

First African-American to win an Oscar

Racial injustices evident in 1939 Academy Award

In the heart of both Oscar season and Black History Month, consider this: Seventy-three years ago, Hattie McDaniel became the first African American to win an Academy Award for her performance as the capable, doting Mammy in "Gone with the Wind." To accept the award, she had to walk to the stage from a segregated table.

McDaniel's unlikely trek to the



Hattie McDaniel



Hattie McDaniel (right) stars in the film *Gone with the Wind*, a 1939 classic that won her an Academy Award.

podium demonstrated progress and also a lack of progress, said David Leonard, author of the book, "Screens Fade to Black: Contemporary African American Cinema, and chair of Washington State University's Department of Critical Culture, Gender and Race Studies.

"Hattie faced the challenge of

navigating different worlds," he said. "Hollywood - and more specifically the academy - recognized her talent in acting. But at the same time, it devalued her talent by making her sit at a separate table and also by casting her in roles limited to servants who took care of white people."

Adding to the insult by whites was criticism by blacks. The NAACP singled out McDaniel for not speaking out against roles that perpetuated the subservient African American stereotype.

To which McDaniel famously replied: "Why should I complain about making \$700 a week playing a

maid? If I didn't, I'd be making \$7 a week being one."

Sadly, that was pretty much the extent of her career prospects in the 1930s and '40s, said Leonard, when black women typically worked as low-paid maids and cooks for households of well-to-do whites.

"The constraints Hattie faced in Hollywood mirrored the constraints that she, a woman of color, faced in society. Pretty much the only roles made available to her were those of servants," he said. "While some might argue that these portrayals were based on the reality of that time, the stereotype became so entrenched that black humanity got washed out."

McDaniel, who acted in dozens more movies besides "Gone with the Wind," shared the stage with Clark Gable, Katharine Hepburn, Henry Fonda and other film legends. Her father was a musician and former slave who steered his children toward show business, according to the 2001 documentary, "Beyond Tara: The Extraordinary Life of Hattie McDaniel," narrated by Whoopi Goldberg. McDaniel worked as a real maid until she was offered a film part playing one, it says.

After her nomination for Best

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