Primary Sources

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as letters, telegrams, and press releases related to Carmen Jones. It also contains the financial summaries of various stage productions of Carmen Jones that include its Broadway run as well as a touring production.

Carmen Jones Clipping File, Margaret Herrick Center for Film Research, Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California. This clipping file contains numerous reviews, trade press items, and studio publicity materials on Carmen Jones. Although I examined all available materials, the following primary research materials were particularly helpful in developing this essay: “As a New Star, Dorothy Learns about Cheesecake,” “Belafonte’s Folk Music,” “Carmen Jones’ May Launch Renaissance of Negro Films,” “Pearl’s Beating Two Drums: ‘Carmen,’ Stage ‘House,’” “Sales Soar for Carmen Jones’ Album,” “Singers to Spare in Carmen’s Film,” all in pressbook for Carmen Jones, Twentieth Century–Fox; “1954 ‘Carmen Jones’ Finally Booked to Spare in ‘Carmen’ Film,” all in pressbook for Carmen Jones, Twentieth Century–Fox; “1954 ‘Carmen Jones’ Finally Booked by 20th–Fox for France,” Variety 2 December 1981; program notes for the Toronto Film Society, 1987.

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